

The Literary Structure of 1 and 2 Thessalonians

David Alan Black

David Alan Black is Professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He received the Dr. Theol. from the University of Basel and is the author of twelve books and over one hundred articles. Dr. Black has most recently written *It's Still Greek to Me* and *The Myth of Adolescence*.

Introduction

Literary structures, to use a scientific analogy, are like those mysterious species of fish that live on the ocean floor. As soon as they are brought to the surface to be examined, the change in pressure is too great for them and they explode, leaving their investigators in a state of frustration and bewilderment.

This analogy applies as much to the structure of the Thessalonian correspondence as it does to the other NT writings. Casual readers may know something about the “rapture” passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and about certain vivid passages, such as “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17), but they are often unaware of the total nature of the author’s thought. Indeed, for many Christians these letters have been reduced to a collection of proof-texts and memory verses—a sort of biblical telephone directory, with chapter and verse instead of area code and number. In this essay we shall examine the literary structure of 1 Thessalonians (and, to a much lesser extent, that of 2 Thessalonians), attempting to understand how the biblical author has composed his correspondence and how the parts fit the whole—hopefully without the pages exploding before us!

Outlining 1 Thessalonians

However, before I discuss the literary organization of 1 Thessalonians, I would like to ask you to roll up your shirt sleeves and do a little work of your own—an inductive study of the letter. The follow-

ing steps will help you discover the structure of 1 Thessalonians for yourself. Ideally, these steps should be done every time you study a biblical book *before* consulting other resources—including journal articles like this one!

A. First Reading. Read the letter for your first impressions. Then answer the following questions:

1. What is the general tone or atmosphere of the letter?
2. What are Paul’s purposes for writing the letter? Does he seem to have one over-riding purpose in writing?
3. What are your personal impressions of the book? Which parts or topics interest you the most?

B. Second Reading. The Greek text of 1 Thessalonians consists of 18 paragraphs (thought units) that together merge to communicate Paul’s message. Read each paragraph and then assign a title to each (a paragraph title is a summary *in your own words* of the central idea in the paragraph). The paragraphs are: 1:1; 1:2-10; 2:1-12; 2:13-16; 2:17-20; 3:1-5; 3:6-10; 3:11-13; 4:1-2; 4:3-8; 4:9-12; 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 5:12-22; 5:23-24; 5:25; 5:26-27; 5:28.

C. Outline. Go through the letter again (in comparison with your paragraph titles) and see if you can find any paragraphs that are of similar content. Construct a master outline of 1 Thessalonians based on your study thus far. Then compare your outline with mine:¹

- I. Opening Greeting 1:1
- II. Commendation for the readers’

- progress in the Christian life 1:2-3:13
- A. Thanksgiving for the conversion and zeal of the Thessalonians 1:2-10
 - B. Review and defense of Paul's ministry among them 2:1-12
 - C. Thankfulness for their reception of the Word despite persecution 2:13-16
 - D. Paul's desire to visit them hindered 2:17-20
 - E. The mission of Timothy 3:1-5
 - F. Gratitude for the joy they have brought him 3:6-10
 - G. Prayer for growth 3:11-13
- III. Correction of problems and misconceptions in the church 4:1-5:22
- A. Exhortation to Christian living 4:1-2
 - B. Instruction on moral purity 4:3-8
 - C. Admonition to brotherly love 4:9-12
 - D. The dead in Christ and the return of the Lord 4:13-18
 - E. The need for watchfulness 5:1-11
 - F. The duties of church and private life 5:12-22
- IV. Conclusion 5:23-28
- A. Prayer for sanctification 5:23-24
 - B. Request for prayer 5:25
 - C. Final greeting and request 5:26-27
 - D. Benediction 5:28

Analysis of 1 Thessalonians

It is now possible to discuss the structure of 1 Thessalonians in greater detail. Please have your Bible or Greek NT open before you as we proceed.

Chapter 1

The first chapter is comprised of two paragraphs and follows closely the standard letter writing convention used by Paul elsewhere: Greeting and Thanks-

giving.² The train of thought in these two paragraphs may be indicated as follows:

Opening Greeting 1:1.

The introduction gives the names of the writers and readers, and a salutation. The form is conventional but it has been Christianized (cf. the introduction to Romans [1:1-7], which has been richly "clothed" with doctrine; cf. also Gal 1:1-5). The introductions of the Thessalonian epistles are Paul's briefest. Significant here is the absence of "apostle" to describe Paul. As in other letters Paul joins his helpers' names to his own in the address. The church is then designated and greeted with the typical Pauline expression "grace and peace."

Thanksgiving for the conversion and zeal of the Thessalonians 1:2-10.

In the Greek text, 1:2-10 is one long, awkwardly constructed sentence that is difficult to punctuate and that is loaded with adverbial phrases that are hard to place. If the paragraph is difficult it is also vitally important to the author's argument. In the form of a prayer of thanksgiving, Paul brings together two themes: (1) the manner in which Paul and his colleagues shared their faith with the Thessalonians (vv. 2-5), and (2) the response of the Thessalonians to the missionaries' preaching (vv. 6-9). Because of this shift in emphasis, it may be useful to make a paragraph break at the end of v. 5.

Secular Greek letters sometimes included in their introduction a prayer to some god, but not often a prayer of thanksgiving. Paul regularly does so (Galatians is an exception), but the theme of gratitude goes far beyond a mere introduction. Paul uses the thanksgiving (1:2-10) to relate the most important

themes of the letter body that follows, though “thanksgiving” in our letter appears to be much longer (1:2-3:13) than in Paul’s other letters.

What is the specific content of this rich paragraph of thanksgiving? Hiebert divides it as follows: (a) Paul first sketches the character of the thanksgiving with various statements (v. 2) and then (b) elaborates three specific grounds for the thanksgiving (vv. 3-10). Paul’s thankful spirit for the Thessalonians is prompted by their Christian virtues (v. 3), their divine election (vv. 4-7), and the reports of others concerning the church in Thessalonica (vv. 8-10).³ According to Hiebert, “this elaboration of their grounds for thanksgiving forms an adequate background for the remainder of the epistle.”⁴

Best’s overall analysis of 1:2-10, however, seems to unite the thoughts of the paragraph better. His explanation may be summarized as follows:

(a) Paul thanks God for the way in which the Thessalonian converts have expressed their faith (v. 3) and (b) for its ultimate ground in God’s choice of them as Christians (v. 4). This choice was (c) made clear in the successful ministry by Paul to Thessalonica (v. 5) and (d) in their response to the gospel, despite tribulation (v. 6). They (e) became an example to others (v. 7) and (f) a spur to evangelical activity (v. 8) by their complete acceptance of the faith, whose content is (g) expressed in a creedal form (vv. 9-10).⁵

This last statement concerning a “creedal form” indicates a common opinion among NT scholars that Paul in 1:9-10 is quoting a pre-Pauline statement of the church’s faith.⁶

Chapter 2

Following the thanksgiving for the

readers in 1:2-10, the thought turns to the relationship of the missionaries with their converts while they were still all together. In 2:1-12 Paul recalls the nature of the missionaries’ work at Thessalonica, clearly uneasy about the charges being flung at them. Then in 2:13-16 Paul utters a new thanksgiving for the readers’ reception of the gospel that was preached to them. And in 2:17-20 Paul explains his continued absence from his beloved converts. (Actually 2:17-20 belongs with what follows: Paul’s relations with them since being forcibly separated from them [2:17-3:13]. Thus it would have been better if chapter 3 had been made to commence at 2:17. The present chapter division was apparently due to the desire to have each chapter close with a direct reference to the Second Coming of Christ.)

Review and defense of Paul’s ministry among them 2:1-12.

As in 1:2-10 there is a movement of thought in 2:1-12 from the activity of the missionaries to the response of the Thessalonians. Paul affirms that they came to Thessalonica in a spirit of love and denies that they had been wrongly motivated. As he points out (perhaps even more forcefully) in Galatians and 2 Corinthians, his message and his personal integrity cannot be separated. Paul notes that his sincerity was clearly evident (a) in the way in which the gospel was presented (vv. 3-6), (b) in the love that was the motive for preaching the gospel (vv. 7-8), and (c) in the life lived by the missionaries in the sight of God and before the Thessalonians themselves (vv. 9-12).⁷

Thankfulness for their reception of the Word despite persecution 2:13-16.

Paul renews his thanksgiving for the

Thessalonians and for the way they received the gospel. This reception is evident in the way they endured persecution; the mention of which leads Paul to a violent outburst against the Jews and to a declaration that God has finally judged them.

The opening word “and” closely connects this paragraph with the preceding one. The review of their missionary labors evoked renewed thanksgiving for the results of that labor: the Thessalonian converts. Paul underlines three basic considerations that should be of encouragement to them: (a) the message of the Christian gospel is the Word of God and not merely the word of man; (b) the Thessalonian Christians are not alone in their experience of persecution (although they may feel that way); and (c) God judges those who are opposing his Word. Paul makes them aware that their faith is not in man but in God, that they are sharing in the sufferings of all Christians, and that God always vindicates his people even through their sufferings.

Paul's desire to visit them hindered 2:17-20.

Beginning with 2:17 Paul takes up the topic of his continuing relationship with the Thessalonians. After his hurried flight from Thessalonica he desired to return (2:17-20), but being unable to do so he sent Timothy to them (3:1-5), who reported on the faithfulness of the Thessalonians (3:6-10). This news leads Paul to pray for them once again (3:11-13).

Paul explains how his separation from the newly founded church was on his heart, and how he was frustrated each time he attempted to return. His great love for and interest in the Thessalonians is evident in the language he applies to them: they are and will be *everything* to him.

Chapter 3

Paul recounts the circumstances that prompted the sending of Timothy (3:1-5) and the latter's return with good news about the Thessalonians. Paul rejoices over the good news (3:6-10) and prays for the readers' growth in holiness (3:11-13). Previously Paul was seriously concerned about whether the newly founded community had stood up to its various afflictions. But after Timothy brought good news, Paul reverts to thanksgiving and intercessory prayer. Just as Paul was grateful for the beginnings of the community through God's grace, so now he is also grateful that God had given the community such steadfastness.

The mission of Timothy 3:1-5.

These verses are a unit; they are concerned with the return of Timothy to the Thessalonians. The focus of this unit is marked by v. 5, which sums up and partly repeats vv. 1-4. On the other hand, the unit is linked with what precedes and follows as a direct consequence of what has just been affirmed in 2:17-20. Since Paul could not go to Thessalonica, the next best thing was to send Timothy to them. Thus the relation of this unit with 2:17-20 is one of reason and result: Paul sends Timothy back because of the affectionate anxiety he has just described. In this paragraph Paul recounts the circumstances behind and purpose for sending Timothy.⁸

Gratitude for the joy they have brought him 3:6-10.

With this paragraph Paul passes from the past to the present. Timothy has returned with good news that not only removes Paul's fears about the Thessalonians but also enables him to be encouraged and to stand firm. The emotive

content of the passage is rare and heightened: it is marked by the frequent repetition of the personal pronouns “you” and “we”; the use of such strong expressions as “brothers” (v. 7), “day and night” (v. 10) and “earnestly” (“with all our heart,” TEV; v. 10); the use of long sentences (vv. 6-8 and vv. 8-10); and a rhetorical question in vv. 9-10.⁹

Timothy’s report formed the immediate occasion for the writing of this letter. The anxiously awaited return of Timothy had brought Paul the long-expected morning of joy and enthusiasm. This paragraph shows that Paul was “a man of high-strung and ardent nature, sensitive in his affection to an extreme degree. His whole soul was bound up with the Churches he had founded.... He lived for nothing else.”¹⁰ In addition, Paul records the fact of Timothy’s return with the good news (v. 6) and his own enthusiastic reaction to the report (vv. 7-10).

Prayer for growth 3:11-13.

In this section of the letter Paul records his prayer both for himself and for the Thessalonians. There are two main petitions: that Paul may visit them, and that the deficiencies of their faith may be made up (perhaps by his coming to them). These verses are linked to what precedes by the reference to prayer in v. 10, the theme of “wanting to see” in 2:17 and 3:6, 10, and by the reference to supplying what is needed in their faith in v. 10 (cf. “grow” in v. 12). The beginning of a new paragraph is marked by the introduction of a new grammatical subject, “God ... and ... Jesus.”

Chapter 4

The first part of the letter has been concerned with the relationship of the missionaries and the Thessalonians; the

second main division of the letter begins here. From now on, the main emphasis is upon the present and the future, not the past. The first part was devoted to thanksgiving and reassurance; this part is devoted to exhortations and counsel. Paul passes from *commendation* to *correction*.

Ellingworth and Nida rightly point out that the distinction between the two parts should not be exaggerated in such a way as to make it absolute and final.¹¹ While many of Paul’s letters can be divided into two main parts—instruction and exhortation—the two are never wholly separated. While there are features marking a new section, there are also echoes of what was said before. The theme of holiness, which is central in 4:3-8, was anticipated in 3:13. The emphasis on love of the brethren (4:9-12) was made in 3:12. The theme of doing even more—a central concern of the epistle (cf. 4:1, 10)—was announced in 3:10 and (more strongly) in 3:12. Though the theme of the parousia becomes prominent in the second part, it also can be found in the first section of the letter (1:10; 2:19; 3:13). In both parts of the letter Paul stresses his relationship with the readers, and in both he touches upon significant theological themes. In the light of this, Rigaux seems to go too far in speaking of an “artificial liaison” at the beginning of chapter 4.¹² The difference between the two parts of the letter is one of emphasis.

The beginning of a new section is indicated in three ways. Paul indicates the transition first of all with the word “Finally” (*loipon*). This word serves to mark a transition rather than a conclusion, although the meaning is more final when the word is used near the end of a letter (e.g., 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:8; 2 Tim 4:8; and possibly Phil 3:1 if two letters are joined

at that point). Paul employs it here, as in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, to mark a major transition to an appeal for action. He is moving to his final point or points; and though this section is somewhat lengthy, there is definitely an important change in subject matter and type of material. Since “Finally” commonly implies that the conclusion is at hand, the more general transitional function of the word is better rendered by the *KJV*’s “Furthermore.”

Secondly, the transition is marked by the word *oun* (“therefore,” “then”). The word may look back specifically to the prayer of 3:13, as Hiebert suggests.¹³ More probably it has a continuative force and serves to introduce matters that are in accord with the subject matter of the preceding section.¹⁴ “The word used here, as in many other passages, reinforces the importance of the transition.”¹⁵ It is also used in Romans 12:1 and Ephesians 4:1 at the major point of transition between teaching and appeal for action.

Finally, the vocative “brothers” tends to mark the beginning of a new section (cf. 2:1, 17; 4:13; 5:12, 14; 2 Thess 3:1, 13), or at least, as in 1:4, the introduction of an important new idea. The word also often marks an intensification of emotive meaning, as in 2:9. This use of an endearing term to introduce a new development in Paul’s thought is not limited to the Thessalonian letters (cf. 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 3:1; 4:8).

The opening words of 4:1 should, therefore, be understood as transitional, equivalent to a phrase such as “now in this closing part of our letter, brothers, we beg and urge you....” Thus Paul passes from a discussion of his own relation with the readers to a consideration of their life and faith. He not only exhorts, but also gives fundamental guidelines for Christian

living in a community and beyond it.

In a very simple and brotherly way Paul tries to give a fundamental formulation of what is “pleasing to God” (4:1) and what his “will” is, topics he emphasizes in both the introduction (*thelēma tou theou*, 4:3) and the conclusion (*thelēma theou*, 5:18).

Chapter four divides into four paragraphs. The first two verses set the stage for the specific details that follow particularly in vv. 3-8 but also in the remainder of the paraenetic portion of the letter (4:1-5:22). This is followed by an exhortation to sanctification as applied to sexual behavior (4:3-8), instructions concerning brotherly love (4:9-12), and words of comfort concerning the dead in Christ and their status at his coming (4:13-18). In 4:13 the subject shifts rather abruptly to eschatological topics, with two central issues emerging: the relation of the dead to the parousia (4:13-18), and the relation of the living to that event (5:11). Perhaps Paul moves to these new topics because of what he has heard from Timothy about the Thessalonians, possibly through a letter from them. At any rate, the apostle is making up for the deficiencies in their instruction in this area (3:10).

Exhortation to Christian living 4:1-2.

This is clearly a foundational paragraph that prepares the way for two specific matters about which Paul exhorts his readers: sexual morality (vv. 3-8) and love of the brethren (vv. 9-12). Verses 1-2 fulfill something of the same function as a headline in a modern newspaper as they look forward to the more detailed specifications of God’s will beginning in v. 3. Paul simply reminds his readers that they already know how to live and that they should live according to their knowledge.

His request is summarized in the final words of v. 1: “that you abound more and more” (the phrase is Pauline; cf. 2 Cor 3:9; Phil 1:9; 1 Thess 4:10). The expression is used absolutely, so that its application is as wide as possible in relation to behavior. Best captures the meaning: “They are already moving in the right direction; let them continue and increase their speed.”¹⁶

Verse 2 adds little that is new. It emphasizes by repetition that the commandments they received from Paul were not man’s but God’s (they came *through* Jesus). As in the beginning, Paul is merely showing them the way of God.

Instruction on moral purity 4:3-8.

Moving from general to particular issues, Paul addresses first of all the subject of sexual behavior. His exhortation is shown to be grounded in the will of God (v. 3a), particularly applicable to the realm of moral conduct (vv. 3b-6a), and supported by three reasons (vv. 6b-8).¹⁷

Verses 3-6 are all one sentence in Greek (not verses 3-8, as Best¹⁸ states) and pose a difficulty in that some of the words can be given different meanings and all of the clauses, though closely knit, can be construed in different relationships to one another. Both the danger of immorality and the responsibility of the Christian before God receive emphasis. It is interesting to note that when Paul felt it necessary to deal with certain practical problems in Thessalonica, he began by showing the close relationship between faith and ethics in Christianity.

Admonition to brotherly love 4:9-12.

Paul’s first words “now about the subject of” (*peri de*) indicate a change in subject matter. The same words appear at the beginning of new sections in 1 Corinthians

7:25; 8:1; 12:1; and 16:1. In these sections Paul is answering questions raised by the Corinthians in a letter they had sent him in Ephesus. Perhaps Paul’s use of the phrase here and in 4:13; 5:1 indicates that he is similarly answering written questions. It is just as likely, however, that his information came from Timothy’s verbal report.

The word *peri* (“concerning”) forms part of the title of many Greek writings and has almost the function of a new paragraph heading here and in 4:13; 5:1. Paul announces his theme and then proceeds to treat it in detail. The section on impurity is followed by three sections, each of which deals with a particular subject: brotherly love (4:9-12), the dead in Christ (4:13-18), and watchfulness (5:1-11). The structure of these three sections in Greek presents striking parallels: (a) the use of *peri* has already been noted; (b) the transition word *de* (“but,” “now”) indicates that Paul is moving to another topic of importance; (c) the word “brothers” serves to mark the introduction of a new theme; (d) finally, the basis for the teaching in the section (either knowledge or lack of it) expresses Paul’s reason for bringing up the topic.

This paragraph marks a further indication of what is involved in a life that pleases God (vv. 1-2). It begins with a commendation of the readers’ love of the brethren (vv. 9-10a) and proceeds from this positive statement to an exhortation to abound yet more in love as evidenced by one’s faithful performance of the everyday duties of life. Evidently the “eschatological restlessness” of some led to the neglect of honest work (cf. 2 Thess 3:6-15).¹⁹ This situation needs to be remedied if the community is to remain in existence and to be a good testimony to

outsiders (vv. 10b-12).

The dead in Christ and the return of the Lord 4:13-18.

Paul's new topic here concerns "those who are sleeping," that is, the dead in Christ. As at the transitions between earlier sections, there are several formal features that indicate a new beginning (e.g., the connecting word *de*; the use of "brothers"; the expression "We do not want you to be ignorant," which introduces a new topic also in Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 10:1; 12:1; and the preposition *peri*). The opening *de* is most appropriately rendered "now," indicating transition rather than contrast.

Because of the abruptness of the transition from moral appeal (vv. 1-12) to teaching about the Lord's return (4:13-5:11), most scholars are hesitant to identify any close and logical connection between 4:13-18 and what has gone on before. Nevertheless, points of contact do exist: (a) Paul's reference to the return of Christ "with all his saints" in 3:13 might raise in the readers' minds the question: "Will all Christians have died by then?" The need for some instruction concerning the Christian dead would have been appropriate at this point in writing. (b) Behind Paul's insistence that Christians should earn their own living (4:9-12) and otherwise live a normal life is a situation in which excitement about the parousia was accompanied by a neglect of work and everyday duties (cf. 2 Thess 3:6-12). While Paul's teaching on these two subjects is more emphatic in 2 Thessalonians, the subjects are nevertheless placed side by side here in Paul's first letter to them. (c) Finally, the apostle's discussion of brotherly love in vv. 9-12 may have raised the question of the believer's Christian responsibility to those who had recently

lost a loved one.²⁰ Thus, while the links between this section and the one that follows (5:1-11) are close and obvious, important links do exist between this passage and the one before.

Under the "subtitle" ("concerning those who are asleep") Paul announces his theme (v. 13), summarizes his instructions (vv. 14-17), and concludes with a word of assurance (v. 18). Paul's main purpose in this section is not doctrinal, but rather to calm his readers' fears about those who are asleep in Jesus. Any further teaching he gives is but a means to this end.

Chapter 5

The relation of chapter 5 to previous sections is obvious. The close connection between 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 is marked formally by the repetition of "encourage one another" in 4:18 and 5:11. Thus we should understand these two paragraphs as comprising the distinctively eschatological block of material in the letter. The former offered needed instruction concerning the dead in Christ; the latter appeals for appropriate conduct on the part of those who remain. The undercurrent of the expectation of the coming of the Lord runs through the whole letter. But in chapter 5 Paul is eager to show that orientation towards the end has consequences for the Christian life. In view of the uncertainty as to the time of Christ's coming, it vital that the Thessalonians be morally and spiritually ready.

After a reminder of the suddenness of the parousia and of the Thessalonians's responsibilities in relation to it (5:1-11), Paul closes his letter with a series of brief instructions (5:12-22) and a conclusion (5:23-28).

The need for watchfulness 5:1-11.

The transition to 5:1 is marked in the same ways as in 4:9 and 4:13: the “sub-title” indicator *peri* is repeated, as is the word “brothers”; Paul refers to his readers’ level of knowledge (here they *do* know what he is about to repeat); and the connective particle *de* is again transitional, indicating that a new subject is being introduced. *De* may properly be rendered “now” if its function here is merely to indicate that Paul is moving to another topic. However, it may also suggest that a contrasting thought is being introduced, as is reflected in the “but” of the majority of modern versions. The contrast may be between the certainty of the *fact* of Christ’s coming as set forth in 4:13-18 and the uncertainty as to its time as set forth here. Ellingworth and Nida see the contrast as being between the readers’ ignorance and their knowledge of eschatological truth: “you needed further teaching about Christians who have died, but you know already that the end will come unexpectedly.”²¹ Concerning the time when the Lord will come, they already possessed knowledge. By contrast, the clear implication is that they needed the instruction given in the previous section (4:13).

Paul deals with two main topics in this passage: the time of the parousia (vv. 1-3) and watchfulness (vv. 4-11). In light of both the certainty and the unexpectedness of the Lord’s return, the Thessalonians must prepare themselves for his coming by bearing the armor of God, which strengthens their inner man and focuses their hope on the salvation to be revealed in Jesus Christ. Only those who are indifferent can afford to let themselves drift into a state of waking sleep.

The duties of church and private life 5:12-22.

A new beginning is intimated by yet another *de*, the repetition of “we beg” (*erōtōmen*) from 4:1, and the use of “brothers.” Here again, the connective *de* may either be resumptive (merely introducing a new section) or adversative (drawing some type of a contrast). Since it is difficult to determine what the contrast could be, it is perhaps best to translate *de* with “now” or “furthermore.”

It is difficult to know how far these exhortations relate specifically to the Thessalonian community. It is very possible, however, that Paul intends to continue the paraenesis begun in 4:1. To be sure, v. 12 is a fresh start, and the material in the paragraph does not lend itself easily to any detailed identification with what has preceded in the letter. Yet in view of the occasional nature of Paul’s writings it is tempting to see certain problems and situations that the Thessalonians were facing in the background. For example, a tension may well have been present between the leaders of the congregation and the rest of the members (5:12-13). There may have also been some disagreement about the usefulness of the more spectacular gifts of the Spirit, which were in danger of being squelched unnecessarily (5:19-22). Frame, in particular, sees a clear connection between those identified in 5:14 as “idle, fainthearted, and weak” and 4:1-5:11.²² Thus, while Paul may be giving traditional catechetical instruction (as he does, apparently, in Romans 12), it is wholly in the style of Paul to set down a list of injunctions with precise groups in mind, writing as he does with the situation of the churches in view. In this connection, it must be borne in mind that Timothy had just returned from Thessa-

lonica with a detailed report of the problems and needs in the church.

The internal structure of this section is not perfectly obvious, but it is still possible to see some type of development from beginning to end. The triadic structure of these exhortations suggests that Paul is treating five topics comprised of three main injunctions each: the church's responsibility to its spiritual leaders (vv. 12-13); the church's responsibility to its needy members (vv. 14a-c); the church's responsibility to all men (vv. 14d-15); the church's spiritual privileges (vv. 16-18); and the church's spiritual responsibilities (gifts) (vv. 19-22). There also appears to be an inner development from the first series of injunctions in vv. 12-15, where Paul's concern is with Christian behavior, to the last series in vv. 16-22, where the inner life of the Christian is in view.

Conclusion 5:23-28.

The particle *de* makes its final appearance in 5:23, where it appears to have an adversative force. Paul realizes that the exhortations of 4:1-5:22 need divine enablement to be carried out, so he utters a prayerful reminder of the only source of power available to the Christian (vv. 23-24). With this prayer Paul concludes his paraenesis, just as he earlier concluded the thanksgiving of the first part of letter with a similar petition (3:11-13). Prayers also appear in the closing sections of some of his other epistles (2 Thess 3:16; Gal 6:16; Rom 15:13; Phil 4:19).

Aware that he needs prayer as much as his readers do, Paul then asks that the recipients of the letter pray for him (v. 25). Reciprocal prayer is found regularly in his letters (Rom 15:30-33; 2 Cor 1:11; Phil 22; Gal 4:3; Eph 6:18-19; cf. also Heb 13:18) and is "a human touch showing how

heavily Paul leaned upon the sympathy of his converts."²³ Conscious of his need for the help of others, Paul again adds the affectionate address, "brothers" (the only instance in the letter where it is placed in the emphatic first position).

In vv. 26-27 Paul bids the Thessalonians to greet all the brethren and to see to it that the letter is read to all, presumably a tactful admonition to the idlers who apparently felt themselves above the injunctions of Paul (cf. 2 Thess 3:14). This particular phrase is unique among the NT letters, and the rare verb "adjure" (*enorkizō*) occurs only here in the NT.

The concluding benediction, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 28), inaugurates the typical Pauline practice. As in the initial greeting (1:1) Paul has replaced the typically secular "farewell" (*errōsthe*; cf. Acts 15:29) with a distinctly Christian reference to "grace." Some manuscripts add here an "amen," which could very well be the original reading (the external evidence is strong) despite the opinion of most scholars that it is a liturgical addition stemming from a later period.

Unlike 2 Thessalonians, this conclusion lacks an autographic salutation in which Paul asserts that the letter is an authentic document from him directly. This method of authenticating his letters apparently developed after Paul learned of attempts to claim his authority on the basis of documents that he had not written (cf. 2 Thess 2:2). From then on, the church had to be trained to distinguish between the spurious and the authentic.

Frame sees a triadic arrangement in vv. 25-27, where Paul makes three final requests: prayer for himself and his associates, a greeting of all the brethren, and the reading of the letter to all.²⁴ This arrangement may well be in keeping with

the triple exhortations in vv. 12-22 and with the triadic arrangement of words and phrases in other parts of the letter (cf. 1:3; 2:10, 19; 5:8, 23).

Different manuscripts add a variety of subscriptions, of which the KJV translates one: "The first epistle unto the Thessalonians was written from Athens." Other manuscripts have "from Corinth," a reading that more accurately reflects the historical background of the letter. None of these subscriptions, however, is part of the original text of 1 Thessalonians.

Analysis of 2 Thessalonians

It must suffice here to present but a brief overview of 2 Thessalonians. The following outline is adapted from Holmes's excellent commentary:²⁵

- I. Opening Greeting 1:1-2
- II. Thanksgiving and Encouragement in the Face of Persecution 1:3-12
- III. The Day of the Lord and the Man of Lawlessness 2:1-12
- IV. Thanksgiving and Prayers 2:13-3:5
- V. The Problem of the Disorderly 3:6-15
- VI. Final Greeting 3:16-18

It is clear that in 2 Thessalonians Paul is dealing with three main topics: persecution, a misunderstanding about the Second Coming of Christ, and continued disruptive behavior on the part of certain believers. The letter also continues the encouragement so evident in 1 Thessalonians. In short, 2 Thessalonians emphasizes that our future rests on the utter faithfulness of God as we await with hope the revelation of his Son from heaven.

Conclusion

In this essay we have tried to show how a NT writing "works" by means of a net-

work of internal cohesion that operates on different levels of linguistic organization. A study of literary structure is a vital aspect of biblical teaching and preaching in that it gives us a picture of the whole before attempting to understand the various parts.

ENDNOTES

¹For a similar outline, arrived at independently, see M. W. Holmes, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). Holmes's work on the Thessalonian epistles is an outstanding model of commentary writing and should be required reading for any pastor wishing to preach from these letters.

²On the structure of the Pauline letters, see the excellent discussion in T. R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), esp. ch. 1, "Understanding the Nature of Letters," 23-50.

³D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 42-44.

⁴*Ibid.*, 44.

⁵Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (BNTC; London: Black, 1977) 65.

⁶This view was first suggested by G. Friedrich, "Ein Tauflied hellenistischer Judenchristen, I Thess. 1.9f," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 21 (1965) 502-16.

⁷Lyle Bristol, *Paul and Thessalonians* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1965) 42.

⁸Cf. Hiebert, 131.

⁹Paul Ellingworth and Eugene Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975) 58.

¹⁰George Findlay, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1931) 86.

¹¹Ellingworth and Nida, 73.

¹²B. Saint Paul Rigaux, *Les Épitres Aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1956) 493.

¹³Hiebert, 160.

¹⁴William Stevens, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890) 44.

¹⁵Ellingworth and Nida, 73.

¹⁶Best, 157.

¹⁷Hiebert, 165; Best, 158-59.

¹⁸Best, 159.

¹⁹Hiebert, 181.

²⁰Ellingworth and Nida, 92-93.

²¹*Ibid.*, 104.

²²James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; Edinburgh, Clark, 1912) 11-12. Elsewhere I have argued that the idle, fainthearted, and weak of 5:14 are addressed more specifically by Paul in 4:9-12, 4:13-18, and 5:1-11 respectively. See D. A. Black, "The Weak in Thessalonica: A Study in Pauline Lexicography," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982) 307-22.

²³Frame, 215.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 215.

²⁵Holmes, 30.

III. The Model Church's

Responsibilities 4:1-5:22

A. To Walk in Holiness 4:1-2

B. To Walk in Sexual Purity
4:3-8

C. To Walk in Love 4:9-12

D. To Walk in Hope 4:13-18

E. To Walk in the Light 5:1-11

F. To Walk in Fellowship
5:12-22

IV. Conclusion 5:23-28

Appendix: Suggested Preaching Outline of 1 Thessalonians: "How to Be a Model Church"

I. Introduction 1:1

II. The Model Church's Privileges

1:1-3:13

A. To Be Faithful People 1:2-10

B. To Be Faithful Ministers

2:1-10

C. To Be Faithful Witnesses

2:11-3:13