

Person and Work of Christ in 1 Thessalonians

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1 Thess 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 the other later writings of Paul. Certainly none of the characteristic Pauline concepts of the death of Christ eg justification, reconciliation or propitiation occur in 1 Thessalonians, while there is no lengthy treatment of our Lord's person such as we might find in Philippians or Colossians where of course it develops out of the situation addressed. The main emphasis in 1 Thess relates also to the situation addressed and has to do with the event of the Second Coming (parousia) which was causing some perplexity among the Thess. This emphasis can be said to force any details there are of Christ's person and work into a futurist "mould", if this is a legitimate way of speaking of what happens. Thus, in relation to the effects of Christ's death, believers will obtain salvation at his return. They will live with him in a future state of glory. Meantime they wait in hope for God's Son who will return to them from heaven. It is possible we may have a "primitive christology" here, reflecting the early Paul whose theological formulations were not yet fully developed, a Paul who stands nearer the Paul of Acts who preached at Athens or Ephesus. This appears to form a contrast with the Paul of Galatians or Romans.

However, this is doubtful. Paul's letters, by their very nature, were addressed to specific persons, and to deal with specific matters, germane to these congregations. It was difficulty in understanding the event of the parousia that compelled probably the writing of the letter. This could account for the scant christological material we find in the letter. Paul rarely if ever attempts anything like a theological treatise. We can assume they have been taught about the nature of justification and there was, therefore, no point in raising the issue. The preponderance of a futuristic emphasis on the death of Christ ie relating to its effects for the end events is simply the result of the need to spell out what the/

Parousia entailed.

In spite of this emphasis, however, teaching on Jesus' Person and Work is by no means absent. Indeed, as we shall see, there is a much fuller christology in 1 Thess than some have suggested. We have some instances of explicit references. Aspects of Jesus' person and achievement evidenced in other Pauline writings are here. Their particular form in this letter is not so much determined by the maturity or immaturity of Paul's thought at the time of writing as by the circumstances to which the letter is addressed. And now to the teaching in more detail.

The Work of Christ

By far the greater emphasis on the work of Christ in 1 Thess relates to 'the Second Coming'. The term 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 is heralded by fitting accompaniments - the cry of command, the archangel's call, the sound of the trumpet of God as the coming of the Lord himself. His coming relates directly to the people for their benefit. 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. It is alluded to as an historic event, as Paul compares the sufferings of the Thessalonian believers at the hands of their fellow-countrymen with the treatment of Judean Christians by their compatriots. He describes the Jews as "those who killed the Lord Jesus." (2.15) A reference to/

the death of Christ is also imbedded in a section of the letter where Paul comforts Thess Christians on their departed loved-ones (4.14f). The form in which it occurs would almost suggest a primitive credal formula, "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again." It certainly presupposes a belief in the death (and resurrection) of Christ as basic to the Christian faith. It is specifically on the grounds of the death and resurrection of Christ as an item of faith that the Thess are urged to hope in anticipation for their Lord's return and to comfort themselves regarding their deceased's destiny on that occasion.

However, the most articulate theological formulation on the death of Christ is found in 1 Thess 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 on 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 is future. Their destiny is not wrath but to obtain salvation. Their living ("we shall live"), 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 the use of peri 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 and NT Greek.

But surely it is natural for the primary emphasis to be future? Paul's teaching concerns the day of the Lord and his reference to Christ's death and its effects is naturally referred to within this setting. He does not imply that present experience of life in Christ accruing from this event. What is inescapable in this statement is simply this, that Christ's death relates to his people, it concerns them, and cannot be understood apart from them. While we may not 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.

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 NT generally. The other occurrence of the resurrection in 1 Thess is at 4.14 where it is coupled with the death of Christ in a form that 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 and Intercession of Christ in the epistle.

So explicit references to the work of Christ in 1 Thess apart from the parousia are notably 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. The suggestion of the fulness of Pauline teaching on Jesus' person and his achievements for men is confirmed when we turn to consider the implication or the application of this in relation to the believer.

Application of the Work of Christ

This is obvious at a number of places in 1 Thess, 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 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 the Lord, where "Lord" is obviously used for "Christ" (4.17). Believers will be delivered from future judgment, obtain salvation and will live with Christ. The benefits of Christ's resurrection are deliverance from the coming wrath (1.10), and this is bound up with his death with its purpose for the believers that they should live with him (5.9,10).

Whatever led Paul in other letters to describe the believer's 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, emerges also here. So the glimpses given us in 1 Thess are all of a piece with what Paul has said elsewhere.

2. Instructions for the believer come ultimately from Christ and what authority they have derives from him. The relationship begun through faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen is to be sustained and continued through simple obedience to his commands. Thus the basic "good news" about Jesus is alternatively described as the "word of the Lord", sounding out from the Thess. to the surrounding areas, or as the "gospel of Christ", of which Timothy is God's servant (1.8;3.2). The authority of Paul's word of comfort to the Thess respecting departed loved ones, derives from the fact that it is given "by the word of the Lord." (4.13) In this, and in the above instance, "Lord" seems to be used of Christ. Instructions which the Thess 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) ie 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 that we find in other Pauline letters are here, whether it is apostolic authority deriving from Christ, or respect for teachers for their works' sake, or imitation of the apostle, or adherence to apostolic instruction as something received from Christ and transmitted to the church. All of these find echoes in 1 Thess. and show the progression of the achievement of Christ in the believer.

3. Sanctification as the ongoing experience of the believer in Christ is also found here with the ultimate purpose of glorification. The effects of Christ's work are evident in the fruitful trilogy - work of faith, labour of love, steadfastness of hope - used to describe the life of the community in 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 complete holiness at the parousia (3.13). Paul rejoices in the fruit of love obvious in their present way of life and urges them to continue (4.10). He anticipates prayerfully their entire preservation and sanctification, spirit, soul and body at their Lord's return (5.23).

All of this is part of their continuing experience of their acceptance of the word of the Gospel and their imitation of Christ. In the present, it expresses Christ's saving work in them and looks forward to the future return of Christ and prepares for it. Their evident brotherly love and their vital gospel witness are abundant proofs of the effects of Christ in them. Their hope will be realised on Christ's return, a constant theme in Paul's epistles. The good work begun by Christ will be brought to completion. Christians are changed from one degree of glory to another. They show the fruit of the Spirit as evidence of their salvation. The nature of the hope, set alongside faith and love, is expounded in Paul's thought. It is hope of glory, laid up in heaven, an immortality and a crown./

All of this is related to Christ's work and derives from it. There is no demonstrable difference between the effects of Christ's achievement as it concerns the believer in 1 Thess and in other Pauline letters. The emphasis is eschatological but the benefits are similar.

The Person of Christ

When we examine the portrait given us of Christ in 1 Thess, we come to the same conclusion. There is no specific teaching on Christ's person but the implications of any allusions tend to confirm the divine nature of Christ. We can find no discernible difference between Paul's understanding of our Lord's nature here and that found in other letters. There are perhaps three areas in which this is particularly evident:

1. The position of Christ in relation to God. In this the elevated status granted to our Lord implies something close to God, even if at the same time there is a certain subordination. The Thessalonian church is described as being both in "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1.1) To Christ, along with 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 that exists.

And yet, as in all Paul's letters, the distinction of persons is maintained. So Christ is described as "Son" at 1.10. Though this use is notable for it appears to be more usual for Paul to use "Lord" in eschatological texts to describe Christ. Is 1.9,10 unpauline? There is no mention of death in a context where Christ's redemption is mentioned. There is also the language used eg "turning to God from idols." Paul, however, may be merely using a traditional saying about the success of Christian missions which may suit his purpose at this point. The description "Son" is crucial for any understanding of Paul's view of the relation of Christ to God.

2. The high rank given generally to Christ throughout the letter. Most of this we have already noted. OT

language, applied to God, is referring 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 the judgement is implicit in statements about the parousia (4.6,17;5.2f).

All of this appears to be consistent with his 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 used to describe Christ in 1 Thess. viz Jesus, Son, Lord, Jesus Christ or combination of these, and setting them alongside his use in other letters, yields interesting results.

A characteristic feature in this respect of 1 Thess. is the incidence of the title "Lord" in the letter. It is used thirteen 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 Christ in quotations or allusions to the OT, or in introducing them, including the phrase "Word of the Lord" (4.15;5.2f) in statements about the parousia (4.6,15-17; 5.2), and in the phrase "in the Lord" (3.8;5.12), all of which appear to be typical of Paul.

The complete title "Lord Jesus Christ" occurs five times in the letter and nine times in 2 Thess., which has been claimed as evidence of a full christology even in these early letters. Caution, however, may be necessary here, since the usage may not be governed by a development from the simple form "Lord" to the fuller form "Lord Jesus Christ", as much as by the demands of the context in which the usage occurs.

While the description "Son" in 1.10 is not/

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as frequent by any means as his use of the term "Lord", and here it may be bound up with a current statement on missionary work. Yet along with the terms "Jesus", "Christ", "Christ Jesus" and "Lord Jesus", it can be claimed to reflect Pauline usage.

Generally speaking, then, there is little difference between Paul's use of these descriptions in 1 Thess and his other letters. Sometimes the material in which they are found is traditional or pre-pauline. Sometimes it may be found in closing benedictions or opening salutations. We can see the dilemma for Paul of insisting on a divine Lord Jesus and yet setting him in distinction from the Father. This tension is found in all his letters but there can be no doubt of the exalted position of Christ, even if at all times there is a certain subordination.

It does appear, therefore, that there is scarcely any discernible difference between the christology of Thess and Paul's other writings. Where differences do occur, they are differences of emphasis, hardly of essential content, and the same basic presuppositions or understanding of Jesus and what he has done for men are found in all the writings.

The essential understanding of Jesus is of one who was essentially human and yet over against God was given the name above every name to which every knee should bow and every tongue confess he is Lord, one in whom the fulness of the Godhead dwelt bodily. He was a real person, put to death by the Jews and yet at the same time the Son of God who as Messiah and Lord will return from heaven for his people. He speaks of a Christ whose death and resurrection are historic facts on which Christians may ground their hope of salvation and 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, united to him even in death. What instructions they have been given derive from his authority. As a result of their relationship with him, they evidence a change of character and anticipate perfection on his return.

Thus here is no stunted christology, no immature Paul with half-developed ideas. His view of the person and achievement of Christ, though perhaps expressed with differing emphasis is substantially one with his teaching elsewhere. We can hardly speak of any radical change in the Pauline view./