

*Standing Firm in a Trinity-Centered Community:
An Exposition of 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17*

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I. Introduction

“Conflicting loyalties can aggravate strained relationships, as common commitment can strengthen them.”¹ Communities are fascinating organisms with unlimited intricacy and mystery. With a plethora of human experiences, personalities, and opinions, a community context offers both volatile and encouraging situations. In addition, when multiple communities converge on the same geographical location, the possibility for conflict is greatly increased. Vying for members, loyalty, and prominence, the communities can develop strained relationships. Indeed, then, the creating of a new community within an already existing one is not only a difficult task but a dangerous one. Paul’s early ministry proves this point.

Paul’s message conflicts with the Roman message because it promotes a different kingdom, king, and peace. In Acts 17, the Jews recognize this conflict, and consequently, they launch various persecution tactics against the Christian community, including physical punishment (2 Thess. 1:3-12) and deceit (2 Thess. 2:1-12). With the Jew’s banishment of Paul, the Thessalonian Christians are left in an oppressive situation without their spiritual mentor causing their hope to quickly fade.

First, to restore their rapidly fading hope, Paul reminds them of the foundational Christian teaching of the Trinity’s past, present, and future actions: God’s work in the past calling them to salvation through the gospel, the Spirit’s work in the present setting them apart for service to God through sanctification, and Jesus’ work in the future coming as both redeemer and judge bringing vindication. The assurance of receiving salvation, sanctification, and vindication will be the basis for the Thessalonian Christian’s faith, love, and hope, respectively.

Second, Paul builds upon the Trinitarian foundation with an exhortation to stand firm and hold fast to the teaching. The instruction provides hope which functions as a basis for his exhortation. The

¹ N.H. Taylor, “Palestinian Christianity and the Caligula Crisis,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 61 (Mar 1996): 105.

Thessalonians will be able to face the persecutions when they rely upon the validity of the faith, love, and hope described above.

Third, the Thessalonians' affirmative response to this teaching ushers them into a Trinity-centered community, characterized by their ethical actions based on faith, love, and hope. The community of God stands firm in both work and word through the faith, love, and hope given to them by the Trinity's actions.

Fourth, placing the Trinity in the center of the community, by default, removes Rome from the center, resulting in conflict. This new community's intent is not to parody, attack, or overthrow the Roman Empire, but rather, to construct the universe around the Trinity as its center. As a result, Paul's message to the Thessalonian Christians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 is that despite persecution, do not lose hope, but instead, stand firm in the Trinity-centered community characterized by an ethic based on faith, love, and hope.

II. Catalyst for Persecution – Paul's Political Message

In Acts 17:1ff, Paul and his companions had just been beaten for the gospel in Philippi before being asked to leave. While traveling the Via Egnatia², Paul began to target Thessalonica³ with the gospel. As was Paul's custom, he began preaching in the synagogue to the Jewish community. His message persuaded some Jews, "a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and not a few prominent women."⁴ This infringement upon the Jewish community launched a series of persecutions⁵ against the

² This is a major Roman road extending 530 miles from modern day Istanbul to Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic Sea.

³ Thessalonica was established in 316 B.C. by a Hellenistic general named Cassander and named after his wife, the half-sister of Alexander the Great. Thessalonica was named the capital city of the new Roman province in 146 B.C. due to its key location for communication, at the head of a bay and on an international highway.

⁴ Acts 17:4. All scriptures will be quoted from the *New International Version*, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ The persecutions leveled against the Christians come from various agents, i.e. Jews, Romans, Politarchs, etc. The persecution occurs in a two-fold manner: tangible persecution and intangible persecution. See pp. 8-10 below.

Christian community in Thessalonica. Perceiving Paul's message as conflicting with Rome's message, the Jews stirred up trouble by bringing the Christians before the politarchs claiming, "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."⁶ As a result Paul was prematurely expelled from the city, leaving the Christian community to fight a losing battle for their new belief.

As can be imagined, the Thessalonian Christians quickly lost all hope,⁷ but was the accusation by the Jews legitimate? Was Paul's message to Thessalonica political? Did it conflict with the Roman message? Examining Paul's message presents a message which promotes an alternative kingdom, king, and peace, which violates not only Rome's message but also Rome's decrees.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 Paul describes another kingdom when he writes, "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his *kingdom* and glory."⁸ The offer to align with a kingdom other than the Roman Empire would have been considered treasonous. Parties subject to Roman rule had a responsibility to prove their allegiance to the glory of Rome by passionately opposing any mention of an alternate authority or kingdom. The Paphlagonian's oath sworn to Rome while merely doing business with the Empire functions as an appropriate example:

I swear...that I will support Caesar Augustus, his children and descendants, throughout my life, in word, deed and thought...that in whatsoever concerns them I will spare neither body nor soul nor life nor children...that whenever I see or hear of anything being said, planned or done against them I will report it...and whomsoever they regard as enemies I will attack and pursue with arms and the sword by land and by sea...⁹

The zeal to protect the Roman Empire against other kingdoms can hardly be underestimated. All means necessary to protect the glory of Rome were expected from its subjects.

⁶ Acts 17:7

⁷ See pp. 10-11, **IV. Results of Persecution – The Thessalonian Christians Have Lost Hope.**

⁸ *Emphasis* added by author. Cf. 2 Thess. 1:5.

⁹ Quoted in E.A. Judge, "The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica," *The Reformed Theological Review* 30 (1971): 6.

In addition, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their allegiance to the kingdom of God displayed in the turning “to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”¹⁰ This action would have been perceived as extraordinarily arrogant and a complete rejection of the status quo¹¹ in the Roman Empire. Rejecting the idols¹² was perceived as atheism¹³ by the Romans and a threat to the stability of the kingdom because, “It alienated the gods upon whom the well-being of the empire depended.”¹⁴ These actions combined with the blatant proclamation of the kingdom of God would have isolated the Christians as a subversive group dedicated to ideals counter to Roman ideology and society.¹⁵

Connected with his proclamation of a new kingdom, Paul preached the coming of a new king, clearly challenging the authority of the emperor, the king of Rome.¹⁶ This subversion is evident in his use of honorific titles¹⁷ and descriptions of imperial arrivals for Christ that directly parallel their use in

¹⁰ 1 Thess. 1:9. Cf. 1 Pet. 4:3-4 and Tacitus in *Ann.* 15:44.

¹¹ P. Oakes, “Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27.3 (2005): 309, notes, “Any movement that challenged the status quo of the social structure would, to some extent, be challenging Rome.” In addition, Christianity’s lack of class-distinction could have been perceived as an attack on the Roman societal structure, which would further complicate their relationship.

¹² In Thessalonica, the cultic center was located only about 300 yards west/northwest of the agora, or the commonplace. The cults would have included: Serapis, Isis, Dionysus, Cabirus, Aphrodite, Demeter, Asclepius, Zeus, and the Imperial Cult. While some of these cults had their own temples in Thessalonica (Serapis, Dionysus, Augustus Caesar, etc.), others would have had merely an idol in the cultic center. For more information see: K.P. Donfried and I.H. Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); K.P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 336-356; and E.R. Richards, “Ministering in a Tough Place: Paul’s Pattern in Thessalonica,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42 (1999): 17-38.

¹³ Justin Martyr *Apol. I* 6; *Apol. II* 3.

¹⁴ C.G. Kruse, “Persecution,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Evans and Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 776. See also D.A. deSilva, “Ruler Cult,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Evans and Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 1026 and J.R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25.1 (2002): 78-79.

¹⁵ See D. Bossman, “Paul’s Mediterranean Gospel: Faith, Hope, Love,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 25.2 (1995): 71.

¹⁶ Cassius Dio 56 25.5, 6 quoted in Judge, 3.

reference to the emperor. The key honorific title Paul uses for Jesus¹⁸ in the Thessalonian correspondence is “Lord.”¹⁹ Scholars have pointed out that the honorific title “Lord” or “κύριος” (*kurios*) has been used to describe the Roman emperors from the reign of Augustus onward.²⁰ Paul’s message of another kingdom governed by another lord replaced Roman ideology with the Christian message, rendering the authority of Caesar meaningless.²¹

Merely proclaiming someone as lord could be challenged as minimal evidence, but when the honorific titles are used in specific Imperial contexts with other politically loaded terms, the reality of the contrast becomes more evident. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the honorific title κύριος (*kurios*) is coupled with two words referring to imperial arrivals, namely: παρουσία (*parousia*) and ἀπάντησις (*apantāsis*).²² The occurrence of these three terms in such close proximity could have hardly been perceived as mere coincidence to a Christian audience living in a city with an Imperial Cult temple dedicated to Octavian himself.²³

¹⁷ Harrison, 79.

¹⁸ There are other honorific titles in the New Testament that would appear to be in direct conflict with Rome. For example, Jesus is referred to as “Savior” in: Eph. 5:23; Phil. 3:20; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; and 3:6, and God as Savior in: 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; and 3:4. See K.H. Schelkle. “σωτηρ,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 ed. Balz and Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 326 for inscriptions referring to the emperor as “Savior.”

¹⁹ The phrase “Lord Jesus Christ” is found 10 times (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1, 2, 12; 2:1, 14, 16; 3:6, 12, 18) and 9 times the phrase “our Lord Jesus Christ” is found (1 Thess. 1:3; 5:9, 23, 28; 2 Thess. 2:1, 14, 16; 3:6, 18), not to mention “Lord Jesus” is found 7 times (1 Thess. 2:15; 4:1, 2; 2 Thess. 1:7, 8, 12; 2:8) and “our Lord Jesus” is found 5 times (1 Thess. 2:19; 3:11, 13; 2 Thess. 1:8, 12). The title “Lord” by itself is found as well (1 Thess. 1:6, 8; 3:8, 12; 4:6, 15 [2x], 16, 17 [2x]; 5:2, 12, 27; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2:2, 13; 3:1, 3, 4, 5, 16 [2x]).

²⁰ See E. Krentz, “Roman Hellenism and Paul’s Gospel,” *Bible Today* 26.6 (1988): 336.

²¹ Oakes, 306, states, “...the gospel involves proclamation of the lordship of the Messiah, a proclamation that relativizes the claims of all other lords, especially Caesar.”

²² Other imperial cult terms listed by Harrison, 92, include: peace – 1 Thess. 1:1; 5:3, 23; hope – 1 Thess. 1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8; 2 Thess. 2:16; good news – 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:2, 4, 8, 9; 3:2; 2 Thess. 1:8; 2:14; and others.

²³ Richards, 19. Donfried, 344 even describes Thessalonica as having an “...unusually strong civic cult in the city,” which indicates the imperial cult context in which the recipients would be reading the letters. Scholars have traced παρουσία (*parousia*) “from the Ptolemaic period down into the 2nd century AD, [for] we are able to

Furthermore, Paul's message of an alternative kingdom and king would have also been seen as an attack on the Pax Romana, in that Christ offers another peace. The Pax Romana, or shorthand "peace and security,"²⁴ was a primary part of the Roman Imperial ideology, because it was promulgated that Rome was the chosen agent of the gods to deliver to the world what only the gods could provide: "peace and security."²⁵ As a result, this imperial slogan was plastered all over the empire²⁶ indicating Rome's authority over all due to their key role for the world.

Outside of the logical implications of Paul's message on the imperial slogan of peace²⁷ and security, Paul blatantly seems to refer to this slogan in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 when he says, "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them...and there will be no escape."²⁸ Ironically²⁹, the phrase seems to indicate that the champions of "peace and security" are

trace the word in the East as a technical expression for the arrival or the visit of the king or the emperor." [A. Deismann quoted in A. Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, London: Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, Ltd., 1932, pg. 143. Also see Krentz, Roman, 336 and Harrison 82-83.] In addition, ἀπάντησις (*apantāsis*) is "the proper term to describe the official procession that went out to welcome the arriving ruler into a city, when his coming is announced by messenger and trumpet fanfare." [Krentz, Roman, 336. See B. Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (Waco: Baylor U. Press, 2005), 119, for support of the trumpet being used in the παρουσία (*parousia*) and ἀπάντησις (*apantāsis*) of the emperor and his greeters.] 1 Thess. 4:13-17 includes all three honorific terms. Cf. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.26-28.

²⁴ Harrison, 86, lists E. Bammel, K. Donfried, K. Wengst, H. Koester and H.L. Hendrix as advocates of this position.

²⁵ deSilva, 1027.

²⁶ Inscriptions [Harrison, 86-87], coins [Krent, Roman, 336], writings (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.21.2; 2.12.1; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.158-60, 247), and even altars [Harrison, 86-87] boast Rome's divine gift of "peace and security" to the world.

²⁷ Peace is referred to 7 times in the Thessalonian correspondence by Paul (1 Thess. 1:1; 5:3, 13, 23; 2 Thess. 1:2; 3:16 [2x]), and commonly referred to as God being the source of the peace (esp. 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 1:2; 3:16). See J.E. Bowley, "Pax Romana," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Evans and Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 774 for possible implications.

²⁸ *The New Revised Standard Version*. While some have suggested that Paul is referring to an Old Testament prophecy, the use of the phrase "they say" would seem quite peculiar.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 126 points out another key point of irony, "...Paul has been expelled and they have suffered persecution from those who are supposedly the bringers of peace and security." Tacitus adds to this irony when he describes the *Pax Romana* as something to be feared (*Ann.* 12.33).

actually outsiders about to receive divine punishment despite their arrogant proclamation.³⁰ Paul is pulling back the veil of the apparent reality to the divine reality which reveals that the only “peace and security” the Thessalonians can be guaranteed is found in another kingdom, another king, and another peace.³¹

In light of Paul’s message, Rome’s message, and the various imperial decrees, the accusation by the Jews in Acts 17:7 was legitimate. The Jews were correctly pledging their allegiance to the Roman Empire in the manner specified in the imperial decrees, even if it was motivated by jealousy and disdain.³² Ben Witherington summarizes it this way, “Along came Paul into...the empire suggesting there was another God walking on the earth offering kingdom, and this one had even come back from the dead. In such an environment this was an explosive message with considerable political implications. This message qualified as a subversive one, violating Caesar’s decrees.”³³

³⁰ Witherington, 125-126.

³¹ See Harrison, 87, Oakes, 318, and Donfried and Marshall, 54 for more information on the *Pax Romana* conflict. Judge, 5 records an oath from AD 37 sworn by the people of Aritium to Caligula, about thirteen years before the Thessalonian letters, which exhorts them to “hunt down” enemies of Caesar similar to the Paphlagonian decree. If Christians were considered enemies because of their message, then this oath would have been quite disturbing.

³² Acts 17:5. It is worth noting that the Roman Imperial Ideology had been used as a weapon against the Jews several times in the recent past. In the regions of Alexandria (Philo, *Leg. Gai.* 134), Jamnia (*Leg. Gai.* 201, 202), and Dora (Josephus, *Ant.* 19.300-11), images of the emperor were erected in the respective synagogues by Greeks who hated the Jews causing revolts and the destruction of the images. As a result, Apion (Josephus, *Ant.* “Against Apion) appears before Caligula to charge the Jews with subversive activity against Rome. The punishment was to be enforced by the erection of an imperial cult statue featuring Caligula as a god in the temple of Jerusalem (Josephus, *War* 2.184; *Ant.* 18.261; and Philo, *Leg. Gai.* 203). While the death of Caligula prevented the fulfillment of the punishment, the Jews learned a lesson in how to use the imperial ideology to their advantage against their enemies, which now translates into the Christian community. See J.S. McLaren, “Jews and the Imperial Cult: From Augustus to Domitian,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27.3 (2005): 257-278 for a detailed look at the Jewish conflict with the Imperial Cult.

³³ Witherington, 122.

III. Nature of the Persecution – Political Response to Paul’s Message

Paul’s political message placed the Christian community of Thessalonica in direct violation of Roman ideology and decrees, resulting in various persecutions from a variety of sources.³⁴ But what was the nature of the persecution in Thessalonica?³⁵ Persecution, as revealed in the New Testament and imperial decrees, can be either a physical, tangible attack or a non-physical, intangible attack. The particular persecution tactic is determined by the persecutor, the situation, and maybe the offense.

Tangible persecutions in Thessalonica would have included beatings, banishment, and possibly even death. As was evident in the imperial decrees, enemies of Rome were to be pursued with arms, swords,³⁶ and rods.³⁷ As a result, the more natural understanding of persecution in the Thessalonian correspondence is beatings, not resulting in death, which carried the imperial message of “peace and security.” In addition, banishment was another form of tangible persecution instituted by Rome³⁸. This

³⁴ Thessalonica would have punished any members of the city perceived as subversive as quickly and forcefully as possible. The reason for such a reaction is directly tied to the honored “free” city status awarded to Thessalonica by Rome in 42 BC following their support for Antony and Octavian in the war at Philippi. This political status was coveted throughout the empire because of the favors and freedom a city could experience. However, in order to keep the political status, the free city would need to prove its allegiance to Rome in other, unique ways. See Donfried, 345-346 and Harrison, 81 for examples of honorific games, coins, and temples dedicated to the deified emperors in Thessalonica. The primary pledge to Roman allegiance, however, was to punish the enemies of Rome.

³⁵ The word “persecution” and its cognates occur 3x (1 Thess. 3:4, 7; 2 Thess. 1:4), “suffering” and its cognates occur 6x (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:2, 14 [2x]; 5:9; 2 Thess. 1:5), “trial” and its cognates occur 2x (1 Thess. 3:3; 2 Thess. 1:4), “distress” occurs 1x (1 Thess. 3:7), “endurance” and its cognates occur 2x (1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:4), “perseverance” occurs 2x (2 Thess. 1:4; 3:5), and concepts of persecution are communicated in various forms (1 Thess. 2:17; 3:3-5, 7-8; 4:13-5:11; 5:15; 2 Thess. 1:3-12; 2:1-3, 4, 15; 3:2).

³⁶ The Paphlagonian oath, quoted in Judge, 5-6, mentions “arms” and “swords”.

³⁷ Edict from Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.21 is quoted in *ibid.*, 5, which mentions the use of rods in flogging enemies.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 quoting Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.21 reads, “It has been decreed to expel from the city prophets who pretend to be inspired by a god...first offenders are flogged with rods and expelled from the city, but persevering ones are thrown into public gaol, or deported, or at least banished.” In another edict from *ibid.*, 5, seers delivering predictions about the emperor’s health were to be banished to “a mine or to an island.” Cf. Rev. 1:9.

practice is alluded to in several New Testament texts: Paul in Philippi in Acts 16:16ff.,³⁹ John on Patmos in Rev. 1:9, and possibly Paul's perspective of the situation in Thessalonica described in 1 Thess. 2:17.

Through these mandated actions, Rome is requiring that nothing be more important than the Roman Empire, Emperor, and peace; these are to be protected by the people of Rome at all costs. Whether that means pursuit over land and sea, punishment with rods or swords, or even death, the result must be to protect Rome by whatever means possible.⁴⁰

In addition to the tangible aspect of persecution, the Thessalonians experienced intangible persecutions as well. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a states, "As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way."⁴¹ This verse shows that the Thessalonian Christians were under attack with at least three intangible persecution tactics all striving for the goal of deception.⁴²

³⁹ When the Roman citizenship of Paul and his companions were revealed the banishment was interrupted. Instead, the officials simply asked them to leave, but the process described in the edict seems to be their motivation.

⁴⁰ Refer to the Paphlagonian decree on p. 3 to establish the persecuting zeal. In addition, Donfried and Marshall, 22-23 comment on the Paphlagonian oath, "...[it] compels Romans and non-Romans alike to report cases of disloyalty and to hunt down physically the offenders. The seriousness by which this is meant to be taken—even to the point of death for those who are disloyal—is evident." Based on the suggestion made in F.F Bruce's *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951): 327-328, Donfried raises three logical evidences for advocating deaths in Thessalonica indicated by "fell asleep" in 1 Thess. 4:13. While the evidence does not necessarily mandate that deaths occurred in Thessalonica as suggested by Donfried, the cumulative case does support the suggestion that the Thessalonian Christians probably faced the threat of martyrdom. This is not to suggest that the martyrdom was systematic in any way, but rather, that there were sporadic episodes of persecution that sometimes possibly escalated to the point of death. Cf. Romans 8:35-36.

⁴¹ *The New Revised Standard Version*.

⁴² While the particular message of deceit in 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to the covert passing of the day of the Lord, it is irresponsible to say that this was the only false message sent to the Thessalonian Christians before or after the Thessalonian correspondence. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16 a false message intended to smear Paul's credibility seems to have been launched to deceive the Christians.

The first tactic of intangible persecution is described as being deceived “by spirit.” The natural inference from this reference of “spirit” is to assume that it is indicating false prophetic utterances.⁴³ Second, the Thessalonian Christians were being persecuted by “word.” The *NIV* correctly interprets λόγος (*logos*) in this context as “report,” which suggests that the Christians may have been receiving false verbal “reports” about what Paul was instructing them.⁴⁴ Finally, some persecutors were circulating false letters claiming to be Paul. Without having an intricate, traceable postal system, the method of communication relied on messengers receiving and delivering letters, which provided the opportunity for false letters.⁴⁵ In all three intangible persecutions, the goal is to lead the Christians astray so that their belief will be altered – i.e., faith, love, and hope – resulting in their inability to function as a community. Both tangible and intangible persecutions, then, were dedicated to the destruction of the Christian community.

IV. Results of Persecution – The Thessalonian Christians Have Lost Hope

David Bossman writes, “For Paul, faith, hope, and love operate as distinguishing values of the assemblies that profess Jesus as their messianic Lord.”⁴⁶ Since all three of these elements have a co-dependant relationship, if one is taken away, then the other two suffer and are possibly even destroyed. After submitting to Paul’s Christian message, the Thessalonian Christians were bombarded with intensifying⁴⁷ persecutions, resulting in a loss of hope.

⁴³ J. Cunningham, “The Man of Sin: A Study of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12,” *Journal from the Radical Reformation* 11.2 (2003): 4-5. He also points out that 1 John 4:1-3 uses “spirit” to describe a false message claiming inspiration.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴⁵ A.J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 353. Cf. 2 Thess. 3:17

⁴⁶ Bossman, 71. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:5; 1 Thess. 1:3-4; 5:8.

⁴⁷ Due to the amount of discourse Paul dedicates to issues of persecution in 2 Thessalonians, both tangible (2 Thess. 1 – i.e. beatings, banishments, and possibly death) and intangible (2 Thess. 2 – i.e. deception by spirit, word, and letter), some have suggested this indicates an intensification of the persecution [Malherbe, 351

In 1 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul writes, “Timothy has just now come to us from you and brought good news about your faith and love.” It is intriguing to question why Timothy did not give Paul good news about the Thessalonians’ faith, love, *and* hope,⁴⁸ but rather, he only reported good news about their faith and love.⁴⁹ In addition, Donfried points out that the phrase “you know” occurs seven times in 1 Thessalonians before 4:13, in which the phrase suddenly ceases. The cessation of the “you know” seems to be suggesting that this topic is not something that they know, namely hope.⁵⁰ These exegetical indicators, combined with the time spent on the issue of hope, seem to point to the conclusion that the Thessalonian Christians have begun to lose hope.

The importance of hope in Paul’s discourse with the Thessalonians surfaces in the war imagery of 1 Thessalonians 5:8, where hope is described as the helmet of salvation. Ben Witherington summarizes Paul’s emphasis on the importance of hope when he writes:

The most vulnerable part of a person in a life-threatening situation is the head. One can survive wounds to almost any other part of the body, but a deep wound to the head of any kind is usually mortal. What protects the believer against a mortal blow to his faith is to some degree the hope of salvation. If one has no hope...then one’s faith is fragile and can be overwhelmed by the problems and the injustices of the present.⁵¹

Facing tangible and intangible persecutions, the sustaining power of the Thessalonian Christian’s faith and love is feeble at best without hope. As a result, Paul’s message to the Thessalonian Christians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 is that despite persecution, do not lose hope, but instead, stand firm in the Trinity-centered community characterized by an ethic based on faith, love, and hope.

and Donfried and Marshall, 86ff.]. The intensification seems to be in reference to frequency and variety of tactics more so than gravity, considering traces of martyrdom may be found in the first letter to the Thessalonians.

⁴⁸ The two times (1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8) that all three elements are found in the Thessalonian correspondence, hope is always placed at the end of the group, which gives it a consistent position of prominence or focus.

⁴⁹ See also 2 Thessalonians 1:3, where faith and love are increasing with no mention of their hope.

⁵⁰ Donfried and Marshall, 21.

⁵¹ Witherington, 128-129.

V. Paul's Restoration of Hope – The Power of Christian Orthodoxy

Paul's primary purpose in writing 2 Thessalonians is to restore the hope lost in the Thessalonian Christians. In order to accomplish this goal, Paul reminds them of the foundational Christian orthodoxy which illuminates the Trinity's past, present, and future actions, by using the "thanksgiving" rhetorical device in 2:13-14. In 2:1-12 he cautions the Christians about Satan's activity in their lives, but in 2:13-14, Paul focuses on thanksgiving to God for his activity in their lives. Paul uses the same Greek phrase found in verse 1:3, but reverses the word order of "give thanks" and "bound" here in 2:13.⁵² Rhetorically, this emphatic positioning in the thanksgiving device contrasts Paul's obligation for thanksgiving and the Thessalonians' lack of hope in their present situation. Ultimately, Paul challenges their perspective by recalling how God has worked in the past, the Spirit is working in the present, and Christ will work in the future.

First, Paul gives thanks for God's past activity in the Thessalonian Christians' lives.⁵³ In verses 13 and 14, Paul uses two verbs, "chose" and "call," to emphasize God's initiative in developing a relationship between himself and the Thessalonians, which is characterized by their choosing to have faith.⁵⁴ The same symbiotic relationship is found in Deuteronomy 26:17 and 18 (LXX) where εἴλατο (*eilato*) or "chose" is used to describe both Israel's choosing of God and God's choosing of Israel. The portrait painted in both passages, 2 Thess. 2:13 and Deut. 26:17-18, is God has always acted to offer a relationship to those who respond to his call.⁵⁵

⁵² Malherbe, 435. See I.H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 206 for the theological differences in 1:3 and 2:15.

⁵³ The *hoti*, "because," indicates that Paul is about to express the cause or grounds for his thanksgiving.

⁵⁴ P. Vang, "Sanctification in Thessalonians," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42.1 (1999): 54. Cf. 2:13b.

⁵⁵ Due to the constraints of this paper, this assertion will be limited to the discussion below. While some would push a predestination theology at this point [Refer to Stott and G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) – 2 Thess. 2:13-17], the context of both Deut. 26:17-18 and 2 Thess. 2:13 reject this interpretation. Deut. 26:17 displays Israel's responsibility in the relationship to choose God, while 2 Thess. 2:13 displays the Thessalonians' responsibility to choose God in the phrase "through belief in truth." Both Beale and

God's activity in the past by calling and choosing the Thessalonians for salvation occurs through Paul's proclamation of the gospel message.⁵⁶ This truth found in 2:14 echoes the same thought Paul had communicated to them in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." In using the aorist form of the verb "call" in 2:14, Paul is reminding them of the past event to which they chose to respond – i.e. the preaching of the gospel message – in order to enter into the relationship of faith resulting in their salvation, even in the face of persecution. The implicit challenge in 2:13-14 is an evaluation of the Thessalonians' current status in the relationship initiated in the past. Are you still choosing the God who chose you? Are you still answering the call of the gospel message?⁵⁷

The culmination of God's activity in the past, however, does not only include his "choosing" and "calling" of the Thessalonians, but also his dying for them. Paul's reference to the "good news"⁵⁸ in verse 14 would catapult the Thessalonians' minds back to the content of the message to which they responded. Donfried writes, "...God's salvific manifestation towards those whom he has called (1 Thess. 1:4) is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."⁵⁹ This is the climactic event to which God has chosen to call the Thessalonians. G.K. Beale describes this past action with a metaphor of courtship, in

Stott recognize this contextual problem in their commentaries. Stott writes about the commands in 2:15, "We need to absorb the apostle's unexpected logic. For we would probably have drawn a different conclusion from what he has just written. We might have said: 'We are bound to give thanks for you...because God chose you...and God called you to share in Christ's eternal glory. So then, brothers, relax and take it easy!' But Paul's appeal is the opposite." See E.J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 355 and Malherbe.

⁵⁶ Malherbe, 437-438.

⁵⁷ In 1 Thess. 5:23-24, Paul refers to the Trinitarian activity in the past, present and future. In verse 24, the "call" is in the present participle which emphasizes that the event is not confined to the past but ongoing. While this same perspective is in view in 2 Thess. 2:13 as well, the intent is to inquire about the persistency of the ongoing response.

⁵⁸ The *NIV* uses "gospel" where "good news" is found in the *NRSV*.

⁵⁹ Donfried and Marshall, 54.

which God, like a lover wooing his beloved, keeps showing his love to his people to ultimately win their hearts.⁶⁰ In the past, therefore, God chose to call the Thessalonians through Paul's gospel message into a relationship which revolves around God's past action of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the Thessalonian Christians accepted the invitation through faith.

The Thessalonians' response compelled Paul to describe them as God's firstfruit.⁶¹ Utilizing the cultic sense of the word from classical Greek,⁶² the Septuagintal use of ἀπαρχής (*aparkes*) refers to the "first" offerings, both quantitatively and qualitatively, from both field and flock sacrificed to God.⁶³ A. Sand describes the Old Testament usage of ἀπαρχής (*aparkes*) when he writes, "...it has to do with the flawless firstfruits of natural products, the firstfruits of human beings, animals, and plants...all of which are owed to Yahweh."⁶⁴ Furthermore, Sand shows the same quantitative and qualitative use of ἀπαρχής in the New Testament. In all contexts, the firstfruit offering was sacrificed with the understanding that the divine would provide more to follow this firstfruit.

This designation as firstfruit takes on both a quantitative and a qualitative meaning for the Thessalonian Christians. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13, quantitatively, Paul is referring to the Thessalonian

⁶⁰ Beale, 229.

⁶¹ A major debate occurs over this particular translation due to a textual variant between ἀπαρχής (*aparkes* – firstfruit) or ἀπ' ἀρχῆς (*ap' arkes* – from the beginning). Due to the constraints of this paper, the variant ἀπαρχής will be assumed from the UBS committee's argumentation for their choice of ἀπαρχής, rating it a [B] in B. Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: UBS, 2002), 568. See M.J. Suggs, "Concerning the Date of Paul's Macedonian Ministry." *Novum Testamentum* 4, no. 1 (1960): 60-68 and Malherbe for deeper discussion on the topic.

⁶² See R.W. Harris, ed., *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary: Alpha-Gamma* (Springfield, MO: The Complete Biblical Library, 1990), 325. Alternate uses are found in Josephus (*Ant.* 16.172), with ἀπαρχής (*aparkes*) used for the Jewish tax to the Roman empire, and G. Delling, "ἀρχω..." In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 484-485, with ἀπαρχής (*aparkes*) used for servants of the sanctuary.

⁶³ Cf. Deut. 18:4; 26:2, 10; Num. 5:9; 18:8-12; Neh. 10:37ff.; Ezra 45:13-16.

⁶⁴ A. Sand, "ἀπαρχή, ης, η," In *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Balz and Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 116.

Christians as being the firstfruits of Thessalonica, with the expectation of more to come in the future from that city.⁶⁵ Qualitatively, “firstfruit” shifts from sequence to status. F.F. Bruce points out, “The firstfruits is a concept deeply embedded in the Old Testament cultus as the portion dedicated to God and that which sanctifies the whole...[The] Thessalonian brothers...are the consecrated first-born who, like the Levites, are set apart for the work of God.”⁶⁶ From both perspectives, then, ἀπαρχής (*aparkes*) seems to be referring to the fact that the Thessalonian Christians were the firstfruits of their city set aside for God’s purposes in advancing his kingdom in the future harvest.

In addition to God’s past activity in salvation, Paul reminds the Christians of the Holy Spirit’s present activity in sanctification.⁶⁷ While πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) is used by Paul eight times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians,⁶⁸ it is used only once in reference to God in 2 Thessalonians (2:13). This intentional reference is strategically placed by Paul in 2:13 to set up a contrast between the unbelievers in verse 11 who are sent a delusion by God to believe in a lie with the believers in verse 13 who are sent the Holy

⁶⁵ Harris, *Alpha*, 326. Technically, there are three quantitative interpretative options. Firstfruits of: Paul’s ministry, Macedonia, or Thessalonica. While some scholars find validity in the first two options (Suggs, 68 and Beale, 226, respectively), both have contextual problems due to the fact that Paul had already successfully converted people in Phillippi—see F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word Books Publishing, 1982), 190 and Acts 16:6ff. Therefore, the third option will be assumed in this paper.

⁶⁶ Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 190. Cf. E.E. Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 19-22. Revelation 14:4 uses ἀπαρχής (*aparkes*) in this same manner designating servants of God with a distinct quality due to their redeemed status and ethical conduct. [See Malherbe, 437, Dellling, 486, and Sand, 116-117. The situations of both firstfruits (2 Thess. 2:13 and Rev. 14:4) standing firm in the face of persecution, strengthens the qualitative parallel.] In addition, James 1:18, “[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” This suggests that James and his converts are firstfruits in quality, set aside for harvesting the rest of creation unto God.

⁶⁷ The Greek is written ambiguously in the genitive (ἀγιασμῶ πνεύματος), thereby leaving open the possibility of this being in the objective construction referring to the sanctification of the human spirit. However, the context dictates a construction of authorship, which renders the sanctification being done by the Holy Spirit. Cf. 1 Pet. 1:2.

⁶⁸ 1 Thess. 1:5, 6; 4:8; 5:19, 23; 2 Thess. 2:2, 8, 13.

Spirit by God to believe in the truth.⁶⁹ Ironically, both of the contrasting groups have the similarity of God's action to secure their chosen position of either rebellion or submission to the gospel.

The syntactical construction of the verse indicates that the sanctification by the Holy Spirit and the belief of truth belong together as the foundation for the Thessalonians' salvation.⁷⁰ One scholar points out the relationship between sanctification and belief in truth by writing, "Part of the process of sanctification is to walk the path of the true implications of the gospel, i.e., not to waver when the odds are against the community of believers or to be misled by those who proclaim false gospels..."⁷¹ The Holy Spirit's sanctification and their belief in truth work to sustain, develop, and secure their salvation received through the gospel despite persecution.

While belief in truth is defined as accepting the gospel, the Spirit's sanctification can be somewhat nebulous without a clear definition. The concept of sanctification is linked to being "set apart" as God's possession both as a moment in time⁷² and as a process in time.⁷³ In both contexts, the "setting apart" necessitates the activity of both the divine and human agents.⁷⁴ Preben Vang taps into this insight by stating, "Holiness or sanctification is thus primarily a relational concept expressive of a dynamic and personal interaction with God...A holy life, a life 'in the Spirit,' is life in the power and

⁶⁹ See Beale, 228. Furthermore, this contrast can be detected in the $\delta\epsilon$ (*de* – "but") at the beginning of the verse, which indicates a point of contrast about to be made with that which precedes. In addition, the word "truth" is only used 3 times in 2 Thessalonians (2:10, 12, 13), which adds to the deliberate contrast of God's activity within the two groups.

⁷⁰ Since the *en* holds a precedent of being translated as *dia* in John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Thessalonians* 4 [PG 62:488], the joint sanctification and belief in truth refer back to being the foundation for the development and security of their salvation. See Malherbe, 437 and Bruce, 190.

⁷¹ Donfried and Marshall, 104.

⁷² Specifically the moment in time refers to conversion (cf. Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11).

⁷³ Cf. 1 Thess. 4:7-8.

⁷⁴ C.A. Wanamaker, "I Thessalonians, Book of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 795.

presence of God.”⁷⁵ This relational element of sanctification is clearly seen through Paul’s references in this section to God’s love for the objects of his sanctification (2:13, 16). Furthermore, God’s love expressed through the gospel message compels those “set apart” to show God’s love through their service in the community.⁷⁶ As Karl Donfried writes, “...faith must be active in love; without love faith is empty.”⁷⁷

This intimate relationship with God in sanctification becomes the foundation for the development of perseverance. Feeling bombarded by persecutions, both tangible and intangible, the Thessalonians have forgotten about their intimate relationship with God brought about by the Spirit’s activity. This memory lapse would not only affect their hope, but possibly their allegiance to the community in both work and word. Without submission to the Spirit’s activity in their present lives, the adverse conditions could overwhelm their past commitment to faith in Christ. One scholar writes, “In a world that is hostile to God the Spirit grants the community the possibility of crying Abba...”⁷⁸ Therefore, the person that rejects the sanctification of the Spirit by refusing to submit to the divine activity is not just rejecting appropriate ethical behavior, but they are rejecting their relationship with God himself through his Spirit.⁷⁹ Essentially, the Spirit’s present work in sanctification is setting Christians apart by God’s love for God’s love.

God’s activity, however, is not confined to only the realms of the past and present, but rather, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of God’s activity in the future through the Lord’s vindication at the *parousia*.⁸⁰ While the death and resurrection function as the foundation for the *parousia*, Christ’s

⁷⁵ Vang, 52.

⁷⁶ Cf. 1 Thess. 4:7; Matt. 22:35-40; John 3:16; 13:34-35; 14:15.

⁷⁷ Donfried and Marshall, 55.

⁷⁸ S.F. Plymale, “Paul, Prayer, and Presence,” *Listening* 31, no. 2 (1996): 158.

⁷⁹ Vang, 56.

second coming as both Savior and judge is the key element to restoring the hope in the Thessalonian Christians in the face of fervent persecution.⁸¹

Combing the relational and authoritative aspects of Christ with the Christian, Paul refers to Jesus as “our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸² In referring to Jesus with the personal pronoun “our,” Paul is reiterating the relationship between himself and the Thessalonians and the Thessalonians and God. He is reminding them of the community of which they are a part, to whom God is dedicating his divine actions of salvation, sanctification, and vindication. This intimate relationship accentuates the honorific title of “Lord” given to Christ, in that he is both comforter and conqueror at the time of his second coming. The parousia perspectives, either positive (2:14) or negative (1:6-10; 2:8-12), are determined by whether or not you are in the community or outside of the community, respectively.

The positive perspective of the Lord’s second coming surfaces in verse 14, “He called you into [salvation] through our good news for the purpose of gaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸³ The glory obtained by God’s people can be defined in at least three ways. First, the glory obtained is the culmination of salvation. This is the moment that faith in God’s promise for salvation in the past is replaced by experiencing the salvation in eternity.⁸⁴ Second, the glory obtained is the culmination of sanctification. 1 Thess. 5:23-24 and 1 Thess. 3:13 look forward to the perfection of God’s love for and within his community that will be experienced in totality at the parousia. Third, the glory obtained is the culmination of the divine relationship. All of the saints, whether dead or alive (1 Thess. 4:13ff.), will be united with Christ in the perfect community with the Trinity.

⁸⁰ Refer to the discussion of Lord and *παρουσία* (*parousia*) on pp. 5-6 and appropriate footnotes above.

⁸¹ Donfried and Marshall, 92. G. Ludemann, “The Hope of the Early Paul: from the Foundation-Preaching at Thessalonike to 1 Cor. 15:51-57,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 7 (1980): 196-197, describes Paul’s hope in 2 Thessalonians as “a *parousia*-hope, and not primarily a resurrection-hope.”

⁸² Refer to footnote 18 for the usage of “Lord” in the Thessalonian correspondence.

⁸³ Author’s translation.

⁸⁴ Cf. Rev. 21:1-7.

The present situation of the Thessalonian Christians takes on a new perspective when they believe the words of Paul in 1 Thess. 5:9-11, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.”⁸⁵ The parousia becomes the divine exodus that the Thessalonian Christians long for but have lost hope in. What Paul reminds them is that, “What the Christian has obtained in this life is *access*, not completed entrance, to God’s grace, and the Apostle rejoices in the ‘hope of sharing the glory of God’ at the future consummation.”⁸⁶

Likewise, the negative perspective of the parousia would be a key point of encouragement for the Thessalonians’ hope. In 2 Thess. 1:9, Paul refers to the glory of the Lord to point out the exclusion of the unbelievers, while in 2:14 Paul uses glory to point out the inclusion of the Thessalonians. At the parousia, the unbelievers will not perceive Christ as the coming Deliverer, but instead they will see Christ as the divine Judge who has come to vindicate the blood of his saints.⁸⁷ While the Lord God is the divine conqueror in the OT (cf. Ps. 94:2), Paul now describes the Lord Jesus as the divine conqueror at the time of the second coming.

So how could this perspective be comforting for the Thessalonian Christians? In a time of intense persecution, the only comfort one may find is in the promised justice. The Lord’s vengeance on the oppressors can provide a perspective that instigates a powerful resilience against compromise. Knowing that the power of the spirit of lawlessness which currently reigns in Thessalonica will be overthrown can provide the encouragement needed to stand firm and hold fast to the truth that produces faith, love, and hope.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *New American Standard Bible*

⁸⁶ Donfried and Marshall, 58.

⁸⁷ Cf. 2 Thess. 1:5-12; 2:3-11. See *Ibid.*, 96 and G.S. Holland, *The Tradition that You Received from Us: 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline Tradition* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1988), 71.

The tangible and intangible persecution endured by the Thessalonian Christians as a result of their allegiance to Paul's political message took a toll on their belief system by causing their hope to fade. Nevertheless, Paul reminds the Thessalonians in his thanksgiving section of the Trinity's past, present, and future actions in order to restore their lost hope. Through the Thessalonians' response to the gospel, God chose them as his firstfruits in the city to be sanctified by the Spirit into the truth that reminds them of the hope they have in Christ's sovereignty at the parousia. As one scholar states, "The Spirit-filled gospel of faith, love, and hope is the foundation of the church: in faith it calls the church into being, in love it permits the fellowship of believers to serve as a proleptic kingdom community and in hope it is assured of victory despite all the contrary signs that daily threaten to disable it."⁸⁹ Through the Trinitarian orthodoxy Paul provides a means by which the Thessalonian Christians can stand firm.

VI. Paul's Exhortation in Hope – Orthodoxy as Foundation for Resolve

The teachings expressed in the thanksgiving function as a foundation for Paul to exhort the Thessalonian Christians. Paul starts off 2:15 with an emphatic "therefore,"⁹⁰ followed by the first two words in the imperative case thus far in the letter. These two elements would indicate that Paul is suggesting that the following exhortation in the form of two imperatives is the result of the previous information in the entire letter.⁹¹ Paul is saying, "In light of the tangible (1:5-12) and intangible (2:8-12) vindication that God provides for the tangible (1:4) and intangible (2:1-3a) persecutions you are

⁸⁸ For further study on the use of Apocalyptic Literature to infuse hope refer to Donfried and Marshall, 105ff.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹⁰ The Greek ἄρα οὖν (*ara oun*) would have jumped out at the Thessalonians because of the emphatic rendering. It would be like putting the word "therefore" in bold print. Cf. Marshall, *Thessalonians*, 209.

⁹¹ Malherbe, 360 points out, "It is frequently thought that the main purpose of 2 Thessalonians was to correct the error of 2:2. One mistake in this view is that it arbitrarily diminishes the importance Paul attaches to the issues he addresses in chaps. 1 and 3. Another is that it effectively, if not explicitly, isolates 2:1-12 from what precedes and makes it didactic in nature, whereas it is more closely related to the consolatory section of 1:3-12 and is paraenetic."

enduring, not to mention God’s activity in the past, present and future (2:13-14), you are to stand firm and hold fast to these teachings (2:15).”⁹²

1 Thessalonians 3:7-8 links *στήκετε* (*stākete*) or “stand firm” with the context of persecution,⁹³ “For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.”⁹⁴ Abraham Malherbe points out that this term “stand firm” is a military term comparable to the picture of a battalion commanded to “stand fast” in view of the approaching danger.⁹⁵ This physical depiction of the appropriate Christian stature would compel the Christian to put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope in salvation (1 Thess. 5:8) to defend themselves in the current war raging against them through both tangible and intangible persecutions.⁹⁶

In addition to “stand firm,” Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to “take hold of the traditions.” *Κρατέω* (*krateō*) carries the connotation of taking possession of something, sometimes by force, due to your status, title, and/or identity. In classical Greek, both rulers and gods possessed an inherent power or force to possess various desires due to their position of authority. The same concept is found in Judges 16:26 where the servant had taken hold of Samson’s hand to lead him due to his position and

⁹² J.W. Simpson, Jr., “Shaped by the Stories: Narrative in I Thessalonians,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 53 (1998): 21 points out that the exhortation is what fuses all three time periods together (past, present and future). See also I.H. Marshall, “Pauline Theology in the Thessalonian Correspondence,” In *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honor of C.K. Barrett*, ed. Hooker and Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 180.

⁹³ E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 454-458 provides a detailed tracing of “stand firm” linked to teachings in the face of persecution.

⁹⁴ *The New Revised Standard Version*

⁹⁵ Malherbe, 439. Contrast the physical description of stability with the description of the “easily unsettled” in 2 Thess. 2:2; a physical description of instability.

⁹⁶ See W. Grundmann, “στηκω, ιστημι,” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VII, ed. Kittel and Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 637ff.

authority. In using this particular word, Paul is exhorting the Thessalonians to take hold of the traditions due to their identity and inherent power as children of God.⁹⁷

Paul defines the traditions they are to take hold of by designating the all encompassing methods of communication in their day – word or letter – through which God (1 Thess. 4:9) and Paul (1 Thess. 2:13) have already taught them.⁹⁸ These traditions would have included doctrinal and ethical teachings – word and work (2 Thess. 2:17) – characteristic of the community of God.⁹⁹ These teachings would have functioned as a point of continual reference for the community to sustain, develop and secure the relationship with the Trinity in the face of persecution, through which they received the traditions (1 Thess. 1:6). Therefore, in Paul’s command to take hold of the traditions, the Thessalonians receive an intangible defense against the tangible and intangible persecutions launched against them.

The exhortations to “stand firm” and “take hold of the teachings” deliver a two-pronged command for tangible and intangible defense against the two-pronged attack of tangible and intangible persecutions. This defense “involves both continually recalling what they have been taught...and consistently obeying it.”¹⁰⁰ In essence, their greatest defense, in light of the Christian orthodoxy, is found in their ethical response of work and word.

⁹⁷ The familial language surfaces as an identity marker in “brothers” immediately following the emphatic “therefore” in 2:15. The use of “brother” throughout the Thessalonian correspondence occurs 28 times: 1 Thess. 1:4; 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:2, 7; 4:1, 6, 10 [2x], 13; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25, 26, 27; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2:1, 13, 15; 3:1, 6 [2x], 13, 15. In addition, father occurs 8 times (1 Thess. 1:1, 3; 2:11; 3:11, 13; 2 Thess. 1:1, 2; 2:16).

⁹⁸ The reference to letter is probably referring to 1 Thessalonians. (Cf. Bruce, *Thess.* and Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1984), 138. However, there is an ironic contrast with verse 2:2, in that they were being deceived by “word” and “letter” earlier delivered by a false spirit, but now Paul exhorts them to obey the “word” and “letter” of truth delivered by the Holy Spirit.

⁹⁹ See W. Popkes, “παράδοσις,” In *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Balz and Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 21 and Donfried and Marshall, 101.

¹⁰⁰ Beale, 231.

VII. Paul's Explanation of Hope – Orthodoxy as Foundation for Orthopraxy

The orthodoxy which develops hope also demands action. Paul's emphasis on the security through God's actions functions as the foundation for humanity's actions in response. As Christians, then, the Thessalonians are to adhere to a new ethic characteristic of God's community. The Christian's hope developed through the orthodox teaching of Trinity's actions in the past, present, and future demands not only a strong defense but also a strong offense. Paul describes this offense, rooted in the "eternal comfort and perfect hope"¹⁰¹ given by God's love and grace, as manifested in Christian orthopraxy – both work and word.¹⁰²

The phrase "work and word" are used as a means for Paul to refer to the breadth of their ethical responsibility. Every tangible and intangible means of action come from these two general categories. Malherbe picks up on Paul's ethical totality when he writes, "... 'heart' denotes the entire person, and 'work' and word' encompass all human activity."¹⁰³ The ethical responsibility, however, is not driven by the desire for Christians to be good, moral people. Conversely, Paul's concern for ethical behavior revolves around three relationships: Christians and God; Christians and non-Christians; and Christians and Christians.

¹⁰¹ Author's translation.

¹⁰² See G.M. Keightley, "The Church's Memory of Jesus: Social Science Analysis of 1 Thessalonians," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17, no. 4 (1987): 153. Cf. 1 Thess. 2:1f; 4:1-12; 5:6-8, 12-22; 2 Thess. 3:4, 6-13. This verse functions as a link to the following context and the previous, in that the orthodoxy presented in chaps. 1 and 2 act as the foundation for the orthopraxy requested and commanded in chap. 3. Rom. 15:18 and Col. 3:17 refer to "word and work," which insinuates that Paul has placed the order of "work and word" in 2:17 for a reason. Possibly, the structure of tangible works of evil in chapter 1 and intangible words of evil in chapter 2 set the tone for the structure. Furthermore, chapter 3:1-5 requests the intangible defense through the Thessalonians' word (prayer) to protect the apostle's tangible work, while 3:6-14 commands the tangible defense through the Thessalonians' work to protect the apostle's intangible word (the gospel). Marshall, *Thess.*, 212 points out the peculiar request for prayer in 3:1, which usually comes at the very end of an epistle. He suggests, "The explanation in the present case is probably that the request is closely connected with the preceding teaching."

¹⁰³ Malherbe, 442. See also Richard, 361.

“Don’ts’ are discouraged precisely because they quench relationship.”¹⁰⁴ The relationship between Christians and God thrives or is destroyed by the actions of both parties. Paul has already described God’s actions in their relationship in 2:13-14, but now Paul is focusing on the Thessalonians’ actions in their relationship. The “work and word” function as the Christian testimony to their allegiance to the community of God in their actions of abstinence from evil (1 Thess. 1:9; 4:3-8) and pursuit of righteousness (1 Thess. 5:12-24).

The “work and word” function as the Christian testimony to the gospel to the non-Christian world. 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 indicates the truth about Christian conduct and its powerful witness to outsiders. As one scholar puts it, “...the credibility of the gospel is affected by the character and integrity of its messengers as well as its adherents.”¹⁰⁵ The example that Paul left the Thessalonians in “work and word” (2 Thess. 3:7-10) was one that was free from accusation (1 Thess. 2:3-9), thereby refusing the enemy a foothold for accusations damaging to the gospel message. Likewise, the Thessalonians’ ethical behavior, in “work and word,” should function as a testimony for the gospel to the outsiders, even their enemies.

Finally, the Thessalonians are to submit to the appropriate ethical conduct to strengthen the relationships amongst the Christian community itself. It is hard to fight on the front lines in the spiritual battle if you keep catching arrows in the back. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to encourage, strengthen, and uphold each other in their “work and word.”¹⁰⁶ This unified front will be the foundation for their ability to “stand firm” in a hostile society.

¹⁰⁴ Vang, 64.

¹⁰⁵ Donfried and Marshall, 76.

¹⁰⁶ This is done by praying for each other (2 Thess. 3:1-5), encouraging each other with words (1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11), being kind and peaceful to each other (1 Thess. 5:13, 15), exhorting each other in patience (1 Thess. 5:14), and even lovingly rebuking each other through shame (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15).

Ultimately, God's action in the past, present, and future has instituted a new community, which centers upon the Trinity and is characterized by a new ethic in "work and word". The relationship between God and his people thrives off of the ethical behavior of his people, which presents the opportunity to advance the kingdom through the "work and word" done by the Christians in their everyday lives amongst the outsiders. This Trinity-centered community, then, is dedicated to the mission of advancing the gospel in the face of opposition by dedicating their efforts of "work and word" to strengthen the relationships amongst themselves.

VIII. Paul's Invocation of a Trinity-Centered Universe – Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy as Foundation for New Community

A community that is centered around the Trinity is consequently not centered around Rome. While Paul's message, by default, is a political message in opposition to the Roman message, it should not be assumed that this is Paul's intent. Paul's purpose is not to promote anti-Roman literature, polemical teachings against the Imperial Cult, or even the overthrow of the Roman government, but rather, his intent is to center all of history on the actions of the Trinity. In the words of Peter Oakes, "[Paul] is redrawing the map of the universe."¹⁰⁷

The Thessalonian message offers an alternative kingdom, which is governed by a different Lord leading his subjects to another peace through salvation, sanctification, and vindication.¹⁰⁸ While this Trinity-centered community is experiencing intensifying persecution, Paul "strengthens the suffering Christians by emphasizing that the universe is not as it appears. The Christians have a secure place close to the real central power,"¹⁰⁹ the Trinity. Amidst persecution, the Thessalonians are able to have their

¹⁰⁷ Oakes, 321. The concept of de-centralizing Rome by centering the entire universe on Christ is Oakes' primary thesis in his article. Witherington, 126-127 supports this perception of Paul's intent when he writes, "Paul is not a crusader against the empire...Rather he is a believer that God in Christ will intervene once and for all and right the wrongs that Paul and his audience have been experiencing because of their witness. God in Christ is the one who will bring justice and peace and security once and for all, not the emperor and his slogans."

¹⁰⁸ Refer to Malherbe, 438 for several points of contrast between the Christian and non-Christian communities.

hearts comforted by the fact that God¹¹⁰ has loved them and given them eternal comfort and perfect hope through grace, which serves as a catalyst for their firm resolve in both their work and word. For in their suffering, the Christians secure their identity as a member of the true kingdom¹¹¹ of which the Roman Empire is merely a shadow. N.T. Wright states:

If Paul's answer to Caesar's empire is the empire of Jesus, what does this say about this new empire, living under the rule of its new Lord?...This counterempire can never be merely critical, never merely subversive. It claims to be the reality of which Caesar's empire is the parody. It claims to be modeling the genuine humanness, not least the justice and peace, and the unity across traditional racial and cultural barriers, of which Caesar's empire boasted.¹¹²

While suffering for the kingdom becomes an inevitable reality (1 Thess. 3:3; 2 Thess. 1:5), faith, love, and hope function as an impenetrable defense with the ability to stand firm and hold fast to the teachings of a Trinity-centered community dedicated to living for Christ by being willing to die for Him.¹¹³

IX. Conclusion

Paul's message placed the Christian in direct conflict with the Roman Imperial message, which resulted in both tangible and intangible persecutions. This incredible opposition combined with the abrupt loss of their spiritual mentor caused the Thessalonians to grow deficient in a key facet of their

¹⁰⁹ Oakes, 322.

¹¹⁰ In verse 16, there is a startling word order in that Christ appears before God (cf. Gal. 1:1 and 2 Cor. 13:13). This position of authority has incredible implications about Paul's view of Christ being equal to God. Furthermore, the optative verbs in verse 17 – "may he encourage" and "may he make a firm resolve" – are singular despite the double subject of "Christ" and "God." Paul makes no distinction between Jesus and God's identity and work.

¹¹¹ Keightley, 154 points out that the Thessalonian suffering not only links them with the churches of Judea (1 Thess. 2:14ff.) and Paul (1 Thess. 1:6), but also with Christ in his suffering.

¹¹² N.T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics*, ed. Hosley (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 182-183.

¹¹³ L.T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 289 states, "[Paul] shows them that the affliction is not simply an external force to be endured but is a positive factor in the strengthening of their identity. It enables them to grow in faith and love (1 Thess. 1:3), in steadfastness and endurance (1 Thess. 1:4; cf. Rom. 5:1-5). They suffer for the kingdom of God (1:5), and the affliction makes them worthy of that kingdom (1:5, 11)." See also Bossman, 75.

spiritual defense, their hope. As a result, Paul reminds the Christians of the orthodox teaching God delivered to them through his word, letter, and Spirit about the Trinity's past, present, and future actions of salvation, sanctification, and vindication. Acknowledging God's sovereignty throughout history, the Thessalonian Christians will be able to stand firm upon this Trinitarian teaching. Taking hold of this foundational orthodoxy will inevitably lead to the characteristic work and word of the Trinity-centered community. As a result, Paul's message to the Thessalonian Christians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 is that despite persecution, do not lose hope, but instead, stand firm in the Trinity-centered community characterized by an ethic based on faith, love, and hope.

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