

INTRODUCTION TO 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

(John Stott)

When Paul and his companions visited Thessalonica in AD 49 or 50, it was already a well-established city with a long history. It had been founded in the fourth century BC by Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's army officers. He named it Thessalonica after his wife who was Alexander's "half sister". It occupied a strategic position, for it boasted a good natural harbour at the head of the Thernaic Gulf, and it was situated on the Via Egnatia which was the main route between Rome and the East. Thessalonica became the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Lightfoot described it as 'the key to the whole of Macedonia', and added that 'it narrowly escaped being made the capital of the world'. Today, as Thessaloniki, it is the second most important city of Greece.

Luke tells us in Acts 17 how Thessalonica came to be evangelized. It happened during Paul's second missionary journey, which followed soon after the Council of Jerusalem. Silas was his chief missionary partner from the beginning. In Lystra he invited the young man Timothy to join them, and in Troas Luke was added to the team. So Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke were the four missionaries who sailed across the Northern Aegean Sea into Europe. After a remarkably successful mission in Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy moved on in a south-westerly direction to Thessalonica, while Luke stayed behind.

The Jewish population of Thessalonica was large enough to justify a synagogue, and here Paul preached on three successive sabbaths. Luke describes his approach. First, he argued from the Old Testament Scriptures that the expected Christ (i.e. the Messiah) had to suffer and rise from the dead. Next, he proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth to them, doubtless telling the story of his life, death and resurrection. And thirdly, he put his first and second points together, and declared that this Jesus was that Christ. In other words, Old Testament prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus, so that the Jesus of history and the Christ of Scripture were the same person. Some of his Jewish listeners were convinced, and joined the missionaries. So did 'a large number of God fearing Greeks', Gentiles on the fringe of the synagogue, 'and not a few prominent women'. This may mean (as is implied by the reference to idolatry in 1 Thes. 1:9) that the Jewish mission was followed by a Gentile mission and that Paul stayed in Thessalonica several months, rather than just three weeks.

It was not long before opposition arose. Jealous of Paul's influence in the city, the Jews recruited a gang of thugs and started a riot. Not finding Paul or Silas in Jason's house, where they were staying, the ringleaders dragged Jason and some other believers before the city magistrates (whom Luke correctly calls '*politarchs*') and lodged a serious accusation against them: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' This allegation threw the city into an uproar. Jason and his friends were put on bail, and that night under cover of darkness Paul and Silas had to be smuggled out of town.

They went south to Berea for a short mission. But the Jews followed them there, so that Paul had to continue his southward journey to Athens, where his escort left him. Soon after, at his request, Silas and Timothy rejoined him. But so anxious was he about the situation in Macedonia that he sent them north again in order to find out what was happening, even though it meant that he was again left in Athens alone. Timothy went to



Thessalonica, and Silas probably to Philippi. By the time they were ready to return south with news, Paul had moved on once more. So it was in Corinth that their reunion took place, and that Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonian church (1 Thes. 3:6). It was one of his earliest letters—his second, in fact, on the assumption that Galatians was written just before the Jerusalem Council.

The apostle responded in this letter to the information he had received from Timothy. On the one hand, Timothy had brought good news of the Thessalonians' 'faith and love', their loyalty and steadfastness under persecution (1 Thes. 3:6-8). On the other, he had reported that Paul was being criticized for insincerity and ulterior motives (2:2-6), and for his failure to return to Thessalonica (2:17-3:5). In addition, the Thessalonians needed correction and instruction in the areas of sexual morality, earning their own living, preparing for the second coming (*parousia*) of Jesus, and tensions in the fellowship.

In the light of this background, it would be possible to divide 1 Thessalonians into two, naming the first half 'Narrative' (looking back to the missionaries' visit) and the second 'Exhortation' (addressing the Thessalonians' problems).

For 1 Thessalonians opens a window on to a newly planted church in the middle of the first century AD. It tells us how it came into being, what the apostle taught it, what were its strengths and weaknesses, its theological and moral problems, and how it was spreading the gospel.

What is of particular interest, because it applies to Christian communities in every age and place, is the interaction which the apostle portrays between the church and the gospel. He shows how the gospel creates the church and the church spreads the gospel, and how the gospel shapes the church, as the church seeks to live a life that is worthy of the gospel.

It seems certain that Paul, Silas and Timothy were still in Corinth when the Thessalonians' response to Paul's first letter arrived. For he stayed in the city about two years. The news they received was mixed, as is clear from Paul's second letter which it prompted. On the one hand, he and his co-workers were deeply thankful to learn of the Thessalonians' growing faith and love, and of their perseverance under persecution (2 Thes. 1:3-4). On the other hand, there was cause for anxiety because the church was being disturbed in three particular ways. First, the persecution was so severe that Paul felt the need to explain why God allows his people to suffer for the kingdom and how he will put wrongs right when Jesus comes (2 Thes. 1:5-10).

Secondly, the Thessalonians were in danger of being deceived by false teaching, which had reached them through a communication which purported to come from Paul but was a forgery (2 Thes. 2:1-3a). In particular, they were being told that the day of the Lord had already come. So Paul needed to remind them of God's eschatological calendar, and especially that the revelation of Christ would be preceded by the rebellion of Antichrist (2 Thes. 2:3b-12).

Thirdly, the group of 'idlers', who (for whatever reason) had given up their work, had not all followed Paul's instruction to return to it. So he had some stern words in his second letter to and about this disobedient minority (2 Thes. 3:4-12). Paul also entreated the Thessalonians in this as in all matters to be loyal to his teaching (2:13-15). And he took the opportunity to express both his continuing prayers for them (1:11-12; 2:16-17; 3:16-18) and his need for their prayers (3:1-3).

All three chapters of the second letter allude to the *Parousia*. Indeed Paul sets the current problems of the Thessalonian church firmly in the context of the historical process and of its climax when Christ comes. As in his first letter, his preoccupation is still the church and the gospel, but now he relates them more clearly to the unfolding of history. He writes in turn about the revelation of Christ (chapter 1), the rebellion of Antichrist (chapter 2), and, in the light of these, the responsibility of Christians meanwhile (chapter 3).