

PAUL'S CRUCIFORM MISSION IN THESSALONICA: THE SHAPE OF
INCARNATIONAL MINISTRY

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to perceive ways in which the apostle Paul embodied cruciformity in his mission at Thessalonica as recorded in 1 Thess. 2:1-12. In this passage, the critical task for Paul, is to clarify “the missionary task, its motivation, and method”.¹ It is argued here that Paul puts into practice Jesus words in John 20: 21, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." In John's narrative, the first part of the statement makes the second part possible. There is no doubt that Jesus “‘sending’ (*pempō*, present tense) of his followers was to be patterned on the fact that the Father ‘sent’ (*apestalēn*, perfect tense) him”.² The perfect tense instructs us that Jesus continues to be on the mission, as such, his disciples do not start a mission but continue a mission, which Jesus started.³ Obviously Jesus’ mission is none other than the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). The paper will then draw implications for the 21st Century church.

The Character of the Ministry

Paul begins by saying that he and his co-workers’ had suffered *propaschō* and shamefully mistreated at Philippi. The meaning of *propaschō* is to experience something in a negative sense. It denotes suffering persecution in an active sense, thereby bringing the nuance of fight or struggle.⁴ R.C.H Lenski favors “inner struggle,” as such, he renders *agōn* "with much

¹ Earl Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 89.

² Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, vol. 25B, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 306.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 649.

⁴ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 91.

agonizing".⁵ Paul Hiebert favors external opposition to the preaching of the gospel as the right meaning of *agōn* as opposed to inner struggle.⁶ There are some who see both meanings as intended, suggesting that external opposition can indeed cause inner conflict. We are in agreement with John Bailey who says *agōn* signifies "outer opposition as the basis of any inner conflict that might have arisen".⁷

Regardless of the opposition, Paul was committed to the crucified One and for that reason the opposition did not deter his mission.⁸ His missionary work was based on his encounter with Christ, crucified and risen, whom he met on the Damascus road.⁹ Paul understood that to proclaim Jesus "who suffered, died and rose from the dead involves suffering on the part of the Jesus' witnesses."¹⁰ As such, Paul and co-workers' "were emboldened (*eparrēsiasametha*)" in God to speak the gospel of God. His *parrēsia* was not that of either a free citizen's right to free speech, or a philosopher's frankness to his friends, but that of one that had its origin in God.¹¹ The content of Paul's free speech was *to euangelion tou theou* where "*tou theou* is not the object, but a genitive of origin, the gospel that comes from God."¹² In 1 Thess. 1:6 Paul states that the Thessalonians became "imitators of us and of the Lord" even in the midst of persecution. The

⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), 244.

⁶ Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 78-82.

⁷ John W Bailey, "The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Abingdon Press, 2000), 267.

⁸ Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 58.

⁹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Paul The Missionary," in *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours*, ed. John Mark Terry and Robert L Plummer (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 29.

¹⁰ Schnabel, "Paul The Missionary," 31.

¹¹ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 135-36.

¹² Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 137.

“Lord” in this case refers to Christ who fits the description of earthly suffering.¹³ Paul follows his Lord “Christ Jesus,” and in turn, the Thessalonians follow Paul. No doubt that Christ’s pattern is normative for Paul and his communities.

Paul makes use of the root *dokimazō*, which means to test or to examine. The word was often used to refer to one who was fit for public office. Missionary candidates in the church of the Nazarene are examined much as political candidates used to be inspected.¹⁴ However, Paul has not examined himself as the philosophers did, God provides the examination. Like the OT prophets who were called by God (Jer. 1:5; Isa 49:1), in the same manner, Paul has been commissioned by God.¹⁵ As such, Paul speaks about his way of life as a missionary in Old Testament terminology. However, Paul draws from the Hellenistic world when he talks about his missionary activity, e.g., flattery.¹⁶ The Godly commission and the prophetic performance correspond with each other. In other words, the "obligation motivated and directed their work".¹⁷

Paul’s mission was about the proclamation of the gospel of God which is nothing other than “the gospel of Christ” (1 Thess. 3:2), meaning “the gospel that is all about Christ, and what he has done.”¹⁸ The God of Israel, mentioned nine times, in this passage is the same with Christ whom he has sent. Gordon Fee has demonstrated how Paul appropriates the language of the Septuagint generally in the entire Pauline corpus and in particular 1 Thessalonians. The word

¹³ Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 42.

¹⁴ Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 79.

¹⁵ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 141.

¹⁶ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), 99.

¹⁷ Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 86.

¹⁸ Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 58.

kyrios, which refers to YHWH, is now applied to Christ.¹⁹ Paul and his companions represent this God as apostles of Christ.

In summary Paul, like the Jesus he represents, faced opposition in his proclamation of the gospel. This opposition did not deter him from doing what he was appointed to do. He has not chosen himself for this task, but has been “approved by God” who also “tests...hearts”. This approval’s purpose was for the proclamation of the gospel, which is about, God’s son Jesus Christ. Let us now look at the nature of Paul’s mission.

The Nature (Methods) of the Mission

In verse 3 Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the nature of his ministry. He does this by presenting the negative (what he did not do) and then the positive (what he did). The word *kolakeia*, often translated flattery or trickery, means "the subordination of one's self to another for one's own advantage"²⁰ Usually the reason for such manipulation was monetary gain and its equivalence. We learn this strategy from Aristotle,²¹ who said “The person who seeks to gratify people...for the sake of getting something for himself is a flatterer”.²²

As God’s emissaries, the missionaries avoided ill motives (*akatharsias*). The sense of *akatharsias* here is moral rather than ceremonial impurity.²³ Paul’s commitment to the gospel

¹⁹ Gordon D Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2013), 45.

²⁰ James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 97.

²¹ Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 4.6.9; Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 69; Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 62.

²² Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 4.6.9 cited in Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 79.

²³ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 118.

would not allow him to please people by making it appealing.²⁴ This commitment, however, does not mean that Paul would not contextualize the gospel; he was still able to “become all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22) without compromising his message. According to Schnabel “the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ determines the scope and the limits of missionary accommodation”.²⁵ On the positive side, the missionaries spoke with openness and truthfulness. Not only did they avoid impure motive, but they also avoided “deception” (*dolos*). For the missionaries, the end does not justify the means, not every method (flattering speech) could be used to get converts, something which charlatans were willing to do.²⁶ As such “their theological perspectives, their strategic priorities, their motivations and their methods” were “based on the reality of Jesus death and resurrection.”²⁷

Similarly, Paul and his colleagues did not please (*doxa*) men. According the Greek philosopher Dio Chrysostom, a true philosopher did not speak for the sake of *doxa*. Chrysostom did not have kind words for a sophist by the name Prometheus of whom he says was “being destroyed by popular opinion (*doxa*); for his liver swelled and grew whenever he was praised and shriveled again when he was censured”.²⁸ That Paul did not “seek glory” is all the more important considering how people of his day were obsessed with honour, as seen by the monuments they left behind reciting their services to the gods and their cities.²⁹ In this sense, Paul contrasts himself from philosophers and sophists whose goal was honor from their

²⁴ Terence Peter Paige, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 2017, 77.

²⁵ Schnabel, “Paul The Missionary,” 35.

²⁶ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 94.

²⁷ Schnabel, “Paul The Missionary,” 35.

²⁸ Dio Chrysostom 32.11; 12:5 cited in Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 124.

²⁹ Paige, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 78.

audiences.³⁰ He was aware that “missionary work was not about personal honor and status, but about getting work done at the behest of God”.³¹

In summary, Paul’s methods were above board; he did not speak with deception, tricks, nor flatter his audience. Even though Paul could contextualize the gospel, such contextualization had limits. The gospel of Christ itself was the limit. The gospel was presented with openness and truthfulness. The methods had to be consistent with the gospel preached. This leads us to the issue of the conduct of the messengers of the gospel.

The Conduct of the Messengers

Not only were their methods above board, but the personal conduct of the missionaries was also in line with the gospel they preached. Paul knew that they had authority as apostles of Christ to demand support, even with that knowledge they did not make use of their privilege. The word translated in the NRSV “demand” is *en barei* which can also mean to be a “burden”. It “speaks of the weight of authority of a city or a person due to their character or importance”.³² “Demand” is the best translation here since Paul’s focus is on the privileges he did not utilize. Of course, the demands, they could have made, could have resulted in burdening the Thessalonians. Instead, the missionaries appeared as trusting “infants” under the community’s care.³³

³⁰ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 97.

³¹ Schnabel, “Paul The Missionary,” 34.

³² Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 125; Plutarch, *Pericles*, 37.

³³ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 144-46. We recognize the significance of the textual problem; gentle *ēpioi* and babes *nēpioi*, however, it is our contention that the more difficult (babes *nēpioi*) reading is to be favoured since it is supported by majority witnesses and it fits the context of our passage.

Paul claims that he and his team were “apostles of Christ”. The Jewish institution of the *shaliach*, one who acted or spoke for another whose authority he or she carried. The Mishnah states, “the one sent by a man is as the man himself” *Mishnah Berakhot* (5:5). The apostles then were carrying a mission on behalf of someone else and they, did it with his authority. It is clear that the one they carried the authority of Christ himself.³⁴ However, they were not willing to claim all that they could in his name. They decided to forego the privileges that could have been theirs as apostles of Christ. Even in so doing the apostolic team acts Christ-like (Ph. 2:5-11).

Unlike Earl Richard, who does not see a Christological motif in this passage, it only makes sense from a Christological perspective.³⁵ Paul’s understanding accepts no difference between the work of the Father and that of Christ.³⁶ What Paul chose to do, that is not relying on his position as divine envoys, was consistent with Christ’s behavior. Nothing can be more Christological than the behavior of these missionaries. For Michael Gorman “The action of Christ is the norm or standard for Paul’s actions;... he is a *mimētēs*—an imitator—of Christ.”³⁷ In other words, Paul’s ministry was configured “by the narrative pattern of Christ’s cruciform love”.³⁸

Paul, just like Christ, renounced his rights and did not use them for his own selfish desires, even though, he had the right to do so, he chose to forego his privileges choosing love to

³⁴ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 126.

³⁵ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 103.

³⁶ Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 53–54.

³⁷ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative*, 185.

³⁸ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative*, 185.

be the expression of his gospel.³⁹ F.F. Bruce is right when he says "No other attitude would benefit the preachers of a gospel which proclaimed as Lord and Savior one who "emptied himself" (Phil 2:7) for the enrichment of others".⁴⁰ The similarity of *en mesō humōn* (among you) with *en mesō humōn* (Lk. 22:27) is undeniable.⁴¹ Jesus's ministry characterized by service to others and is here embodied by the missionaries.⁴² For Paul, functioning as a slave of Christ and for others became his *modus operandi*.⁴³

Paul has converted a "Christological formula about Christ's self-giving death to the pastoral situation of interpreting his ministry to the Thessalonians".⁴⁴ In other words, the posture of Christ's dying is the posture of Paul's ministry. Paul offers himself to others in the same manner in which Christ gave his life for others. In the words of Best, "Paul not only gives what he has, the gospel, but what he is, himself".⁴⁵ The result was that Paul and his fellow missionaries shared life with their converts, as such, "their ministry had the shape of cruciform love in imitation of their Lord".⁴⁶

Paul finds no better way to share life together than to actually work together with the Thessalonians. Paul's manual work is "an act of self-giving" which demonstrates how Paul shared his life with the Thessalonians.⁴⁷ The present tense signals that work was done

³⁹ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative*, 91-93.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 33.

⁴¹ George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians. The Greek Text, with Introduction and Notes*; (London: Macmillan and Co., 1908), 21.

⁴² Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 33.

⁴³ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul Narrative*, 187-88.

⁴⁴ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul Narrative*, 194; Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 28-33.

⁴⁵ Best, *A Commentary on the First*, 102.

⁴⁶ Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul Narrative*, 194-95; Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 160.

⁴⁷ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 160.

continually. However, day and night do not mean they worked constantly. The phrase demonstrates how demanding and tedious the labour of the artisan was for Paul and his co-workers.⁴⁸ Paul connects the fact of his working with the preaching of the gospel. The reason is that “that we might not burden any of you” (1 These. 2:9). Scholarship has noted the importance of Paul’s work to his apostolic calling.⁴⁹ Not only did the workshop provide them with their sustenance, but it also provided them with the forum for preaching the gospel.⁵⁰ According to Ronald Hock the apostle Paul, like Socrates in Simon the shoemaker’s workshop, was “busy at tent making and busy at preaching the gospel”⁵¹ Paul did not compartmentalize his life, he understood the fact that he was an apostle of Christ any time of the day.

Paul would support the right for the worker to receive his wages (1 Cor 9:3-7) and he did receive support from Philippi during his mission at Thessalonica (Phil 4:15-16). However, Paul did not want such support to stand in the way of the gospel. Paul did not want the church to appear like one of the Greco-Roman associations where membership fees were required for one to continue enjoying membership privileges.⁵² As a result, he decided not to receive support from where he was currently doing mission work.⁵³ Consequently, Paul’s character was “pure, holy and blameless”. His conduct was above reproach in both God and human eyes.

⁴⁸ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 102.

⁴⁹ Ronald F Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 62.

⁵⁰ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 103; Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul Narrative*, 183; Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 104.

⁵¹ Ronald F Hock, *The Working Apostle: An Examination of Paul’s Means of Livelihood* (New Haven, Conn.: Fortress Pr, 1979), 450.

⁵² Paige, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 82.

⁵³ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 104; Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 103.

In summary, Paul and his co-workers came to the Thessalonians as “infants”. This metaphor encapsulates the fact that they did not “throw their weight around”. Even though they were apostles of Christ, they did not demand the privileges meant for them. Like Christ who did not come to be served but to serve, Paul and his team instead served the Thessalonians rather than demand service from them. As such, they shared their lives with the Thessalonians as demonstrated by working to support themselves. Let us now look at why Paul and team did what they did.

The Goal of the Ministry

Paul turns to the last metaphor in this passage, that of a “father”. His mission in Thessalonica necessitated him acting like a father to his new converts. In the ancient world (Greek and Romans) it was the father’s duty to provide moral instruction to his children.⁵⁴ Socializing involved introducing them to the socio-economic and cultural aspects of life in the society they lived.⁵⁵ The phrase “each one of you” supports the conclusion that they did not preach *en masse*.⁵⁶ Thus Paul’s missionary work was not only founding but shaping and community nurturing.⁵⁷ Conversion to a new religion entails re-socialisation to the beliefs and values of the new religion. This is the only way in which the convert can effectively function within the new religious system.⁵⁸ Instruction on the moral life was not an afterthought but the principal concern of the missionary team.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 81.

⁵⁵ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 106.

⁵⁶ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 106.

⁵⁷ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*.

⁵⁸ John Wilson, *Religion*. (London: Heinmann Educational Books, 1972), 118–20.

⁵⁹ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 136.

In Thessalonians Paul reveals the goals for which he labored as a father. It was with the result that they would “walk in a manner worthy of God” (1 Thess. 2:12). The phrase “worthy of God” has Hellenistic religion origins and the phrase has to do with behavior expected the devotees of a god. This behavior was often prescribed in line with the character of the particular god.⁶⁰ Paul functions as a surrogate father, one who trains his children in the ways of their true father who calls them into his kingdom of glory.⁶¹ The goal of salvation for Paul is the restoration in the image of God and the incarnated Christ is the embodiment of this reality.⁶²

In summary, Paul likens himself to a father in accordance with his role as a moral instructor. His duty is that of teaching his converts the expectations of the God they now follow. He teaches his converts so that they might “walk in a manner worthy of God”. To walk this way is to walk as Christ walked, the way, which Paul exemplified among the Thessalonians.

Implications for Cruciform Missions Today

To be “sent” in the manner in which Christ was sent is to be cruciform. Those who accept the call of Christ to go must also become like Christ. Paul’s mission at Thessalonica was an embodiment of cruciform mission. Such a mission is not deterred by any form of opposition. It is a mission in which God not only approves but continues to test his messengers. The methods, which are used in this ministry, must be consistent with the gospel preached. As a result, deceit, tricks, flattery cannot be used, only openness and truthfulness will work.

In our day the gospel is often made palatable to the audience. In some cases, the message preached makes no demands on those who are join. They come as they are and remain as they

⁶⁰ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 108.

⁶¹ Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 84.

⁶² Fee, *The First and Second Letters*, 84.

are. Such methods are not consistent with the gospel of Christ crucified. Those who preach Christ must not “throw their weight around” but must behave as innocent infants who have no demands to make. Also they must also act as servants rather than masters, like Christ they must be “among you as one who serves”. In contemporary society where we have preachers and evangelists who do not ride on commercial airlines but use their own private jets, such a scenario reveals a situation in which the needs of the messengers are more important than the gospel they proclaim. Likewise, we have instances in which the messengers live luxurious lives, way above the average congregant. Paul and Christ’s example of sharing life with his converts and working with them is a necessary antidote.

Evangelistic ministry should not be separated from discipleship ministry. In Africa, it has often been said that “Christianity is a mile wide and an inch deep”, it should be as wide as it is deep. The social evils we have cannot only be caused by those who are not Christian. We must learn from Paul who founded, nurtured and shaped his communities of faith. It is not enough to get people converted; we must develop a plan to teach them the demands of the faith they have accepted. The goal of such instruction should always be that people would “walk lives worth of God”. The reign of God should then be our focus in our discipleship ministry.

In conclusion, in the mission in which Jesus calls us, the manner in which we go is as important as going. The sent one cannot be other than the one who sent him or her. Christian mission is defined by Christ crucified; those who join it can only assume the posture of cruciformity. The character, method, goal, and conduct of the missionaries ought to embody cruciformity just as Paul’s mission did. Those in search of upward mobility have no share in this ministry.

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