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1 Thessalonians Resource Review

Frank Dicken

The apostle Paul penned the letter known to us as 1 Thessalonians during his eighteen-month stay in Corinth which began shortly after his brief but successful engagement with the Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue of Thessalonica (1 Thess 2.1—3.13; cf. Acts 17.1–9; 18.11). Given the small amount of time and distance between Paul’s initial encounter with the Thessalonians and the writing of his first epistle to those believers, the letter provides contemporary church leaders with a unique view of the apostle’s relationship with an early Christian community. The three resources reviewed here capitalize on this unique perspective and assist church leaders not only with preaching and teaching 1 Thessalonians, but also with thinking about the theological underpinnings of their own ministries in light of Paul’s pastoral care of the Thessalonian church.

Gene Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Gene Green is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College (Wheaton, IL) and former minister in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. The Pillar New Testament Commentary series is designed specifically for pastors and teachers in local churches and combines rigorous exegesis with a concern for contemporary relevance (xi). Green’s contribution to this series seeks to read the Thessalonian correspondence in its Greco-Roman environment (xiii). The author’s attention to this background material is evident in the extensive amount of space dedicated to it in the introductory section of the commentary (pp. 1–46). Green highlights that the close relationship between the cities of Thessalonica and Rome made possible the former’s prominent place on the Via Egnatia and sea trade routes of the Mediterranean. Green explores the religious dimension of this close relationship between the cities extensively (pp. 31–47), particularly as a way of understanding Paul’s commendation of the Thessalonians’ turn from idolatry (1 Thess 1.9).

Space does not permit a review of the entire commentary here. As an example, I have chosen to look at Green’s comments on the important eschatological text, 1 Thessalonians 4.13–18. Green believes this text arises from the failure of the Thessalonian Christians to allow their confession of Christ to inform their reactions to the deaths of fellow believers, revealing an incomplete grasp of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead (p. 215). In accordance with his emphasis on the Greco-Roman setting of the letter, Green notes that the Christian hope of resurrection stood in stark contrast to the prevailing culture’s fatalistic worldview (pp. 218–219). Continuing this emphasis, the author also reads Paul’s language regarding the Parousia and believers meeting Christ in the air as an appropriation of the imagery of a Roman imperial entourage arriving in a city (pp. 223–228).

These two examples from 1 Thessalonians 4.13–18 offer a glimpse into how Green’s interpretation of 1 Thessalonians in its Greco-Roman milieu sheds light on a difficult text. He does not, however, fail to bring the meaning of the text to bear on a difficult situation that every church leader must face: the death of a fellow Christian. Green’s conclusion of this section is that 1 Thessalonians 4.13–18 is best understood not as offering

an eschatological timeline, but rather comfort and hope to those attending a memorial service or funeral (p. 229). In these ways, this brief commentary (the section on 1 Thessalonians comprises approximately 200 pages; the entire volume is only 440 pages) provides the church leader with a wealth of material for understanding Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians in both its original and contemporary contexts.

Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*

(Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1987).

We now turn from the public preaching and teaching of 1 Thessalonians to reflections on how the letter may shape one's ministry. Abraham Malherbe, now deceased, was a New Testament scholar who held teaching positions at Abilene Christian University, Dartmouth College, and Yale Divinity School. His scholarly interests focused on early Christianity in the first two centuries and the Hellenistic moral tradition. In this small, classic volume Malherbe brings his expertise in both the Pauline tradition and Hellenistic philosophy together in order to examine how Paul draws on and adapts the models of philosophers' care for adherents of their teachings in his pastoral care for the Thessalonian church. The book is an exercise in comparison and contrast between various aspects of philosophical schools assimilating new members and what can be gleaned from 1 Thessalonians (and to a lesser extent, the book of Acts) concerning how Paul and the Thessalonian believers cared for converts.

The first chapter describes the social setting of the Pauline communities, especially the apostle's use of both residential and public spaces in proclaiming the gospel. Of particular interest to church leaders will be Malherbe's comparison and contrast of Christian conversion (which is typically portrayed as instantaneous in the New Testament) with conversion to a philosophic school (which was typically a gradual process). The extant literature utilizes similar terms to describe both types of conversion (e.g., turning, repentance, rebirth, etc.), though for Christians this terminology takes on different nuances (p. 29). The emphasis on conversion in this chapter is foundational to the following three chapters.

Chapters 2 through 4 each deal with a select topic of community formation and identity: shaping (chap. 2), nurturing (chap. 3), and relation of the community to its pagan culture (chap. 4). Chapter 2 primarily expounds Paul's comfort of the Thessalonian Christians, many of whom would have experienced rejection on several social levels because of their conversion. Chapter 3 examines Paul's role as pastor to the Thessalonians despite his absence from them. According to Malherbe, the apostle fulfills this role in three ways: 1) he sends Timothy, 2) he writes the letter, and 3) he urges them to continue what he taught them as a means of self-nurture. Chapter 4 focuses on Paul's challenge to the church to live a quiet life working at manual labor for the purpose of exhibiting a lifestyle that is appealing to nonbelievers (p. 98, cf. 1 Thess 4.11–12). A two-page conclusion follows.

In many ways, Malherbe's treatment of Paul's adaptations of models taken from philosophical schools is exploratory rather than definitive. There is plenty here for the serious student of Scripture to begin an exploration of the situation in which Paul composed 1 Thessalonians. The genius of the book is Malherbe's sampling of ways that Paul drew upon his wider culture, which offers a model whereby church leaders may fruitfully interact and draw upon their culture in order shape their own ministries.

James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision*

(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

This final resource also deals with ministry formation from a theological perspective, but from a text-based rather than a socio-cultural perspective. James Thompson recently retired from his posts as professor of New Testament and the associate dean of Abilene Christian University's Graduate School of Theology. In this monograph Thompson attempts to reach a lofty goal—to offer a Scripturally-based pastoral theology based on

the Pauline epistles (pp. 9–11). His investigation begins with a definition of pastoral ministry gleaned from his reading of the Pauline letters, “Ministry is participation in God’s work of transforming the community of faith until it is ‘blameless’ at the coming of Christ” (pp. 19–20).

Only half of the second chapter deals with 1 Thessalonians, which Thompson treats alongside Philippians because both epistles are “deeply pastoral letters written by the absent mentor to his new congregation, and the two share similarities of situation, purpose, and location” (p. 31). His conclusions concerning 1 Thessalonians and Philippians are set in the context of the other Pauline letters in this chapter and supplemented by readings of Galatians (chap. 3), Romans (chap. 4), and the Corinthian correspondence (chap. 5).

Thompson sees the situation in Thessalonica that Paul addresses as the crisis of continued devotion in the face of hostility (p. 33). This hostility was not outright, systematic persecution, but rather social rejection (p. 34). In this way, Thompson’s treatment of 1 Thessalonians is quite similar to Malherbe’s. Thompson argues that Paul’s pastoral vision for the Thessalonians is evident in the prayer that express Paul’s desire that the Thessalonian Christians love one another (1 Thess 3.12) which finds its outworking in the paraenetic section of the letter (1 Thess 4–5) and is epitomized in the instruction to do good to one another (1 Thess 5.15; pp. 55–57). By loving each other, the Thessalonian believers will find their hearts blameless at the Parousia (1 Thess 3.11; p. 56).

Thompson concludes his reflections on 1 Thessalonians by urging the contemporary pastor, “If we adopt the Pauline understanding, we will work with God for church growth that consists of an increase in ethical sensitivity and care for others within the community. We will challenge the self-centeredness of our own society, measuring our effectiveness by the community’s capacity to live in harmony with each other” (p. 60). Ministers will do well to reflect on Thompson’s vision for pastoral ministry based on 1 Thessalonians alone, but the entire monograph is worthwhile reading.

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