

Pauline Theology in the Thessalonian Correspondence

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At a time when interest is being increasingly directed to the problem of unity and diversity in the NT writings¹ it may be appropriate to pay some attention to the question of the distinctive theological outlooks of the individual Pauline writings. It is of course true that one of the reasons offered for regarding certain writings as deuter-Pauline is their alleged differences in theological content. But the question of the theological distinctiveness of the acknowledged Pauline epistles has scarcely been discussed.²

The present study is confined to the Thessalonian correspondence. In 1 Thessalonians we have an undisputed Pauline epistle, but the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians stands under some suspicion.³ A comparison of these epistles with the accepted epistles of Paul may be significant both in order to highlight the theological individuality of 1 Thessalonians and to establish the constant features in the Pauline writings generally, and also to shed some light on the question of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians. We should perhaps expect to find that the contents of an epistle are influenced by its circumstances and purpose, but that there is a basic theological outlook and method of argument common to the several epistles.

I

In his discussion of Pauline theology, *From First Adam to Last*, C. K. Barrett organized his treatment round certain key figures such as Adam and Moses. He comments: 'When I was discussing the subject of this book with a learned friend he suggested to me (and the idea, though not his way of expressing it, had occurred to me also) that it might be interesting and profitable to include a chapter under the heading "Absent Friends". This is a true and valuable observation, and it would be possible to fill many pages with absentees, and with

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suggested reasons for their non-appearance.⁴ This hint is worth following up with regard to theological concepts absent from the Thessalonian epistles.

1 There is an almost entire omission of material relating to Paul's status as an apostle. As in Phil. 1.1 he does not name himself as an apostle in the epistolary introduction. The fact that he associates Timothy and Silvanus with himself as co-authors of the epistles does not explain this omission, since elsewhere he was capable of producing a suitable form of words to get

¹ J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London 1977); cf. G. Strecker, ed., *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Darmstadt 1975).

² Various writers have attempted to trace stages in Pauline thought, reflected in his epistles when placed in chronological order. See C. H. Dodd, *New Testament Studies* (Manchester 1953); W. L. Knox, *St Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (2 Cambridge 1961); R. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Leiden 1971); J. W. Drane, *Paul: Libertine or Legalist?* (London 1975).

³ W. Trilling, *Untersuchungen zum 2. Thessalonicherbrief* (Leipzig 1972); J. A. Bailey, 'Who wrote II Thessalonians?', *NTS* 25 (1978-9), pp. 131-45.

⁴ C. K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last* (London 1962), p. 22.

round the fact that Timothy was not an apostle (2 Cor. 1.1). The word 'apostles' is found only once, with reference to Paul and Silvanus⁵ as 'apostles of Christ'.⁶ The usage is fairly casual, but implies a known and accepted standing and practice (cf. 1 Cor. 9.3-7). This lack of emphasis is surely because Paul's apostleship was not questioned in Thessalonica and there was no need for him to produce 'official' backing for his teaching, although he did have to deal with criticisms of his motives and conduct as a missionary. In 2 Thessalonians the point at issue is not Paul's authority, which is unquestioned,⁷ but rather the fact that his teaching has been misrepresented.

2 The concept of sin plays little part in the epistles. The noun appears only in 1 Thess. 2.16 with reference to the sins of the Jews who reject the gospel.⁸ Paul is not concerned with the sins of his readers, apart from the warning against evil in 1 Thess. 5.22 and the promise of divine help in 2 Thess. 3.2. On the contrary, he is more concerned to give thanks for their spiritual progress, and only in one section does he develop a warning against immorality (1 Thess. 4.1-8). Judgement on sin is likewise not prominent (1 Thess. 4.6). God's wrath is a fate from which the readers have been delivered (1 Thess. 1.10, 5.9) and which is reserved for their opponents (1 Thess. 2.16; 2 Thess. 1.6-9; 2.10-12).

This lack of emphasis on sin may seem surprising, since ἀμαρτ- word-group occurs some ninety-one times in Paul. However, this impression is considerably modified when we discover that sixty of these occurrences are in Romans; when we compare the Thessalonian epistles with the other Pauline epistles, the lack of emphasis is less surprising.

3 Closely related to this omission is the almost total lack of theological concepts associated with the *Judaizing controversy*. Circumcision, uncircumcision, the Law, works, boasting, justification and

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Pauline Theology in 1 and 2 Thessalonians freedom are not mentioned. There is but one word from the δικαιο- word-group (δικαίος, 1 Thess. 2.10), and it is used of the missionaries' own conduct. The only reference to boasting is to Paul's exultation in his converts. Even grace is scarcely mentioned; apart from its use in epistolary formulae it appears in 2 Thess. 1.12 and 2.16. The whole problem of how a man may be put right with God is simply not mentioned. The reason is surely to be found in the fact that this controversy was absent from Thessalonica, but was very much alive in the Galatian and Roman situations, and to a lesser extent at Corinth and Philippi. Paul could write about the gospel quite easily without using a set of categories that arose only in controversy with Judaizing Christians.⁹ This does not mean that the topic was unimportant to Paul, only to be discussed on occasions of controversy. Rather, controversy may serve to sharpen the expression of one's convictions and to bring out the latent presuppositions more explicitly.

⁵ For the view that Paul is thinking only of Silvanus and himself as apostles here see W. Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church* (London 1971) pp.23, 65-7.

⁶ The phrase recurs in 2 Cor. 11.13.

⁷ The lack of appeal to Paul's authority as an apostle in 2 Thessalonians would seem to speak in favour of the authenticity of the epistle. W. Trilling's comments (op. cit., pp. 110-21) lose much of their force when it is realized that 2 Thess. says nothing about Paul being an apostle.

⁸ Synonyms for 'sin' appear in 1 Thess. 5.22; 2 Thess. 2.10, 12; 3.2f.

⁹ The lack of mention of this topic in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is thus not an argument against the possibility that Galatians is the first of Paul's extant writings.

4 Other topics which receive little emphasis are *truth and wisdom*. The former of these is absent from 1 Thessalonians except for the description of God as 'true' or 'real' in what is probably a piece of traditional phraseology appropriately used in drawing a contrast with idolatry. 'Truth' appears more frequently in 2 Thess. 2.10, 12, 13 with reference to those who follow antichrist and reject the Christian revelation; this fits in with Pauline usage which contrasts the truth of the divine revelation with error.¹⁰ The omission of 'wisdom' is not surprising, since the bulk of the references to this concept in Paul are in the polemical situations reflected in 1 Corinthians and Colossians.

5 Much more remarkable is the almost total absence of *flesh and body*. Only the latter term occurs, and that but once, in the difficult phrase in 1 Thess. 5.23.¹¹ Elsewhere in his epistles Paul uses 'body' with reference to the presence of sin in believers, the resurrection of the body, and the Church as the body of Christ. The first of these topics does not concern him in Thessalonians. The second is a concern, but the problem is not the nature of the resurrection but rather the fact and timing of it. The third topic is likewise not a concern. The absence of 'flesh' is more striking since it comes regularly throughout the Pauline corpus with a variety of uses. One can only comment that its absence is a clear warning against expecting that all of Paul's favourite expressions must occur in any given letter.¹²

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II

From these omissions we turn to look at some constant factors which are found in the epistles.

1 The use of *christological titles* is similar to that elsewhere in Paul. The same names and titles, 'Jesus', 'Christ', and 'Lord', and the same combinations of these titles are found in the Thessalonian epistles and the other epistles. The description of Jesus as 'Son' is found only in 1 Thess. 1.10, and this usage may rest on tradition (for the connection with the resurrection see Rom. 1-4); the rareness of the word fits in with Pauline usage.¹³ One unusual feature, to which W. Trilling has drawn attention, is the way in which 'Jesus' and 'Jesus Christ' always appear combined with 'Lord' in 2 Thessalonians.¹⁴ The combination is thoroughly Pauline. What is strange is its comparative frequency in the epistle. However, Trilling's conclusion that this represents a late stage in the development of Christology when OT divine attributes were being ascribed to Christ is to be rejected, since the same combinations are also present with high frequency in 1 Thessalonians.¹⁵

2 There is not a lot of *christological information* in the epistles, but it is not Paul's habit to engage in christological discussion for its own sake. The formulae Christ 'died for us' and 'died and rose again' (1 Thess. 5.9f; 4.14) express the basis of salvation and the hope of

¹⁰ Trilling's claim (op. cit., pp. 112f) that the concept of truth in 2 Thess. is not Pauline seems weak to me.

¹¹ R. Jewett, op. cit., p. 181, thinks that Paul is combating a gnostic type of view that the body and soul were unimportant in comparison with the spirit of a man.

¹² Other characteristic Pauline words which are not found in the epistles include *κατά, κόσμος, τοιοῦτος*.

¹³ M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (London 1976), pp. 7-15.

¹⁴ W. Trilling, op. cit., p. 128. The phenomenon had been observed by earlier writers.

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	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Christ</i>	<i>Lord</i>	<i>Christ Jesus</i>	<i>Lord Jesus</i>	<i>Lord Jesus Christ</i>
1 Thess.	3	3	13	2	6	5
2 Thess.	-	1	9(10)	-	4(3)	9

resurrection in a thoroughly Pauline manner. The present spiritual power of Jesus alongside the Father is assumed (1 Thess, 1.1; 3.11f; 5.28; 2 Thess. 1.2; 3.3-5; 3.16, 18). His Parousia is particularly stressed. These are all features of basic Paulinism. The death and resurrection of Jesus are not mentioned in 2 Thessalonians, but the subject-matter of the epistle did not call for any particular reference to this saving event.

3 The references to the *Spirit* in 1 Thessalonians tie in with Pauline usage. The Spirit is active in the preaching and reception of the gospel (1 Thess. 1.5f). His presence is associated with power and joy (1 Thess. 1.5f). He is God's gift to believers (1 Thess. 4.8) and is associated with holiness; one must beware of disregarding the Spirit by lapsing into sin. Spiritual gifts, such as prophecy, must not be quenched (1 Thess. 5.19). It is easy to parallel these references from Paul's other epistles. W. Trilling characterizes the teaching of 2 Thessalonians on the Spirit as poverty-stricken,¹⁶ but it must be insisted that the silence is explained by the subject-matter of the epistle.¹⁷

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4 An extremely important constant is the 'in *Christ/Lord/him*' formula. If we set aside the so-called 'cosmic' use (found only in Colossians and Ephesians) we find that of the remaining eight types of usage listed by E. Best¹⁸ no less than five are found in the seven occurrences of the phrase in 1 Thessalonians, and three uses are found in the four occurrences in 2 Thessalonians.¹⁹ The Pauline conviction that the life of the Christian is determined by the Christ-event is fully expressed. The unusual phrase 'in God the (our) Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', which might have aroused suspicion had it been found only in 2 Thess. I. I, occurs in 1 Thess. 1.1 (cf. Eph. 3-9; Col. 3.3).

5 The *corporate* aspects of the faith are taken for granted. Believers form 'the church' of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. I. I; 2 Thess. 1.1)²⁰ and are placed alongside the churches of God in Judea (1 Thess. 2.14) and elsewhere (2 Thess. 1.4). The readers are addressed as members of a community, and it is their communal life as a Christian fellowship with which Paul is concerned.

6 The essence of Christian experience is expressed in the three basic attitudes of *faith, hope* and *love*. These are grouped as a triad (1 Thess. 1.3; 5.8) which may well be of pre-Pauline origin and is widely found in Paul and elsewhere in the NT.

The readers can be described simply as 'believers' (1 Thess. 1.7; 2.10, 13), a familiar Pauline expression. The same usage is found in 2 Thess. 1.10 (cf. 2.12), although here the aorist participle is used. The usual elements of faith are present in 1 Thessalonians: it is directed towards God (1.8f), it can grow (3.10), it involves acceptance of credal statements (4.14), and

¹⁶ W. Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁷ Πνεῦμα has the meaning 'breath' in 2 Thess. 2.8. In 2.2 it is used of an ecstatic utterance (for the usage cf. 1 Cor. 14.12), and in 2.13 the Spirit is probably the agent of sanctification (as in 1 Pet. 1.2).

¹⁸ E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (London 1955), pp. 1-7.

¹⁹ 1 Thess. 1.1; 2.14; 3.8; 4.1, 16; 5.12, 18; 2 Thess. 1.1, 12; 3.4, 12. W. Trilling's verdict (*op. cit.*, pp. 129f) that the usage is weak and only occasionally influential in 2 Thess. is not justified by the comparative statistics.

²⁰ For the phrasing cf. Gal. 1.2.

it is expressed in action (1.3). The material in 2 Thessalonians is smaller in quantity (1.3, 10, 11; 2.12f) but conveys the same emphases.²¹

Paul speaks of God's love for his people (1 Thess. 1.4; 2 Thess. 2.13, 16)²² and of the need for believers to love one another (1 Thess. 1-3; 3.6, 12; 4.9; 2 Thess. 1.3), including especially their church leaders (1 Thess. 5.13), but the scope of love must include all men (1 Thess. 3.12). There is an unusual reference to 'loving the truth' in 2 Thess. 2.10; the phrase is unparalleled, but the same thought appears in Rom. 1.18 (cf. Gal. 5.7).

The hope of future salvation distinguishes believers from nonbelievers and is centred on the coming of Jesus (1 Thess. 1.3; 4.13; 5.8; 2 Thess. 2.16), and the linking of hope with endurance is typically Pauline (1 Thess. 1.3; 2 Thess. 1.4; 3.5; Rom. 5.2-4; 8.25).

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7 *The ethical implications* of the faith are expressed in the same kind of way as elsewhere in Paul. It is because believers are sons of light (indicative) that they can be summoned to show the Christian virtues (imperative, 1 Thess. 5.5-8). Because God has called them to salvation, they are the objects of exhortation (1 Thess. 5.9-11; 2 Thess. 2.13-15). Sanctification is both the work of God, whose Spirit is active in believers and who is petitioned by Paul to complete his work (1 Thess. 3.12f; 4.8; 5.23f; 2 Thess. 1.11; 3.16f; 3.5), and also the task of the believer who is given both general and specific commands regarding his personal way of life (1 Thess. 2.11f; 4.1-12; 5.6-8, 12-22; 2 Thess. 2.15; 3.4, 6-13).

8 Finally, underlying Paul's theology is a linguistic and conceptual basis in the OT. Space forbids discussion of this theme, and it must suffice to comment that, despite the lack of explicit OT quotations, there is a usage of OT language and phraseology which is typically Pauline in both the epistles.²³

III

Various features stand out as particularly prominent in the epistles.

1 A marked peculiarity of style is the use of the *second person plural* to address the readers. The pronoun ὑμεῖς occurs eighty-four times in 1 Thessalonians and forty times in 2 Thessalonians out of a total of about seven hundred occurrences in the Pauline corpus. This is roughly twice as often as might have been expected, although it must be admitted that the distribution is somewhat uneven; it is low in Romans and 1 Corinthians, and high in 2 Corinthians. In the same connection we may note the high frequency of the address ἀδελφοί (fourteen times in 1 Thess.; seven times in 2 Thess.), especially in 1 Thessalonians. This is symptomatic of the way in which both the letters are very much couched in terms of address to the readers and deal with them and their situation. It also demonstrates the warm feelings of Paul to his readers.

²¹ The use of the aorist participle in 2 Thess. 1.10 and 2.12 is strange, but may be explicable in terms of the writer looking back from the perspective of the last day (E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London 1972), p. 265, mentions, but does not adopt, this possibility), cf. Eph. 1-13.

²² It is debatable whether 'the love of God' in 2 Thess. 3.5 is his love for us or our love for him; see E. Best, op. cit., p. 330, and R. Jewett, op. cit., pp. 320-2, for the opposing views.

²³ See the references in B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris/Gembloux 1956), pp. 94f.

2 Considerable stress is laid in 1 Thessalonians on the *conversion of the readers* and the circumstances surrounding Paul's mission. The term 'gospel' is characteristic of 1 Thessalonians, although it is equally frequent in Galatians and Philippians. Paul dwells on the fact that the message preached by himself and his colleagues really was the word of God accompanied by the power of the Spirit (1 Thess. 1.5; 2.13),²⁴

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that the Thessalonians received it as such, and that they were prepared to endure suffering for its sake. Similar thoughts are found in 1 Cor. 2.4, but it is 1 Thessalonians which provides the fullest exposition of the theme. This topic is lacking in 2 Thessalonians, which is more concerned with the current problems of the readers.

3 The topic that has come to be known as the 'apostolic parousia' is found in several epistles, but the treatment in 1 Thess. 2.17—3.13 is particularly extended and rivalled only by the discussion in Rom. 15, i.e. in an epistle whose specific aim was to prepare the readers for Paul's arrival. There is nothing comparable in 2 Thessalonians, although we may note that Paul uses the example of how he behaved during his visit to Thessalonica in his exhortations to the church (2 Thess. 3.7-10).²⁵

4 The major distinguishing feature of both epistles is the extent of the teaching about the *Parousia*. The prominence of the actual word²⁶ reflects the prominence of the concept. The occasion for the extended teaching is the need to correct misunderstandings on the part of the readers, and this in turn reflects the fact that teaching about the Parousia had formed part of Paul's oral message at Thessalonica. This is apparent from 1 Thess. 1.9f where the essence of being a Christian is to serve God and to wait for his Son from heaven, the one who delivers from the wrath to come. The language is probably pre-Pauline, but it fits in with Paul's thinking elsewhere (Phil. 3.20f). The Parousia reference in 2.19 is concerned with Paul's own personal expectation (cf. Phil. 4.1). In 3.13 the purpose of holy living is that the Thessalonians may be unblamable at the Parousia—and therefore not come under judgement. The major discussion in 4.13—5.11 appears to arise from problems that were perplexing the church. First, Paul assured the believers who were grieving because some of their number had died that such people would rise first and be reunited with living believers at the Parousia so as to be with the Lord for ever. This misunderstanding could have arisen because Paul's preaching had emphasized the significance of the Parousia for the living. Second, Paul tackled the suggestion that uncertainty about the date of the Parousia could lead to believers being unready for it. He argued that believers should not be caught unready for it, since God had destined them for salvation and in any case they should be living all the time in a manner appropriate for people with such a destiny. The final prayer (5.23) that they might be blameless at the Parousia is contextually appropriate and is in harmony with Pauline thinking elsewhere (1

²⁴ Despite the reluctance of commentators to allow it, 1 Thess. 1.5 could refer to miraculous signs accompanying the preaching, as in Gal. 3.1-5.

²⁵ See R. W. Funk, 'The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance', in W. R. Farmer, et al., *Christian History and Interpretation* (Cambridge 1967), pp. 249-68. W. Trilling, op. cit., pp. 118f, comments that in no text other than 2 Thess. 3.7-10 is imitation of Paul treated so thematically, and his aim said to be the provision of an example for others to imitate. It is hard to see why this should be regarded (as apparently it is) as an argument against Pauline authorship.

²⁶ Παρουσία occurs four times in 1 Thess. and three times in 2 Thess. (once with reference to the man of lawlessness). Its only other Pauline use with reference to Jesus is in 1 Cor. 15.23.

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Cor. 1.8; Phil. 1.6; cf. Rom. 13.11-14). The centrality of the Parousia in 1 Thessalonians thus arises from the fact that it was an integral part of Paul's message and from the misunderstandings which had arisen. The Parousia is treated as an incentive to godly living, but it is not the only incentive, and Paul's exhortations would not completely lose their force if references to the Parousia were dropped.

In 2 Thessalonians Paul begins with a reference to the judgement of God on the persecutors of the Church at the Parousia. This association of the Parousia with judgement is implicit in Phil. 3.19-21 and 2 Cor. 5.10, but 2 Thess. 1 is unique in the amount of detailed description of judgement. The apocalyptic passage in 2 Thess. 2 is certainly unique in the Pauline corpus, although of course it has other NT parallels of a broad nature. It is motivated by the need to correct misunderstanding, and there is no reason to doubt that the misunderstanding really did exist. The discussion thus arises out of the readers' situation, just like the unique extended discussion of the nature of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15. The problem is whether the answer given to the misunderstanding is in line with Paul's theology elsewhere; here we must confine ourselves to the one observation that Jewish eschatology generally expects a time of troubles before the End, and that it would be surprising if Paul had not shared this expectation.

5 There is a good deal of *exhortation* in both epistles. First, Paul is especially concerned with the need for believers to stand firm in the midst of afflictions. He displays a mixture of confidence, based on the good news which he had received from Timothy, and of concern that the Thessalonians should continue to stand firm. These feelings are entirely natural in an adverse situation, especially when Paul had been unable to spend very long in Thessalonica to establish the church. Second, there is ethical exhortation to purity and love which fits in well with similar instruction elsewhere in Paul (e.g. Rom. 13; 1 Cor. 6) and was natural in epistles directed to Gentile converts. Finally, there are general exhortations to hard work, to orderliness in the church and to the promotion of spiritual gifts. These, and particularly the warnings against idleness in 2 Thess. 3, are appropriate in the situation of the readers.

IV

Our brief discussion has indicated something of the individuality of the Thessalonian correspondence alongside the constant factors that tie it

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to the rest of the Pauline corpus. We have taken care to consider the evidence as it relates to 1 and 2 Thessalonians separately. In the case of 1 Thessalonians we have been able to observe that despite some interesting omissions the main features of Pauline theology are present. The same is also true of 2 Thessalonians, although the theological content of the epistle is less marked. It is clear in any case that 2 Thessalonians stands closest to 1 Thessalonians in its general outlook.

In his commentary on the epistles E. Best raises the general question of Pauline theology in them with particular reference to 1 Thess. 4.13—5.11.²⁷ He notes the omissions and the

²⁷ E. Best, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-2.

additions which constitute 'vast differences' in theology from that of the other epistles. Various relevant factors are summarized: (1) Paul is answering questions arising out of the situation of his readers, and thus omits matters that were not directly relevant. (2) What is written in the letters needs to be supplemented by what Paul said at Thessalonica in his preaching and teaching. (3) The rise of particular problems at a later stage led Paul to formulate his basic theological convictions in answer to them in a way that is not found in the earlier epistles. (4) Despite these omissions various basic structural features of Paul's thought are present in 1 Thessalonians: the new existence of the believer, the association of the indicative and the imperative, and the close relationship of believers to Christ.

The effect of our analysis has been to confirm Best's position. The comparative absence of certain apparently key-concepts from 1 Thessalonians has not prevented us from tracing a basic similarity of structure with Paul's theology as it is expressed elsewhere. At the same time the elements that receive special emphasis in this letter contribute to a fuller picture of Paul's thought and demonstrate specially his pastoral concern for a congregation undergoing affliction and persecution.²⁸ There is admittedly less of Paul's theology in 2 Thessalonians, but much of the same basic structure is visible. Certain peculiarities of expression have been observed, but we have not observed anything which individually or cumulatively stands in the way of accepting the Pauline authorship of the letter. If 2 Thessalonians is regarded as a kind of explanatory appendix to 1 Thessalonians, the comparative lack of Pauline theology in it receives a satisfactory explanation. It has become all the more apparent that the distinctiveness of the individual Pauline letters is closely related to the differing situations which Paul was addressing. While his theology had a basic content, the actual expression of it could be very varied, and in a real sense it could be said

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that what he wrote arose out of a creative encounter with his congregations and the problems which they were facing.

If we bear in mind that the Thessalonian correspondence belongs to an earlier date in Paul's missionary work, what C. K. Barrett has written à propos of 1 Corinthians finds some illustration here: 'The practical advice... is consciously grounded in theological principles which can usually be detected; and, more important, the problems with which Paul deals seem to have reacted upon his theological views, or at least to have had a catalytic effect in pushing forward developments that might otherwise have taken place more slowly.'²⁹

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

²⁸ For a study of Paul's doctrine, grouped around his doctrine of God, see R. F. Collins, 'The Theology of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians', *Louvain Studies* 6 (1977), pp. 315-37.

²⁹ C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London 1968), p. 17.