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C.E.B.Cranfield: A Study of 1 Thessalonians 2

The contents of 1 Thessalonians 2 bear a close resemblance to those of the preceding chapter; but in chapter 2 there is a considerable increase of detail, and a greater intensity of feeling comes to expression. Both chapters are concerned with the ministry fulfilled in Thessalonica by Paul and his colleagues, Silvanus and Timothy, and with the existence there of a young church as its result. Both chapters strike the note of thanksgiving to God; but, while in chapter 1 Paul's 'We give thanks to God' /1 comes at the beginning, following immediately upon the epistolary pre-script, in chapter 2 the words 'we also thank God' occur near the middle (v13). We shall take the liberty of making Paul's thanksgiving in v13 our starting-point and then dealing with its sequel in vv14-16, which includes two very puzzling and difficult verses (v15f), before considering the long paragraph consisting of vv1-12. We shall then conclude by taking a quick look at vv17-20, which, though they are closely connected with chapter 3, throw a valuable further light on vv1-12.

## I

Verse 13 declares that Paul and his colleagues- it seems more natural here to understand the first person plural in this way (cf. 1.1) than to take it as a writer's plural or any other kind of plural used of a singular subject- 'thank God without ceasing'. /2 The reason for this constant thanksgiving is indicated in the latter part of the verse: /3 'that, when ye received from us the word of the message, even the word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God, which also worketh in you that believe'.

There are several details of exegesis to be considered before we attempt to draw out the significance of this as a whole: (i) The Greek word represented by 'message' can denote the ability to hear, the act of hearing, that with which one hears (i.e., the ear), that which is heard, so a report, message (cf. its use in the Isaiah quotation in Rom. 10.16). The RV supplement, even the word, is not necessary.

For 'from us the word of the message, even the word of God we might well substitute something like 'the word of God

spoken by us'; (ii) that Paul used paralambanein ('receive') here to denote external reception as opposed to something inward denoted by dechesthai ('accept') does not seem to us very likely, since paralambanein, which is a technical term in the NT for receiving teaching or tradition (cf., e.g., Mk 7.4; 1 Cor. 11.23; 15.1,3; Gal. 1.9,12; Phil. 4.9), does not naturally exclude the thought of inward acceptance but rather includes it (see, in particular, 1 Corinthians 15.1 and 3). But the way in which the two verbs are used in this verse does suggest that, while paralambanein may be taken to bear its ordinary meaning embracing both the external and the internal aspects, dechesthai does specially bring out, and focus attention on, the element of inward personal decision; (iii) The Greek contains no explicit equivalents of the 'it' and 'as' of the RV. It is therefore possible to translate: 'when ye received...., ye accepted not the word of men, but.....the word of God'. Paul's point would then be that, when the Thessalonians had received the Gospel message, they had received no mere human word but had received nothing less than the word of God himself. Rigaux insists that the Greek word should be taken in this way. /4 But against this it must be said that 'when ye received the word....of God, ye accepted...the word of God' seems decidedly tautological; that, on this interpretation, the clause 'as it is in truth' seems redundant; that the use of dechesthai with two accusatives /5 in the sense 'accept someone (or 'something') as something' can be paralleled (cf., e.g., Thucydides 1.43, where it is used of accepting someone as an ally); and that the presence of 'as it is in truth' tells positively in favour of this 'accept....as' interpretation. We conclude that the Latin Vulgate's insertion of illud and ut, which the AV and RV have followed, gives Paul's meaning correctly; (iv) It is not certain whether the antecedent of 'which' is 'the word of God' (in Greek the relative pronoun here is masculine, as are both logos ('word') and theos ('God')); the Vulgate and some of the Fathers understand the relative as referring to God; /6 but we are inclined to think that it is rather more natural to take it to refer to the word. /7 But, substantially, there is not a great difference of meaning involved.

Verse 13 indicates two things about the people who make up the young church in Thessalonica. These two things are, if we understand the verse correctly, that they have recognised the message of the Gospel for what it truly is, and have received it as such, namely, as the authoritative word

of God; and that this word of God is now working in them, having definite consequences in their lives. The questions which this verse puts to us, as we seek to hear in it God's word for us, are obvious enough: Are those marks of true churches and of true Christians, to which it points, characteristic of the congregations to which we belong and of ourselves? Have we really received the gospel message as the authoritative word of the eternal God - as what it truly is, and not as mere human teaching, as a philosophy or as an ideology or as something for which, as part of our cultural inheritance, we feel a certain sentimental attachment, perhaps rather condescending, perhaps always diminishing? And is the word of God really working in us effectually? Does it make a significant difference to the way we live our lives? Could we honestly say that it is - in some measure at least - moulding our daily lives, disciplining us, curbing our egotism? Does it, for example, affect what we do with our money or the way we vote in parliamentary elections?

## II

Verse 14 supports the latter half of v13 (note the 'For') by referring to the fact that the Christians of Thessalonica have followed the pattern of those in Judaea, in that, as the Christians of Judaea have suffered persecution at the hands of their fellow-Jews, so they have been persecuted by their own fellow-countrymen. To share Christ's reproach, to be hated for his sake, this is another mark of the true church and the true Christian. We may compare the words of John 15.19f: 'because ye are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you'. The words of William Temple, 'Not all that the world hates is good Christianity; but it does hate good Christianity and always will', /8 are wise words and true. If our lives are even just beginning to be under the discipline of the gospel, they are bound to be in collision with the values and ways of the society around us.

## III

Verses 15 and 16 are incidental. Having mentioned the Jews, that is, the unbelieving Jews, in the course of re-

ferring to what the Thessalonian Christians have suffered from their fellow-countrymen. Paul adds by the way some statements concerning them. With 'who...killed the Lord Jesus' we may compare Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10; 7:52; also Mark 12.7f and its parallels. Paul is not forgetting the part played by the Romans, but he is underlining the special guilt of God's own chosen people. With 'and the prophets' compare, among other passages, Matthew 23:29-37; Mark 12:5; Acts 7:52; Romans 11:3. Of the next four charges levelled against the unbelieving Jews, the first is distinguished by the use of a further aorist participle in the Greek (they have fiercely persecuted /9 Paul and other preachers of the gospel), the other three /10 by the use of present participles expressing continuity. The clause which the RV renders, 'to fill up their sins always', is understood by some as final, /11 by others as consecutive. It is difficult to decide between these alternatives. If we take the clause to be consecutive, we may understand the thought to be that their always completing the full measure of their sin results from the rebelliousness against God which has just been described. If, however, we take the clause as final, we may understand the thought to be that God's purpose behind all this rebelliousness of his people was that they should always complete the full measure of their sins. The expression 'fill up their sins' is biblical (cf. the Septuagint version of Genesis 15:16; Daniel 8:23; 2 Maccabees 6:14f). /12 Though the precise sense it has here is not easy to determine, the general sense which we take it to have will become plain from our discussion of the last sentence of this paragraph ( v16b).

It is this sentence which is the most difficult part of vv15 and 16. It is often taken to be a declaration that there is now no hope for the Jews. So the New English Bible renders the Greek: 'and now retribution has overtaken them for good and all'. If this 'for good and all' really gives the true meaning of the Greek, then Paul's view of the situation of the Jewish people certainly did undergo a most drastic change between the writing of 1 Thessalonians and Romans 11. But the Greek phrase eis telos is patient of more than one interpretation. It can mean, for example, 'at last', 'finally', 'to the uttermost'. The most likely meaning of the sentence as a whole in view of what Paul says elsewhere is, in our opinion, that God's wrath has already

come upon the Jews to the uttermost in the event of the Cross. In that event the disobedience of God's people reached its climax, and God showed it up in its true character with final and absolute clarity. Moreover, in the act of taking upon himself the full burden of his wrath against sinners, He allowed men to see its awful reality. /13 Paul knew full well that the judgment of the Cross was God's judgment not of the Jews only but of all men, Jews and Gentiles alike. But here he refers specially to the Jews, underlining their special guilt as the people of God. The lesson which Christians ought to draw from v16b is most certainly not an encouragement of any anti-semitism to which they may be inclined but a reminder of the fact that the Christian church shares with the Jewish people a specially exposed and dangerous position in relation to God's judgment - 'to whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required'. And how like the unbelieving Jews of Paul's time we Christians often are! Could it not often be fairly said of us that we 'please not God', and sometimes that, far from being serious about our missionary task, we prevent, in one way or another, those who would hear the gospel from hearing it so as to be saved?

#### IV

We now turn to vv1-12. They tell us a very great deal about the ministry of Paul and his colleagues in Thessalonica which lay behind the existence of the young church to which this letter is addressed. They deserve a much more detailed and careful study than we shall have space for here; for they do, in fact, provide an outline for what could be a truly notable and worthwhile course of lectures in pastoral theology, and it is on this aspect of them that we shall specially focus attention.

It is perhaps not quite as certain as Rigaux takes it to be /14 that eisodos (RV: 'entering in') is used in v1 (and also in 1:9) in its literal sense of 'entrance' or 'visit'; but even if we take Rigaux's judgment for granted and ignore the possibility that eisodos is here used metaphorically, /15 it is still hardly to be disputed that this chapter as a whole indicates clearly that Paul and Silvanus and Timothy had found an entrance to the Thessalonians' hearts - had shown themselves credible as messengers of God, possessed of that credibility which only God Himself can give but

without which no true pastoral work can even be begun, let alone sustained and brought to fruition. (And to say of someone that he or she is a credible minister of the gospel of Christ, in the sense that he or she is someone who can be - and, by God's gracious working, at any rate to a considerable extent, deserves to be - taken seriously as a minister of Christ's Gospel, is surely as high a praise as one can confer on a fellow-human being.)

In v2 Paul refers to the fact that, in spite of the sufferings and humiliating treatment which he and his colleagues had had to bear in Philippi (see Acts 16:19ff), they had 'waxed bold in our God to speak' to the Thessalonians 'the gospel of God', even though in Thessalonica too they met with opposition ('in much conflict' - see Acts 17:5ff). The word for us to mark specially here is parrēsiazasthai (RV: 'wax bold'). The substantive parrēsia (its derivation is from the combination of the words for 'all' and 'speaking') was used to denote that freedom of speech which the Athenians claimed as their right and of which they were greatly proud. /16 It was characteristic of a democracy. In the NT the word's range of meanings includes openness in speech, frankness, publicness (publicly, in public), boldness, fearlessness, confidence, joyful confidence. /17 So here in v2 eparrēsiasametha is an affirmation that they had proclaimed the gospel of God fearlessly and confidently. Contrast the timidity, the lack of confidence, the hesitancy, by which so often the preaching in Britain at the present time is characterized. It is a rare experience to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed with confidence and joy and without apology, that is, with the parrēsia of which it is altogether worthy.

Verse 3 contains three interesting negative phrases. The first of them is 'not of error'. The noun planē denotes a going astray from the truth, a state of being misled. It corresponds not to the active verb planan ('lead astray') but to the passive planasthai. For Paul it is clearly a matter of great importance whether the source of his exhortation is the truth of the gospel or error, that is, the condition of being astray from that truth. This phrase puts a number of questions to us. To mention just some of them - Do we want to have, or would we rather escape the embarrassments involved in having that moral and intellectual integrity which compels a person to care seriously about

the distinction between truth and falsehood? Are our churches and their ministers at present perhaps so bewildered and confused as to be scarcely conscious of the need to distinguish the truth of the gospel from the fashionable falsehoods of the day? How far is an anti-intellectual prejudice characteristic of our churches? And, if it is, how far is it a reaction against a barren pseudo-intellectualism which has obscured the fact that theology has to do with obedience, that the truth of God is only known when we begin to 'do' it (cf. John 3:21; 1 John 1:6)? The second negative phrase is 'nor of uncleanness'. While the word akatharsia is often used of sexual immorality in particular, it can also denote quite generally the moral condition of the pagan world. We need to ask ourselves how far we could truly claim that the source of our exhortation is unadulterated by the manifold corruptions of the pagan society in which we live.

The last of the three negative phrases of v3 is 'nor in guile'. That Paul should be anxious to dissociate himself as strongly as possible from the many charlatans who wandered about in his day claiming to be purveyors of philosophical or religious wisdom is understandable enough, and it is quite likely that he added 'nor in guile' with this purpose in mind. But guile is certainly not a special peculiarity of the ancient world; and we should be wise to consider whether Paul's phrase is not relevant to the position of those who, having ceased to believe those things which in their ordination they have solemnly affirmed that they believed, lack the honesty to resign their ministries (We do not, of course, mean to suggest that every passing doubt or depression or even the experience of a prolonged period of doubt constitutes a proper ground for resigning one's ministry) and so deceive their fellow-men and abuse their trust.

We may take together vv4b and 6a (in what follows we shall have to pass over much that is interesting and important). While there is a right pleasing of men which is a Christian duty (see, e.g., Romans 15:2f), there is a pleasing of men which is opposed to pleasing God, and this is something which a Christian minister should eschew. So Paul writes: 'not as pleasing men, but God'. And similar is the general purport of v6a ('nor seeking glory of men, neither from you, nor from others'). The bearing of these two halves on our present-day church life is surely too clear to need exposition.



Verse 5 contains two denials. In support of the former ('neither at any time were we found using words of flattery') Paul appeals to the Thessalonian Christians' own knowledge ('as ye know'); in support of the latter ('nor a cloke of covetousness') he calls God to witness ('God is witness'). The reason for this difference is probably that, while flattery is something which is usually pretty obvious (to the onlookers at least - to the person flattered it is, of course, often not at all obvious), the sort of thing to which the latter denial refers is something which it is much more difficult for human perception to discern. The essence of logos kolakeias ('word of flattery') is the saying of things designed to gratify the vanity of someone with the intention of gaining some advantage for oneself. It is a very common vice of the clergy which, in situations of extreme boredom, provides much comic relief for any onlooker who is sufficiently hard-hearted to be able to put out of his head the thought of the serious inward damage which the flatterer is doing to himself - and quite often also to the person flattered. The gain which the clerical flatterer seeks is, of course, often simply general popularity (undiscerning congregations like to be flattered and like those who flatter them!); but it may also be in favour in high places and the preferments and promotions which may result therefrom. The Greek represented by 'a cloke of covetousness' is difficult. The word prophasis ('cloke') can have a variety of meanings; pleonexia is also an elusive word; and the sense of the genitive is patient of a number of different explanations. Perhaps the most likely explanation of Paul's meaning is that he is denying that he has been guilty of any sort of hidden exploitation of the Thessalonians. There are many ways in which one can exploit someone, that is, use him for one's own selfish ends, for self-gratification of one kind or another. Often, of course, a man's exploitation of his fellow-man is open, shameless, blatant. But exploitation of others is sometimes exceedingly subtle; and, among Christians, it can be veiled in a beautifully pious disguise. And not only can it be hidden from its victim and from all human witnesses: it can also be unrecognized by the exploiter himself - unconscious exploitation of others.

We notice next Paul's reference to his gentleness /18 in v7: 'But we were gentle in the midst of you as when a nurse /19 cherisheth her own children'. It is an inter-

eating and instructive feature of this paragraph; for gentleness is an apostolic quality which is by no means common among parish ministers and priests. How many of the clergy would be more accurately described as inclined to be arrogant, self-willed, stubborn, domineering, than as gentle! How many are too conscious of their authority, and apt to see it as a personal thing rather than as belonging to the message, of which they are always the altogether unworthy, and are meant to be the humble, servants! The gentleness to which Paul refers is surely contrary to all pomposity and also to that excessive loquaciousness, which is a besetting sin of many clergy, making them far too often oblivious of the fact that their parishioners need not only to be talked to by, but also to be able to confide in, their pastors (and some parishioners are likely to be too shy and hesitant to be able readily to seize the odd moments when their pastors stop for breath).

From the rest of vv1-12 we pick out just three things for notice. The first is the reference in v8 to Paul's and his colleagues' readiness to impart to the Thessalonians 'not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us', which both gives us a precious glimpse of the tender affection of Paul's relations with his churches and is also a reminder that to be a proper Christian pastor one must give one's very self (cf. RSV; NEB) to those in one's charge, so that, while belonging absolutely to Christ alone, one belongs more to them than to oneself. The second is v10: 'Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and righteously and unblameably we have behaved ourselves toward you that believe'. It should be remembered that Paul is not speaking here of what he has been, or is, in God's sight (in view of Romans 7:14ff, it may, we think, be safely assumed that the man who wrote these words was well aware that his life had fallen, and still continued to fall, far short of God's absolute standard). He is not claiming that his conduct toward the Thessalonians has been blameless in God's sight; but only that it has been such that before his fellow-Christians he can hold his head erect. A Christian minister, who knows himself altogether unworthy before God, may still be conscious of being a man of relative integrity and of having a right to look his fellow-Christians in the eyes. And, if he is not a man of integrity in this sense, he is scarcely likely to be a credible minister of the gospel. The third is the presence

of the words 'each one of you' in v11. Paul's giving himself to his churches involved a fatherly concern for each individual in them - one by one. Such a caring for the individual is a mark of every faithful under-shepherd of Him who - we are told - 'calleth his own sheep by name'(John 10:3)

V

We turn lastly to vv17-20, in which Paul speaks of his strong desire to see the Thessalonian Christians again and the fact that he(note the emphatic 'I Paul' in v18) has more than once wanted to visit them again(though he has not been able to do so), and then goes on to say:'For what is our hope,or joy, or crown of glorying? Are not even ye, before our Lord Jesus at his coming? For ye are our glory and our joy'. This is surely something decidedly surprising for the apostle to say. John Calvin saw the difficulty: Paul's words seem to be inconsonant with the truth that there is only One, in whom we may properly boast either now or hereafter, God Himself. His comment is sensible: 'we should not take this to mean that he glories in any other than God,but that we are allowed to glory in all of God's favours in their proper place in such a way that He Himself is always our point of aim'. /20 These last two verses of the chapter shed a flood of light on the important question of the scale of values to be recognized by the minister of the gospel, be he a parish minister or a theological teacher. That to glory in our social,academic or ecclesiastical honours or dignities is out of the question should be clear to us. Karl Barth wisely recognized that in heaven his eleven honorary doctorates would all have to be handed in at the cloakroom, /21 and even the Church Dogmatics would be but waste paper there, /22 where we shall know even as also we have been known. But,if at the parousia of Jesus Christ-notice the words'before our Lord Jesus at his coming'(the present tense(este) in v20 is to be understood in the light of v19): to glory in our converts now or in the large numbers who,maybe,crowd the churches where we minister would be premature, since we do not yet know who will endure to the end - there are some who have owed something of their true faith in Jesus Christ to words or deeds of ours,then that is something of eternal worth,in which,as God's favour to us, we may properly glory and rejoice, humbly and thankfully, for ever.

Notes

1. I quote the RV, because it still seems to me the best translation for the student who cannot read Greek to use as the basis of his study.
2. The first 'also' of the verse (representing the second 'kai') is by some connected with 'we', by others with 'thank'. In either case, the force of the Greek word is just to give emphasis to the word it is associated with. It is probably better (pace B. Rigaux, Saint Paul: les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens, Paris and Gembloux, 1956, p437f) to connect it with the verb.
3. The dia touto ('for this cause') is here used with reference to what follows, anticipating 'that.....'
4. op.cit., p440
5. To understand the first accusative from the participial clause (in Greek: in the RV the clause beginning with 'when') is of course natural enough.
6. So too J.A. Bengel (in his Gnomon Novi Testamenti, first published in 1742), who saw in the introduction here of a relative clause about God an underlining of the fact that the word really is God's word.
7. Cf. the use of energēs (RV: 'active') with reference to the word of God in Hebrews 4:12. If we were to accept Rigaux's contention (op.cit. pp440, 668-70) that energeitai is passive ('is rendered active': RV 'worketh' assumes that it is middle), then the question of the antecedent would be settled in favour of the word; but we are not convinced by his arguments.
8. Readings in St. John's Gospel, London, 1950, p271f.
9. The RV takes ekdiōkein here to mean 'drive out'. It is rather more probable that the ek- has here a strengthening force and that the compound verb is used in the sense 'persecute vehemently'. Cf. A. Depeke, in G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (Eds), Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT, 2, p232f.
10. In one case the participle is not expressed but has to be supplied - that is ontōn with enantiōn.
11. The purpose is understood to be God's.
12. Cf. also Matthew 23:32

13. For an attempt to expound what Paul meant by the 'wrath of God' and its revelation we take the liberty of referring the reader to C.E.B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 1, Edinburgh, 1977, pp106-111, 213-217.

14. op.cit. pp400 and 388f.

15. See W. Bauer, Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des NT und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur, Berlin, 1971 (corrected and expanded reprint of 5th ed. of 1958), s.v. 1

16. Cf., e.g., Euripides, Hippolytus 421-423; Ion 670-672; Demosthenes 9:3; Aristotle, Athenaion Politeia 16:6; Polybius 2:38.

17. See, for example, John 7:26; 7:54; Acts 4:29; Ephesians 3:12; Hebrews 10:19; 1 John 3:21.

18. On the textual variation between ēpioi ('gentle') and nēpioi ('babes') the reader may be referred to B.M. Metzger, The Text of the NT: its transmission, corruption and restoration, Oxford, 1968, pp230-233, ēpioi should surely be read.

19. The Jerusalem Bible is surely right in rendering trophos here by 'a mother': cf. Sophocles, Ajax 849; Theocritus 27:65.

20. The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, Eng. tr. by R. Mackenzie, Edinburgh, 1961, p351.

21. E. Busch, Karl Barth: his life from letters and autobiographical texts, Eng. tr. by J. Bowden, London, 1976, p489.

22. *ibid.*