

I

Opening section and thanksgiving

(1 THESSALONIANS 1:1–10)

Almighty God, who is the ultimate author of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, used Paul to communicate God's message to the church at Thessalonica, and also to communicate God's message to us in the twenty-first century. May we (the reader and I) humbly ask that God would grant us understanding as we approach his grand text.

Paul writes 1 Thessalonians from Corinth soon after he received a verbal report from Timothy, who had just returned from the Thessalonian church. Paul is thrilled that the report is primarily positive and writes 1 Thessalonians with enthusiasm. (For further discussion, see 'Introductory matters'.)

Opening section (1 Thessalonians 1:1)

The format Paul adopts in his letters matches well with the standard format of any Hellenistic/Jewish letter of the first century AD. This is especially true for the opening words. A typical Hellenistic letter uses the formula ‘X (from whom) to Y (to whom), Greetings’.¹ Paul follows this general form.

All of Paul’s letters, including 1 Thessalonians, have the same overarching form of ‘X to Y, grace and peace’. However, within this general pattern, there are slight differences in the openings of individual letters as Paul expands upon the ‘X’, ‘Y’, and/or ‘grace and peace’ in a variety of ways. How does the opening of 1 Thessalonians compare with Paul’s other letters? It has the least amount of additional material. Also, in 1 Thessalonians (and 2 Thessalonians) there are two unusual grammatical expressions: ‘of Thessalonians’ and ‘in God’.

1:1. *Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of [the] Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*²

Although Paul is the primary author, the letter is described as being from ‘Paul and Silvanus and Timothy’ because all three ministered in Thessalonica (cf. Acts 16:1–3; 17:14–15) and the other two endorsed what Paul wrote.³ At the time the letter was written, the three men were in Corinth (Acts 18:5; 2 Corinthians 1:19) in the year AD 50.

As opposed to all of Paul’s other letters, there are no epithets to describe the sender(s) in the openings of either 1 or 2 Thessalonians (cf. ‘Paul, the apostle’ and ‘Timothy, the brother’ in 2 Corinthians 1:1).⁴ Some argue that Paul did not use ‘Paul, the apostle,’ here because his authority was not being questioned.⁵ This argument does not adequately take into account Paul’s defence in

1 Thessalonians 2. It is best to assume that the lack of any epithet is related to the fact that 1 and 2 Thessalonians were early letters.⁶ Subsequently, Paul included epithets as part of his standard letter format. This change in format over time is similar to Paul's using 'church' in the opening salutations of his early letters and changing to 'saints' in his later letters (see discussion below).

'Silvanus' is certainly the Silas mentioned in Acts. He is probably also the 'Silvanus' of 1 Peter 5:12. 'Silvanus' is a Latin/Roman name and may reflect his prestigious Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37). 'Silas' may simply be a shortened form of 'Silvanus', or, possibly, the Greek version of his Aramaic name, *š'illa'* (Saul), which just happens to sound similar to 'Silvanus'.⁷

The letter is addressed to 'the church of [the] Thessalonians'.⁸ To be called the 'church' was an honour and an encouragement for the Thessalonians. Certainly, by AD 50 the term 'church' (*ekklēsia*) had become a technical term for the Christian covenant community, either in its local manifestation (as here) or in a broader sense (e.g., Acts 9:31; Ephesians 1:22, Philippians 3:6).⁹ Interestingly, in Paul's first five canonical letters (Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians), 'church' is used in the opening address to his readers. In his later canonical letters to congregations (Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians), 'saints' is used.¹⁰ Obviously, the 'church' is composed of 'saints'.

Paul expands upon the 'church' by noting that she is 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. Although in Greek the word 'in' (*en*) is not repeated, it is certain that 'in' relates to both 'God' and 'Lord'.¹¹

The use of the expression 'in God' is somewhat unusual in Paul's writings (but see Colossians 3:3), although 'in ... the Lord Jesus Christ' is not. The expression 'in Christ' (4:16) and its equivalents (e.g., 'in Christ Jesus', 2:14; 'in the Lord', 3:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:4;

‘in the Lord Jesus Christ’, 2 Thessalonians 3:12; ‘in him’, Philippians 3:9) refer to the believers’ union with Christ (represented by, and connected to, Christ) and the variety of implications that flow from this.¹²

Initially, two possible implications present themselves for ‘in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’: either a general meaning that the Thessalonians are in union with God/Christ; or a more specific meaning that God/Christ is the instrument through whom the Thessalonians became a church (examples of this instrumental usage include Romans 3:24; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 2:17).¹³ The general meaning is probably in view here in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 because it is more common in Paul’s writings, and this sense should be assumed when there is no explicit contextual reason to opt for the instrumental meaning.

Paul’s high view of the divinity of Christ is portrayed here. The Thessalonian church is ‘in’ (one preposition) *both* the ‘Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’, which shows the very close connection between the two persons of the Godhead. Also, ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*), as used here, notes divinity. In the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament written 250–150 BC), *kyrios* translates both God’s personal name, *Yahweh* (misnamed Jehovah), and the Hebrew word for ‘lord’, or ‘master’, (including God’s title as the divine ‘Lord’, *Adonai*). When the New Testament uses *kyrios* in reference to Jesus, sometimes it is explicitly declaring that he is *Yahweh* (e.g., Mark 1:3; Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13; Ephesians 4:8, citing Psalm 68:18; Philippians 2:11; Hebrews 1:10).¹⁴ In other places, the emphasis is on the generic ‘lord’/‘master’ (e.g., Matthew 8:2) or the divine ‘Lord’/‘Master’ (e.g., John 20:28; Acts 2:34; Revelation 19:16). In a third large group, there is a merging of *Yahweh* and divine ‘Lord’/‘Master’ (e.g., Acts 2:36). 1 Thessalonians 1:1 is in the third group. There is certainly an aspect of the clear divinity (*Yahweh* and

divine ‘Lord’/‘Master’) associated with *kyrios* because of the close connection between the Father and the Son.¹⁵

For a discussion of ‘Grace and peace to you’, see the same phrase in 2 Thessalonians 1:2.

Application

As was true in the first century AD, Christians today are organized into local groups. As a result of sin—our own and that of others—we may not have as high a view of this body of people as God does. Yes, there are problems in these modern groups, and the Bible even provides critiques of some of those in New Testament times. But the Triune God, speaking through Paul, has declared that each of these groups of true Christians is a ‘church’—that is, a special assembly of God’s covenant people.

This church is wonderfully connected to ‘God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. This connection exists both individually and corporately and, as we shall see in the subsequent texts of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, it provides all manner of blessings and responsibilities. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (AD 1563) expounds upon these blessings and responsibilities: ‘First, that all and every one who believes, being members of Christ, are in common, partakers of Him, and of all His riches and gifts; secondly, that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members.’¹⁶

May we have the proper understanding, actions and emotional responses to the church, as befits a group that is ‘in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’!