

1 Thessalonians 3:11–13: The Pivotal Importance of Prayer in the Structure of Paul's Letters

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This paper was delivered to the Thessalonians Seminar of the Society for New Testament Studies meeting in Birmingham, England, 4–8 August 1997. I would begin therefore by thanking this Seminar, not only for the honour of this invitation, but also for the choice of the text which they assigned to me. If I had had to choose a passage myself, I would have chosen 3:11–13, as the reader will be able to see. I am doubly grateful to be able to present what follows to Frederik Wisse.*

This is not the place for an extended discussion of my approach to 1 Thessalonians. There are, however, two points which I should mention initially:

The Influence of Acts

I am fundamentally convinced that we should be careful not to import from Acts assumptions about the occasions of Paul's letters. The fallacy of this procedure—in general, and with particular reference to 1 Thessalonians—I have attempted to expose in my book, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*.¹ The assumption which particularly distorts the interpretation of 1 Thessalonians is that the letter was written very shortly after Paul had completed his first and founding visit to the church in Thessalonica thus eliminating, for example, the possibility of previous correspondence. Actually, there are a number of indications in 1 Thessalonians that a considerable amount of time has elapsed since the conversion of the Thessalonians. I do not propose to defend the hypothesis here, but I believe that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians prior to 1 Thessalonians during an eschatological crisis which has faded somewhat in the interval between the two letters. Further, I believe that in this interval the first Christian deaths occurred (see 1 Thess 4:13–18). However, in any case we should let

the letter speak for itself and float freely to find its own place in the sequence of events in Paul's career.

Rhetorical Criticism

In 1994 I was asked to lead a discussion of 1 Corinthians 16 in the then S.N.T.S. 1 Corinthians Seminar. Until that point I had had little contact with rhetorical criticism except through my doctoral students. Thus I was particularly glad of the opportunity to assess the treatment of this chapter by Margaret M. Mitchell, a pupil of Hans-Dieter Betz, in her recently published *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*. However, when I read her treatment, I was astonished. Mitchell considers chapter 16 to be *outside* the main argument of the letter: "1 Cor 16 is made up of a variety of small matters."² In the event, the 1994 Seminar spent a valuable session discussing (i) the importance of the Collection to Paul's relationship with the Corinthians and (ii) Paul's early efforts to establish an ordered ministry at Corinth. Therefore I must confess that I am still waiting for a rhetorical treatment of 1 Corinthians which excites me. I do understand, however, that rhetorical criticism has an interest in structure and in motive, although I suspect that the primary motive for most of its proponents is to push towards an understanding of Paul's meaning, i.e., his theology.³ My own conviction is that one cannot understand Paul's meaning without relating it both to his biography, i.e., to his situation in life at the time of writing each of his letters, and to his literary habits, i.e., to epistolary structure and conventions.

Having now said enough to offend everyone, we may begin.

1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 as the Letter's Pivot: the Structure of 1 Thessalonians

The Structure of 1 Corinthians

You will understand, and I hope forgive me, if I start with 1 Corinthians. In 1958–1961 when I wrote the dissertation which became my book on 1 Corinthians, I was innocent of the study of letter structure. I did, however, hit on the device of using the sources of information on the basis of which Paul wrote 1 Corinthians as a key

to analyzing the structure of the letter. If we sort the text by its probable source, 1 Corinthians may be pictured as follows (asterisks indicate the *peri de*, “now concerning,” formula):

Table 1

1 CORINTHIANS		
<i>From oral information</i>		<i>From written information</i>
	1:1-9	
1:10-4:21		
5:1-8		
————— >		5:9-13
6:1-11	6:12-20	
		*7:1-24
		*7:25-40
		*8:1-11:1
		11:2-16
11:17-34		< —————
		*12:1-14:40
		15:1-58
		*16:1-11
		*16:12
	16:13-24	

The result is surprisingly neat. After the Salutation, Greeting, and Thanksgiving (1:1-9), which form an introduction to the whole letter, Paul dealt with the information which had reached him in oral form. Then in 6:12-20 he made a transition which closed the preceding discussion of the failings of the Corinthians and at the same time made allusions to the topics which would follow. These topics were contained in the Corinthians' letter to Paul, which he took up at 7:1. Finally, in 16:13-24 he wrote a section which served to bring the whole letter to an end.

At two points, however, this simple scheme seems disrupted. Is there a simple explanation for the two blocks of text that float in the columns opposite to their neighbours? My suggestion is that in two instances a topic in the oral information related to a topic in the

written. In order to simplify his presentation Paul brought the relevant sections together as follows:

(i) In 5:1–8 Paul discussed a case of immorality within the congregation about which he had heard orally (5:1). Then in 5:9–13 he corrected what he claimed was a misunderstanding of his earlier letter, a misunderstanding about which he had probably heard in writing.⁴ His line of thought was that, if the Corinthians had understood his earlier letter on the subject of immoral persons, they would not have allowed the situation he was complaining about in 5:1–8 to develop or continue. He closed this excursus by bringing in the idea of “judging”: “It is those inside the church that you are to judge, is it not?” (5:12b). He thus made a transition from this rebuke to his discussion of Christians who use civil law courts (6:1–11), about which he had very probably heard orally.⁵

(ii) In 11:2–16 Paul discussed a problem concerning public worship which was probably raised by the Corinthians’ letter.⁶ In 11:17–18, however, Paul took up information which had reached him in oral form (11:18), and 11:19–34 is his discussion of this information. He clearly links the matters concerning worship about which he “commends” them (11:2–16) with those about which he does not commend them (11:17). Thus he interrupted his discussion of the liturgical item in the Corinthians’ letter to him with comment on a liturgical matter about which he had heard orally (11:18).

There are three blocks in the centre column. These blocks serve to tie the letter together. The first and the middle blocks bracket a major section based (with one exception) on oral information, the middle and the last blocks, a major section based (with one exception) on written communication.

The opening block contains the Thanksgiving (1:4–9). Ever since Paul Schubert wrote his *The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings*⁷ it has been widely recognized that the opening Thanksgiving sections of Paul’s letters serve to signal the major topics and concerns of the letter to follow. Words and phrases in the Thanksgiving anticipate the major topics to follow, often at the remove of many chapters.

The central block, 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, however, does double duty.⁸ (i) It points back to the preceding discussions. The theme of the radical separation which should exist between Christians and the unrighteous is basic to 5:1–6:11 and is reiterated in 6:12–20.

(ii) At the same time, like the Thanksgiving section, 6:12–20 points ahead to the sections which follow. The quotation, “The two shall become one” (Gen 2:24), actually belongs to the arguments of ch. 7. There are even more emphatic connections between 6:12–20 and 8:1–11:1. Almost the whole of 6:12 with its repeated slogan, “All things are lawful,” reappears in 10:23 in the discussion concerning idol meat. And the slogan, “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” is an anticipation of the same discussion. The unity theme about which Paul is concerned in 11:17–34 appears in 6:17, “He who is united to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him.” Possession of the Holy Spirit (here and in v. 19) anticipates chs. 12–14. Chapter 15 is anticipated by v. 14, “God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.”

The closing block of material sums up the whole letter in a single word, “love” (16:14, 22, 24), the final two occurrences written in Paul’s own hand (v. 21). Love is the ethical ideal to which Paul appeals in ch. 8 and in 10:23–11:1, the argument concerning the “weaker brother.” Love is central to chs. 12–14. And 8:1b, “‘Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up,” serves as his judgement on those who presume to have knowledge (1:10–4:21). He then ends as he began with “Grace” (compare 1:3 with 16:23).

Actually, the above analysis was not as general as it might have been. Clearly one major reason why Paul wrote 1 Corinthians was because he had received a letter from the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 7:1), and the other reason was the reception of oral reports from “those of Chloe” (1:11) and possibly from others. Thus I separated the contents of 1 Corinthians into two categories in terms of “oral” vs. “written” information. A more general way of putting the matter, however, would be to say that what I called “oral” information was actually information *about* the Corinthians, information over which they had no control, i.e., gossip or rumours. This information did not come directly from the Corinthians. It represents the conclusions of others *about* them. In terms of historical source material it would be called “secondary,” i.e., filtered through one or more additional minds on its way to Paul.

The “written” information, on the other hand, is information *from* the Corinthians, i.e., information which they themselves assembled and caused to be transmitted to Paul. This information gives Paul

immediate access to the Corinthians. In the case of 1 Corinthians they had sent him this information in a letter. Thus what I called “written” could more generally be designated “primary” source material, i.e., unmediated, coming directly to Paul from the Corinthians.

Note, however, that it is not the case that one class of information is automatically superior to the other in quality or reliability. Much secondary source material is highly reliable. It has, however, passed through one or more minds on its way to us. On the other hand, in the case of primary source material one must remember that it is the public *persona* of the writers which they present to the reader. The Corinthians did not call to Paul’s attention matters that they did not want him to know. Neither did Paul say all that was on his mind.

It is simply that these two classes of material are different in kind, and Paul’s treatment of each must be differently analyzed.

As we have just seen, the information which occasioned the writing of 1 Corinthians is clear and undisputed: oral material about the Corinthians and a letter from Corinth. It will be useful at this point to discuss and catalogue the information which lies behind 1 Thessalonians. As we shall see, this investigation will again lead to a structural conclusion.

The Information Behind 1 Thessalonians

1) Original Visit. — To begin with, it is clear that Paul and the Thessalonians shared certain items of knowledge as a result of their joint participation in Paul’s original mission in Thessalonica. The formula *kathōs oidate* in 1:5; 2:2, 5, 11 (*kathaper*) and 3:4b; and the emphatic formula *autoi gar oidate* in 2:1; 3:3; 4:2 (simply *oidate gar*); and 5:2 are unique to 1 Thessalonians in the Pauline corpus. In all but one instance (3:4b) they point to this original visit. By means of them Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what he had said to them “in the beginning of the gospel,” to use the phrase found in Philipians (Phil. 4:15).

These references establish the nature of Paul’s original preaching in Thessalonica and allow us to sketch the apocalyptic vision of history which constituted his message to them. In his preaching Paul had told them that the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ would come suddenly, like a thief in the night (5:2). Before the Parousia the elect (1:4) would undergo suffering (3:3) at the hands of the wicked, who would thereby

incur God's wrath (2:16). Paul had told them of his previous troubles in Philippi (2:2), presumably as a sign that the Messianic Woes were already beginning. During Paul's stay in Thessalonica there apparently were difficulties (1:6; 2:16) which no doubt received the same interpretation. In *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* I argued that 1 Corinthians provides evidence for the same apocalyptic orientation for Paul's original mission in Corinth, a visit which presumably occurred during the same missionary campaign.⁹

His teaching had also included moral instruction. He had told them how to "walk," that is, how to "please God" (4:1–2; 2:11–12). This instruction covered at least sexual matters (4:3–8) and "love of the brethren" (4:9–12). The former topic emphasized the avoidance of immorality; the latter included, at least by example (2:9), the requirement that the able-bodied should "work with their hands" (4:11).¹⁰ The elect community was to be pure and self-sufficient, suffering innocently in the End Time.

As a result of Paul's preaching and teaching a congregation was successfully established in Thessalonica (2:1). The Thessalonians had come to know what kind of a man Paul was (1:5), that he was not an insincere flatterer who taught only for the money it might bring (2:5). On the contrary, he exercised a genuine concern for them, like that of a loving father or a gentle nurse (2:11, 7).¹¹ Indeed, in a rare exposure of his more tender emotions Paul declared that in the course of his stay with them they had become "very dear" (*agapetoi*) to him (2:18).

2) Subsequent Information. — The way subsequent events are reconstructed depends on whether or not we include 2 Thessalonians. If it is part of the picture, then it provides evidence that persecution of some sort was the Thessalonians' lot continuing from the beginning (2 Thess 1:4–7). If not, then their difficulties may have been more sporadic or even quite recent. Yet troubles there were, and at some point news of their problems reached Paul.

How did Paul hear of the troubles of the Thessalonians? One thing we know: after Paul had left Thessalonica—and apparently Macedonia and Achaia as well¹²—he began to meet Christians in his travels who had heard of the success of his mission and of the conversion of the Thessalonians (1:9). From such people Paul heard that the Thessalonians had themselves undertaken missionary work in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7–8; cf. 4:10). These people may have been the source of Paul's knowledge of the hardships suffered by the

Thessalonians. If not, then the source(s) must remain unknown. It is, however, clear that news had reached him that, as a result of their commendable response to the gospel, they had incurred the active displeasure of their countrymen (2:14 and 3:3–4 [*kathōs oidate*]). This displeasure was apparently so vigorous and/or prolonged that Paul became concerned for the very survival of the congregation.

Then followed a period in which no news reached Paul. The silence caused Paul more and more anxiety. Having attempted on more than one occasion¹³ to arrange his itinerary to include a return visit to Thessalonica, Paul finally decided to send Timothy in his stead (2:17–3:3). Thus Timothy was commissioned to be Paul's surrogate with the Thessalonians, and to "strengthen" (*stērixai*) and to "encourage" (*parakalesai*) them (3:2). Timothy was then expected to report to Paul. As Paul put it, "I sent that I might know your faith" (3:5).¹⁴ He needed to know whether the Thessalonian church still survived, faithful to their calling. Timothy did indeed rejoin Paul, and 1 Thessalonians is Paul's immediate response to the good news (3:6) which Timothy brought.

At the Time of Writing

a) Timothy's report (secondary information).

We must now consider Timothy's good news as an explanation for the contents of the letter. What was it that Paul wanted to communicate? Paul had been acutely anxious about the Thessalonians, but with Timothy's return he was anxious no longer. Paul wrote to communicate his joy at Timothy's good news and to assure them of his continuing love and concern. Whether or not Paul Schubert was correct in taking 1:2–3:13 as a single Thanksgiving period,¹⁵ Paul in this section appears to have little in mind other than the strengthening of his relationship with the Thessalonians. There are no scandals of which he has just heard (contrast 1 Cor 1:11; 5:1; 6:1; 11:18). He gives no hint of any interlopers in the congregation (contrast Gal 1:6–7; 2 Cor 11:12–15).¹⁶

However, in addition to his good news, it seems probable that Timothy had communicated to Paul his opinion that the Thessalonians had wondered whether Paul really cared for them in view of his failure to visit them again. They seemed disappointed that it was Timothy

and not Paul who had arrived. Timothy based this conclusion in part on the Thessalonians' direct statement to him that they remembered Paul kindly and longed to see him (3:6). Thus in 1 Thessalonians Paul concentrated on turning *apousia* into *parousia*¹⁷ by reminding the Thessalonians of what they already knew about his initial care for them and by interpreting for them recent events in his own ministry which showed his loving concern for them.

b) A letter from Thessalonica (primary information)?

The above concerns do not account for chapters 4–5. These chapters consist of short essays on four different topics: sexual morality (4:1–8), love of the brethren (4:9–12), resurrection of deceased Christians (4:13–18), and signs of the Parousia (5:1–11). These are followed by a passage (5:12–22) containing a series of abrupt commands. Here he uses two request formulae (*erōtaō* and *parakaleō*) and fourteen imperatives. This last section has parallels in a number of Paul's other letters (1 Cor 16:13–18; 2 Cor 13:5–11; Gal 5:16–6:10; Phil 4:2–6) and thus seems to be a Pauline letter-closing convention. However, the set of four brief, disconnected essays requires explanation. The logic of their sequence is not based on their subject matter. Paul was not developing a theme. The list of topics appears imposed from without.

There are two possible lines of argument. (i) We can argue that Paul had a standard list of topics, either from tradition or from his own past experience, on which he was in the habit of writing short admonitions. The subject matter thus would have little connection with the Thessalonians' situation. (ii) On the other hand, we can argue that the list of topics is not Paul's creation but the Thessalonians'. The Thessalonians may have written him a letter containing a series of questions (or committed a series of their concerns to Timothy's memory, which amounts to the same thing). The subject matter would therefore be closely connected to the Thessalonians' situation.

Concerning option (i): It is true that Paul does use the Hellenistic convention of *topoi*, brief, self-contained paragraphs of moral instruction. However, the four topics which Paul treats here in 1 Thessalonians are not particularly persuasive as a list of general concerns on which all Christians might need instruction. Further and more importantly, if Paul were using a standard, customary list of paraenetic topics, why

would he not simply eliminate those that were unnecessary in the present situation? Why would Paul have written to them on matters about which he specifically says that they have no need to be written? Paul seems to consider three of the four matters superfluous. Concerning the first topic Paul says that he has already instructed them (4:2). Concerning two others, Paul specifically says that there is no need for him to write (4:9; 5:1). Nowhere else in his letters does he preface any one of his *topoi* by saying that he has no need to write on the topic.

A slightly different pair of alternatives is offered by John White in his study of the literary-paraenetic convention, "Now it is unnecessary for me to write you about. . ." (4:9; 5:1).¹⁸ We should note his remarks about "Statements signalling Previous Communication: The Addressor's Reproach."¹⁹ Reproach is undoubtedly too strong a word to use in the case of 1 Thessalonians, but the statement that the addressor ought not to have to write (4:9; 5:1) was a minor stereotype in non-literary letters of the period. Such a formula can be used for two main reasons. The topic can have been raised either (i) by the writer himself in the case of an unresolved issue, the writer complaining that further writing on the topic should be superfluous by reason of a previous letter or letters to the addressee on the same subject, or (ii) by the addressee by means of a letter requesting information.

Concerning White's option (i) it must be observed that in these three passages (if we include 4:2) Paul gives no indication that they involve continuing problems about which he has previously written. If 2 Thessalonians be accepted as a letter written before 1 Thessalonians, then it is true that Paul might well have complained that he had no need to write them further about "times and seasons" (5:1), since virtually the whole of 2 Thessalonians is devoted to this topic. However, in the case of this topic and the other two as well Paul says in each case that the Thessalonians are behaving correctly and should continue along the same path ("just as you are doing," 4:2; "indeed you do love all the brethren," 4:10; "just as you are doing," 5:11). These are not on Paul's mind as unresolved issues.

In either case, therefore, we are left with option (ii): a letter from Thessalonica. Paul had been asked by the Thessalonians to write something on at least these three issues

In a different class, however, is 1 Thess. 4:13–18. Unlike the other three, this topic is introduced by the disclosure formula, *ou thelomen de*

humas agnoein, adelphoi, “I do not want you not to know.” Examination of the other occurrences of this phrase in Paul’s letters (Rom 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor 1:8) shows that Paul apparently used this particular formula to impart information which he believed to be entirely new to his readers/hearers. On the other hand, he used the positive form, *gnōrizō de humin, adelphoi* (1 Cor 12:3; 15:1; Gal 1:11) when the information should already be known to the addressees.²⁰ Thus the doctrine of the resurrection of Christians at the Parousia seems most probably Paul’s response to a new problem and not a part of his original teaching to his converts. (Nor does this topic appear in 2 Thessalonians.) Clearly he knows that one or more believers have died in Macedonia and/or Achaia. He seems to have sent the same reassurance to the Corinthians at about the same time.²¹ Either Paul assumes that they have heard this news and assumes further that they are in need of reassurance, or the Thessalonians have communicated directly to Paul their concern about these newly dead believers. Because of the position of 4:13–18 among topics which were probably raised by the Thessalonians, I incline to the latter, although the former is also possible.

There are a number of scholars who have already suggested that 1 Thessalonians was written in response to a letter brought back by Timothy from Thessalonica. The idea originated with J. Rendel Harris in 1898.²² He relied chiefly on three points of evidence.

(i) In his study of the papyri he had noted that introductory assurance that the recipient is “remembered” was an epistolary convention occasioned by the receipt of a letter. He found therefore an echo of a letter from Thessalonica in Paul’s statement “that you always remember us kindly and long to see us” (1 Thess 3:6).

(ii) He suggested that the Thanksgiving section presumably contained in such a letter from the Thessalonians explains the emphatic *kai hēmeis* in 2:13, “We *also* thank God constantly.”

(iii) He took the recurring *autoi oidate* and *kathōs oidate* formulae to mean “As you know (because you just said so),” that is, “As you say (in your letter).”

The subsequent history of Harris’s suggestion is ably presented by Chalmer E. Faw in his article entitled “On the Writing of First Thessalonians.”²³ Benjamin W. Bacon²⁴ and George Milligan²⁵ adopted Harris’s hypothesis without further discussion. Frame²⁶ (and, less positively, Bicknell²⁷) provided additional evidence for the theory

by pointing to the formula *peri de* (1 Thess 4:9, 13; 5:1), which is used by Paul elsewhere only in 1 Corinthians (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). In that letter it explicitly introduces matters raised by a letter to which Paul was replying. Faw builds on this observation by further analysis of the function of the *peri de* formula elsewhere in the New Testament. He also traces the sequence of Paul's thought in 4:1–5:22. On the first point he concludes,

(1) that *peri de* is a formula of reply to specific questions or problems, especially where there is a series of such; (2) in series of replies it is properly used to introduce those from the second point onward; (3) in Pauline usage it is confined to the answering of specific questions or problems brought up in letters from the churches to which he is writing.²⁸

Concerning the structure of Paul's argument he notes the abrupt transitions at 4:9, 13; 5:1, 12 which make it seem as if the sequence of topics were determined by something other than internal logic. Further, he calls attention to the fact that on two of the topics Paul explicitly says that he has no need to write (4:9; 5:1): "Why should he bring up a subject and then state that they really did not need a discussion of it if he has not been requested to write upon it?"²⁹

Faw's argument has not evoked much enthusiasm among subsequent commentators. Karl Staeb,³⁰ Leon Morris,³¹ Kenneth Grayston,³² and D. E. H. Whiteley³³ ignore the matter entirely. Rigaux³⁴ and Moore³⁵ specifically reject the idea. Moreover, in defining 1 Thessalonians 4:1–5:22 as paraenetic material David Bradley says, "These exhortations . . . do not appear to be immediately motivated by a question or specific problem of the community addressed."³⁶ On the other hand, J. W. Bailey³⁷ and W. G. Kümmel³⁸ consider the existence of a letter from Thessalonica "possible." Further, T. W. Manson³⁹ and C. Masson⁴⁰ definitely favour the idea. Manson cites P. Lond. 1912 as "an exact parallel." There Claudius responds to requests from the citizens of Alexandria and in his letter his responses are introduced by *peri* with the genitive.

It is clear that Faw's examination of the *peri de* formula was too limited. One must look beyond the New Testament to establish epistolary usage. Indeed, there are abundant examples of this formula in the papyri, as John White shows in his *The Form and Function of the*

*Body of the Greek Letter.*⁴¹ Concerning the papyri White concludes, “*peri* with the genitive is often shorthand in private correspondence for: ‘to a subject mentioned in previous communications.’”⁴² The parallels in the papyri show, however, that answering a letter is only one way that a subject may have been previously mentioned. It may have occurred in an earlier letter by the same writer, or even at an earlier point in the same letter (2 Cor 9:1 is probably an example of both possibilities). White makes, as far as I can discover, no use of this formula when he comes to analyze the structure of Paul’s letters. But the reason is clear. His concern is with letter bodies; in Paul the formula only occurs in the section subsequent to the body, i.e., after 1 Corinthians 4:21 and 1 Thessalonians 3:13. In any case, it is clear that the formula alone is not sufficient evidence of a letter from the addressee.

Faw’s second point as quoted above is something of a truism. It is simply a way of saying that this particular formula is the briefest way of referring to topics under discussion and that if a longer introduction to the discussion as a whole occurs, it normally occurs in connection with the first item in the list.

His third point is somewhat overstated, since outside of 1 Thessalonians, which is under discussion, the formula has only one other set of occurrences in Paul’s letters. Nevertheless the attention to the parallel in 1 Corinthians 7–16 is very helpful, as we shall see. And his exegetical points are important. When we add the force of the parallels in the papyri, his case becomes even stronger.

For a number of scholars, W. G. Kümmel in particular, it is the absence of a direct reference to a letter from the addressees in the manner of 1 Corinthians 7:1 that is the main argument against the hypothesis that Paul was answering a letter in this section of 1 Thessalonians.⁴³ The actual mention of a letter, however, is by no means necessary to the original epistolary situation. It was not a matter about which the Thessalonians needed to be informed. After all, Paul had reported the arrival of the messenger and the receipt of news. It is the modern investigator who, for his own peace of mind, wants an explicit reference to a letter. It seems to me probable that Paul had indeed received a letter, whether written or committed to Timothy’s memory, and that 1 Thessalonians 4:1–5:11 was written on the basis of primary information.

The Response Letter Form

Having discussed the sources of information available to Paul at the time of writing 1 Thessalonians, we may now make the same type of analysis that I have already made for 1 Corinthians (asterisks again indicate the *peri de*, “now concerning,” formula):

Table 2

1 THESSALONIANS		
<i>secondary information</i>		<i>primary information</i>
	1:1–10	
2:1–3.10	3:11–13	
		4:1–8
		*4:9–12
		(*)4:13–8
		*5:1–11
	5:12–28	

The information reflected in 1 Thessalonians 1–3 is not based on primary communication, as we have seen, but on mutual knowledge and oral reports, i.e., on secondary information. Timothy has told Paul (3:6) about the “faith (i.e., faithfulness) and love” of the Thessalonians and Paul responds with expressions of thanksgiving.

1 Thessalonians 4:1–5:11, however, has all the characteristics of a response to primary communication, as we have also discussed. Further, if Paul had begun this section with the unnecessary statement, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote” (as in 1 Cor 7:1⁴⁴), it would not create the slightest discord nor cause any difficulty in reading the subsequent text. In my opinion, therefore, the structure of 1 Corinthians is not unique⁴⁵ but has in 1 Thessalonians a good parallel dating from about the same period of Paul’s life.⁴⁶ We may call it Paul’s “Response Letter” form.

Now at last we can focus on 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. This passage stands at the centre of the letter. It is not part of the preceding “Apostolic Parousia” sequence (2:17–3:10).⁴⁷ Instead, the passage serves as a close to the Body. Its parallel is found in 1 Corinthians

6:12–20.⁴⁸ Like that section, 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 refers back to what has preceded (“May our God...direct our way to you,” 3:11; cf. 2:17, 18; 3:6, 10). In addition, and again like 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, it introduces the material to follow. The references to the Thessalonians’ “love for one another” (3:12), to their “hearts unblamable in holiness” (3:13a), and to “the coming of our Lord Jesus” (3:13b) point ahead to 4:9–12; 4:1–8; and 4:13–5:11 respectively.

If we use 1 Corinthians as a model, Paul’s habit in writing a Response Letter was first to go through the form which is more or less characteristic of his other letters and to deal with whatever rumours and/or reports may have reached him. Then, after a transitional passage, which, like the Thanksgiving section, signaled the topics yet to be discussed, he turned to the letter he had received and dealt with its contents point by point.

I refrain from the attempt to reconstruct exactly what the Thessalonians’ questions may have been!⁴⁹ Further, there is no way of knowing whether the sequence of topics in 1 Corinthians and that in 1 Thessalonians corresponded to those of the letters Paul had received. In both cases, however, sexual morality is taken first (1 Cor 7; 1 Thess 4:1–8), and eschatological matters come more or less at the end (1 Cor 15; 1 Thess 4:13–5:11). The parallelism is only rough, but it is enough to suggest that Paul was at least in part responsible for organizing the sequence.

We have been talking about the form of a Pauline letter written in response to another letter. An unambiguous example of this form is 1 Corinthians. We have seen evidence that 1 Thessalonians is a second example of the same form. We may surmise that this manner of structuring a Response Letter was more or less a conscious choice with Paul, although further research may disclose precedents in the epistolary literature of the period. In any case, we may assume that we have here an adaptation of general epistolary practice to Paul’s specific needs. However, the important point for our discussion today is that this analysis of the structure of 1 Thessalonians, if it is accepted, *establishes 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 as the pivotal passage of the whole letter*. This conclusion means that this brief passage is not to be interpreted as a self-contained whole. Each word or phrase in it must be interpreted by the previous material which it summarizes and the subsequent discussions which it introduces.

Prayer in a Pivotal Passage

The Problem

In the above analysis of the structures of 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians I have argued that 1 Thessalonians should be thought of as having the same overall pattern as 1 Corinthians. I have argued that this pattern can be called “the Response Letter form.” I have used the clear pivotal position and function of 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 to argue that 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 has the same position and function.

To this point, however, we have not considered what class of material is contained in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. The answer to this question is not hard to find: 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 is one of the clearest examples of prayer in any of Paul’s letters. All the evidence points to this conclusion. For example, if we set aside the occurrences of *mē genoito*, there are 14 instances of the optative mood in the Pauline corpus. The two in 1 Corinthians qualify Paul’s statements that there are many languages and types of seed in the world (14:10; 15:37). The other twelve occurrences are all in prayer passages (although the one in Philemon 20 is a request addressed to Philemon). Three of these are in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13!

This classification of 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 as prayer raises two problems. (i) Is it likely that a prayer passage would have the structural function that I have postulated? 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 has almost the role of a good housekeeper: tidying up the preceding line of argument and preparing for the next. Is this a role for prayer? (ii) And secondly, in style and content 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 seems quite different from 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. Does it mean that it is only by accident that these two dissimilar passages have been juxtaposed? Does this difference mean that we should abandon the parallelism that I have set up?

The Structural Role of Prayer Passages

Actually, the first of these two problems is not difficult to solve. We may look at prayer passages in three different positions: introductory, concluding, and medial.

Introductory Prayer Passages

As we noted in passing in Section II.A above, ever since Paul Schubert⁵⁰ it has been widely recognized that the opening Thanksgiving sections of Paul's letters serve to signal the major topics and concerns of the letter to follow. Once this characteristic had been identified, its truth was obvious. Equally clear is it that the Thanksgiving sections are prayer passages. As Wiles puts it:

The canons of ancient letter style prohibit the inclusion of any prayer directly addressed to God. It is always the reader who is being addressed, and references to God or to any other third party must occur in the third person. Thus . . . prayers must be introduced obliquely if at all, either by recasting direct prayers into 'wish-prayers' . . . or by 'prayer reports' that claim to describe the prayers of the writer.⁵¹

It is as "prayer report" that the Thanksgivings are to be considered prayer passages. From this observation follows an interesting corollary: prayer passages may include considerable material which is not actually addressed to God or even particularly relevant to the passage as prayer. Like the clergyman who is reported to have begun his pastoral prayer, "O God, as you will have seen in this morning's newspaper . . ." the information referred to is in reality not for God's benefit but for the congregation's. So too Paul includes in his prayers considerable material for the information of his readers rather than the edification of God. Thus context rather than content governs the question whether Pauline material is part of a prayer passage or not. It follows that much of the information in the Thanksgiving sections is both prayer in form and structural in function, serving to alert the reader/hearer to the discussions that lie ahead.

Closing Prayer Passages

It is also widely recognized that much of the letter-closing material in Paul's writings consists of prayer passages much influenced by liturgical tradition.⁵² One of the clearest examples is 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

“Peace” as an attribute of God harks back to 4:11 and contrasts with the causes of possible disruption listed in 5:12–22. “Sanctification” echoes 4:3–4, 7–8. The virtue *amemptōs* appears in 2:10 and 3:13. The *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ points back to 2:19; 3:13; and 4:15. The requested wholeness of the anthropological triad, *pneuma*, *psyche*, and *sōma* underlines 4:13–18, the new doctrine of the resurrection of Christians who predecease the arrival of the Kingdom (and anticipates the somewhat tortured exposition of 1 Cor 15). And God’s “faithfulness” (*pistos*) serves to encourage the Thessalonians about whose “faith” (*pistis*), *i.e.*, faithfulness, Paul had been so concerned in 3:5–6. Primarily 5:23–24 serves to close 4:1–5:22, but there are a number of references to the concerns of the first half of the letter as well.

Medial Prayer Passages

If on a scale that represented nearness to or remoteness from the divine, one were to graph the level of Paul’s discourse through each of his letters, one would find that it rises and falls cyclically. He begins each letter with prayer. The angry letter to the Galatians is no exception. Not only does it have an extended Grace Salutation (1:3–5), but the expression of astonishment which replaces the customary Thanksgiving period is itself prayer. It begins by referring to “him who called you in the grace of Christ” (1:6) and ends with a curse (1:9), which is, of course, prayer in its negative form. And as we have just seen, Paul also ends each letter with prayer material.

In addition, throughout each letter there are periodic peaks at the points where he lifted the discussion up to God. These passages include, but are not limited to, those commonly referred to as “eschatological climaxes.” Another way of putting it is to say that all these peak passages are “eschatological” in that they confront the reader/hearer with ultimate reality. What has not been as commonly seen is that these passages have structural significance: they serve as transitions from one topic or section to the next.

There are a number of instances in Romans. In Romans 7:24–25, for example, the reference to “this body of death” in v. 24 encapsulates

the agony of chapter 7, and the exclamation of thanksgiving in v. 25 raises the curtain on the joy of chapter 8. In Romans 9:1–3 *alētheian legō en christō*, “I am speaking the truth in Christ,” connects back to the affirmations of chapter 8 in addition to introducing the oath immediately ahead. So also the reference to the Holy Spirit (v. 1) echoes chapter 8, which focuses on the work of the Spirit. Further, in v.3 “accursed and cut off from Christ” gains much of its force from its stark contrast with the affirmation with which chapter 8 ends:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And the connection of 9:1–3 with the material ahead in chapters 9–11 is obvious.

One could multiply instances. Perhaps enough has been said to establish that prayer passages in Paul’s letters often serve a structural function. To show that they invariably do so would require a larger canvass. Thus the fact that 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 is prayer material is no impediment to its function as the pivotal passage in the letter. On the contrary.

1 Corinthians 6:12–20 as Prayer

However, one could still be unhappy with the attempt to put 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 parallel to 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. The former passage is so thoroughly prayer material, while the latter passage seems the antithesis. And yet appearances can be deceiving. Paul begins by referring to food and the stomach, but he immediately shifts to the divine aspect of the issue:

God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power (vv. 13–14).

Union with Christ is the main focus of the next verses, climaxing in the declaration that “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God.” And he ends, “Glorify God in your

body.” This final verse is clearly prayer material, and in a larger sense so is the whole of 6:12–20. It lifts the ethical problems of both the preceding and the subsequent sections of 1 Corinthians up to the divine level and invites the Corinthians to look at these matters from God’s point of view. And so too does 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13.

Summary

I have argued that the separation of the material in 1 Corinthians on the basis of Paul’s sources of information, “primary” or “secondary,” produces a clear outline for that letter (Table 1). The same analysis of 1 Thessalonians produces an almost identical outline (Table 2). Both letters are based in part on “secondary” information and in part on “primary.” In the case of 1 Corinthians the “primary” information came as a letter from the Corinthians to Paul. In the case of 1 Thessalonians there is considerable probability that the same is also true, although the matter is not subject to proof. However, the extent of the “primary” material in 1 Thessalonians is clear in either case. In the outline presented in Table 2 the pivotal passage of the letter is 3:11–13, closing the first half of the letter and introducing the second.

I further argued that the fact that 3:11–13 is prayer material strengthens, rather than casts doubt on, this function. Finally, I attempted to show that 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, while not liturgical, has many of the attributes of prayer, and thus that 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 and 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 may be considered mutually illuminating parallel passages in form as well as function.

Notes

* The member of the Seminar originally assigned this pericope was unable to attend this session, and the present paper was a late replacement. Because of the pressure of time, I was obliged to rely at some points on material that I had written previously and never published. However, during these 1997 meetings Gerd Lüdemann, an old friend from his days in Canada, approached me to inquire whether I had material that could be published in the series which he edited, “Studies in the Religion and History of Early Christianity.” The result was the publication of a collection of ten of my essays entitled, *The Earlier Letters of Paul – and Other Studies* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1998). Much of the material in Section II of the present paper was derived

from the fuller treatments in two of these essays: “Concerning the Structure of 1 Thessalonians” (ibid., 47–83), and “Good News and the Integrity of 1 Corinthians” (ibid., 183–206).

Many of the other papers of this Seminar are now available as *The Thessalonians Debate: Methodological Discord or Methodological Synthesis?* Ed. Karl P. Donfried (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000).

1. J. C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965; with a new introduction, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983). See chapter 1, section 3: “The Weakness of the Evidence for the Usual Chronology of Paul’s Letters.”

2. M. M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), 292. Chapter 16 contains two of the *peri de* references which began at 7:1 and which mark topics raised by the Corinthians’ letter to Paul. I do not claim (as Mitchell alleges that I and many other scholars do) that the *peri de* formula itself, if found in any Hellenistic letter, indicates that the writer is referring to a letter which he had received. *peri de* merely indicates that the writer is beginning a new topic (as Mitchell correctly says). But Paul in 1 Cor 7:1 tells us that he has in fact received a letter from the Corinthians. He announces that he intends to respond to the matters (plural) which they have raised. A sequence of passages introduced by *peri de* follows, each with a sudden change of topic. It seems logical to conclude that the *peri de* formula, including its occurrences at 16:1 and 16:12, points to topics from the Corinthians’ letter to Paul. (See Table 1 below.)

3. I note that Charles Wanamaker in his 1995 paper for this Seminar entitled “Epistolary vs. Rhetorical Analysis” (now published in *The Thessalonians Debate*, 255–86) ended by saying, “It is a marriage of unequal partners. Rhetorical analysis, both of the ancient and the modern variety, takes us far closer to the issues which really matter: meaning and significance, intention and strategy” (35).

4. Hurd, *Origin*, 83.

5. Hurd, *Origin*, 84–86.

6. Hurd, *Origin*, 90–91.

7. (BZNW 20; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939).

8. Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (FF; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 78, also notes the bi-directionality of 1 Thess 3:11–13 but from the rhetorical point of view.

9. Hurd, *Origin*, 282–87.

10. A number of scholars, e.g., T. W. Manson (“The Letters to the Thessalonians,” *BJRL* 35 [1953]: 443–44, repr. idem. *Studies in the Gospels and*

Epistles [Manchester: The University Press, 1962], 444 [275]), believe that this passage refers back to 2 Thess 3:6–13.

11. On the terminology in 2:1–12 see the illuminating article by Abraham J. Malherbe, “Gentle as a Nurse: The Cynic Background to I Thess ii,” *NovT* 12 (1970): 203–17.

12. Hurd, *Origin*, 26, n. 3.

13. See Leon Morris, “kai hapax kai dis,” *NovT* 1 (1956): 205–08.

14. Note that here *pistis*, “faith,” had not yet become the important theological term that we find in Galatians and Romans.

15. See note 7.

16. Nor does he mention any persons returning or travelling to Thessalonica, who might have offered a convenient opportunity for sending a letter (contrast 1 Cor 16:17–18; Phil 2:25). We do not know who the messenger was who carried 1 Thessalonians.

17. Heikki Koskeniemi, *Studien zur Idee and Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (AASE, Ser. B 102.2; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1956), 38.

18. See Abraham J. Malherbe, “I Thessalonians as a Paraenetic Letter,” *S.B.L. 1972 Proceedings—Suppl.*, 7–9.

19. J. L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study of the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle* (Ph.D. Diss., Vanderbilt University, 1970; University Microfilms, 1971), 39–40.

20. Similar in function are the two *oidate* formulae in our letter and the frequent *ouk oidate hoti* in 1 Cor 3:16, etc. (ten times). Cf. also 1 Cor 11:3; Col 2:1.

21. Hurd, *Origin*, 231–33.

22. J. R. Harris, “A Study in Letter Writing,” *The Expositor*, Ser. 5; 8 (1898): 161–180.

23. Chalmer E. Faw, “On the Writing of First Thessalonians,” *JBL* 71 (1952): 217–25.

24. B. W. Bacon, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), 73.

25. *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians. The Greek Text, with Introduction and Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 126.

26. James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 140, 157, 166, 178. We should also note Kirsopp Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Rivingtons, 1911), 86–87.

27. E. J. Bicknell, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (WC; London: Methuen, 1932), 40, xvii.
28. C. E. Faw, "Writing," 221.
29. *Ibid.*, 222.
30. K. Staab, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe. Die Gefangenschaftsbrieife* (RNT 7; Regensburg: Pustet, 1959).
31. L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians: the English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (NLC; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1959).
32. K. Grayston, *The letters of Paul to the Philippians and to the Thessalonians* (CBC; Cambridge: The University Press, 1967).
33. D. E. H. Whiteley, *Thessalonians in the Revised Standard Version* (New Clarendon Bible; London: Oxford University Press, 1969).
34. B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Epîtres aux Thessaloniciens* (EBib; Paris: Lecoffre, 1956), 55–56.
35. A. L. Moore, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCB; London: Nelson, 1969), 43.
36. D. Bradley, "The Topos as a Literary Form in the Pauline Paraenesis," *JBL*, 72 (1953), 240.
37. Bailey, *Thess.*, 248.
38. W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (14th rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 184. Perhaps "not impossible" would be a fairer translation: see his "Des literarische and geschichtliche Problem des ersten Thessalonicherbriefes," in *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (Festschr. O. Cullmann NovTSup 7; Leiden: Brill, 1962, 213–27), 223, n. 2.
39. Manson, "The Letters to the Thessalonians," 443–44 (repr. *idem. Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, 274–75). Oddly Manson mentions no previous literature on the subject; he may not have seen Faw's article.
40. C. Masson, *Les Deux Epîtres de saint Paul aux Thessaloniciens* (CNT 11A; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Nestlé, 1957), 7–8, 44. Also favouring the idea are Ernst Fuchs in "Hermeneutik," *Theologia Viatorum* 7 (1960), 44–60, as cited by Kümmel, "Literarische Problem," 223; and Graydon F. Snyder, "Apocalyptic and Didactic Elements in 1 Thessalonians," *S.B.L. 1972 Proceedings*, 1, 236–37.
41. White, *Body*, 30–31, 53–54, 57.
42. *Ibid.*, 30. See also Snyder, "Apocalyptic" (n. 40 above), 236–37.
43. Kümmel, "Literarische Problem," 223, n. 2. He lists Hendriksen, Rigaux, Morris, and Guthrie.

44. In fact, one may wonder why in 1 Corinthians Paul alluded to the Corinthians' letter at all. It may well be that there he was making a contrast between "my letter" (1 Cor 5:9) and "your letter" (7:1), or perhaps because 1 Corinthians is a far longer and more complex letter than 1 Thessalonians.

45. Pace Gerhard Sellin's 1989 S.N.T.S. paper, "1 Kor 5–6 und der 'Vorbrief' nach Korinth: Indizien für eine Mehrschichtigkeit von Kommunikationsakten im ersten Korintherbrief" (later published in *NTS* 37 [1991]: 535–58, 537).

46. It is interesting to note the parallel position of the travel material in 1 Thess 2:17–3:13 with that in 1 Cor 4:14–21 (cf. Funk, 'Apostolic Parousia', in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W.R. Farmer, C.F.D. Moule, and R.R. Niebuhr [Cambridge: The University Press, 1967, 249–68], 254). The appearance of visit material in 1 Corinthians 4:14–21 is used by Sellin (553) and others (wrongly in my opinion) to argue that this passage was originally the end of a letter fragment.

47. Funk (*Language, Hermeneutic. and Word of God* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966], 265) identifies the "travelogue" as 2:17–3:8; in "Apostolic Parousia" (n. 46 above), he stretches the form to include 3:11 as an anomalous repetition of 3:10a, Paul's prayer for his presence among the Thessalonians. He has no suggestions about 3:12–13.

48. The attempt to perform the parallel task for 1 Corinthians was the purpose of my first book, *Origin*.

49. I suggest that the Body of 1 Corinthians does not end at 4:21 but that 5:1–13 and 6:1–11 are two additional Body units each marked by an opening expression of amazement and reaching a theological climax in 6:11. Paul's three separate pieces of unfavourable news are responsible for the unusual structure. A comprehensive Pauline "letter grammar" should show which units may be repeated and under what circumstances. Cf. the repeated thanksgiving periods in 1 Thessalonians 1–3.

50. See note 7.

51. Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers: The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of St. Paul* (SNTSMS 24; Cambridge University Press, 1974), 6–7.

52. E.g., Wiles, *Prayers*, 42–43, and *passim*.