

# 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

MOLLY T. MARSHALL

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## *Publisher's Note*

William C. Placher worked with Amy Plantinga Pauw as a general editor for this series until his untimely death in November 2008. Bill brought great energy and vision to the series and was instrumental in defining and articulating its distinctive approach and in securing theologians to write for it. Bill's own commentary for the series was the last thing he wrote, and Westminster John Knox Press dedicates the entire series to his memory with affection and gratitude.

William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in Humanities at Wabash College, spent thirty-four years as one of Wabash College's most popular teachers. A summa cum laude graduate of Wabash in 1970, he earned his master's degree in philosophy in 1974 and his PhD in 1975, both from Yale University. In 2002 the American Academy of Religion honored him with the Excellence in Teaching Award. Placher was also the author of thirteen books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *The Triune God*, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, *Jesus the Savior*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, and *Unapologetic Theology*. He also edited the volume *Essentials of Christian Theology*, which was named as one of 2004's most outstanding books by both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* magazines.

## *Series Introduction*

*Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth's concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are "no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary." Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church's great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the

church, but also to encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative and the results were rich. Much of the series' shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series' authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors' chief dialogue will be with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both "high" and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of *why* the church needs this book and why we need it *now*, in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents



more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than any other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher  
Amy Plantinga Pauw

## *Preface*

While writing is a solitary process, it involves many conversation partners to prompt deeper reflection. Other commentary writers have served as helpful interlocutors, as their prior studies offer insight and fruitful scholarly pathways. While I trust that my own voice will sound through, I have consulted with New Testament specialists to enrich my theological insight. I have depended primarily on the thoughtful works of Linda McKinnish Bridges, F. F. Bruce, Gordon Fee, Cain Hope Felder, Andy Johnson, Abraham Malherbe, I. Howard Marshall, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, and Ben Witherington III. While some of these are more given to exegesis, sociocultural issues, and rhetorical criticism than my theologically focused contribution, each has informed my treatment of the Thessalonian correspondence. I am grateful for their attention to these early Christian epistles; their scholarship has inspired my own addition to the conversation.

Inspiration has also come from other writers in the *Belief* series. It is good to see a major project that is once again trusting theologians with the Bible, and the editors have gathered quite the array of authors. The volumes written by distinguished and diverse scholars who work in doctrinal, historical, biblical, systematic, constructive, practical, liturgical, and moral theology—to name a few of the specializations that fall under the aegis of theology—serve both academy and church through their theological commentary. Each volume in some way moves beyond the strict boundary of the assigned text and engages larger questions of value at the intersection of biblical and theological studies. It is because of gender, ethnic,

and denominational diversity that this creative undertaking can offer new perceptions of historic creeds, earlier classics, catechetical processes, and the worship life of the church. The background or experience of these writers gives voice to minority perspectives and makes for a larger conversation, a sorely needed corrective.

One cannot do theological work without extended engagement with Holy Scripture; it is a privilege, indeed a responsibility, for a theologian of the church to offer theological commentary on Scripture. Cultivating a disposition that allows both a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and a “hermeneutics of consent” creates the proper tension for a contemporary interpreter to work with an ancient text. Such a process both vexes and promotes the task of coherent interpretation. The “surplus of meaning” (*sensus plenior*) the Bible extends to its reader awakens imagination for relevant application in a far different context than the original recipients. The Christian canon continues to guide faith and practice, for which we remain grateful. Even when its worldview seems off-putting, as it does in the Thessalonian correspondence, the church remains committed to listening to its perspective on the ways of God.

As I sat at my desk each morning to begin the writing for the day, I asked the Holy Spirit for the inspiration to understand what prompted the writing of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in the first place, believing that the Spirit who inspired these texts might inspire this author to study them well. I have been inspired anew by the early apostolic witness amid the welter of first-century challenges. Adversaries to the proclamation of the risen Christ seemed only to assure those of the Pauline tradition that they were actually on the right track as they engaged their context with wisdom. Their relentless travel, proclamation, church planting, and tending of fledgling communities provide a template for how the gospel can take root in a culture. I have not treated Paul or his colleagues as solitary figures; they were as dependent on communities of faith as we are today to sustain faithful commitment.

The Bible does not narrate the lives of perfect persons; rather, it reveals the grace of God who in humility deigns to work through such flawed human instruments. As one reads the Word of God that comes to us through Scripture, we realize the gap between what we

profess and what we live. The call to live more faithfully resounds through the early Christian witness inscribed in texts and speaks in our time. Writing a theological commentary is an exercise in spiritual formation, which always calls to repentance and renewal. As we admire and give thanks for our forebears in faith, we are reminded that future generations depend on our own pursuit of fidelity as stewards of the mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1).

I am grateful to Central Baptist Theological Seminary for this sabbatical season in which to write after completing my service as president and professor of theology and spiritual formation in the spring of 2020. The Shumaker Library has provided useful resources to assist in this work, for which I am indebted. Both the librarian, Vance Thomas, and circulation assistant, Linda Kiesling, have been supportive, especially by letting me check out books for very long periods of time and renewing them over and over. Hopefully no one else in the seminary community was working on the Thessalonian epistles during this time of my research and writing.

Patient colleagues have listened to my shifting opinions about these letters, and their questions have sharpened my writing. I am particularly grateful for early conversations with Linda McKinnish Bridges and Phil Love, good feedback from editors Amy Plantinga Pauw and Don McKim, thoughtful early reading by Mark Medley and especially Clarissa Strickland (who has also provided significant editorial and formatting assistance), and the ongoing conversation with my inner circle whose names are known to God and to each other. One of them, a retired professor, has suggested that she will organize a *viva*, an oral exam customarily conducted at the end of doctoral studies, that will call me to account for my theological conclusions. Knowing her, it will be thorough. These friends have sustained me in this time of monastic solitude to bring this commentary to completion. They have valued this labor of love on my part and continue to show interest (without too much eye-rolling) in what I have been discovering about the Thessalonian Epistles. I also want to thank the WiTS (Women in Theological Schools), a colloquy of colleagues and friends, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Carol Lytch, Dena Pence, Lallene Rector, and Melissa Wiginton, who have walked with me as I pursued this writing but more importantly who

have infused my life with encouragement and love for over a decade. This living cloud of witnesses has accompanied this project from beginning to end, and I could not have accomplished it alone.

This commentary is dedicated to generations of colleagues and students with whom I have shared a theological journey in faith, hope, and love. My own teachers have left their graceful imprint on my life; my pastors over the years have affirmed my vocation as a teacher for the church; international colleagues have interrogated my North American myopia; and my students, often my best teachers, have questioned how I have dealt with Christian traditions, challenging me with their global and liberatory insights. It has been a joyful task to journey with them toward their vocational horizons over these forty years in theological education.

I am grateful to be a part of the Belief series. Some of the theological minds I most admire have already written their volumes. It is good to be in their company.

# *Introduction*

## *Why Thessalonians? Why Now?*

Does the world really need another commentary on Thessalonians? What do these ancient texts have to offer now? Those questions have been an ongoing consideration as I undertake this task. Commentaries are written in specific seasons, and even if the author is not explicit about her context and epoch, somehow the reader understands for whom it is written and the season it engages. Ours is a season of liminality, and I will examine these early Christian documents in light of today's groaning challenges.

The brief letters to the Thessalonians are fraught with tension. Why should we work hard if Jesus is coming back any day now and the world is about to end? Tension surrounds the delay of the Parousia and the question of how to live in the meantime. Is it really worth alienating my family and community of origin, not to mention regnant powers of the empire, to be a part of the Jesus movement? Tension about belonging abounds. Can we really trust the apostolic witness when so much chaos accompanies their proclamation? Tension arises as Paul and Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy do their evangelistic work in Thessalonica.

The apostle Paul had a daunting task: to integrate his learning and practice as an observant Jew with the life-altering encounter with the risen Christ. Already zealous for the traditions of the law, his new commission required reorientation of his theological vision, extensive travel, hermeneutical agility, cross-cultural communication, and the sheer stamina of making a living as a tentmaker while giving himself to preaching and teaching the gospel in widely scattered cities in the first-century Mediterranean world. And on the move he was!

In light of the resurrection of Christ, Paul set about to form communities that would live according to the patterns revealed in the way of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit. God had reset the hopes of all people through overcoming death through Jesus' self-giving life. Paul's great mission was to invite both Jews and Gentiles to adopt a new self-understanding characterized by faith, love, and hope. This order of key Pauline virtues is unique in this earliest extant correspondence, as the apostles knew the need to accent hope. That they might become a unified expression of Christ's body was a consuming claim on Paul's life, as the chief New Testament architect of both the Jesus movement and the ongoing relevance of his Jewish kin. We cannot imagine the sustaining of Christianity through the centuries without this visionary theologian and missionary.

Luke's writing gives a sense of the geographical scope of Paul's ministry, and the Epistles give specificity to the particular theological issues he was engaging in varied communities. While Paul is the key figure in Acts from chapter 9 on, he was not the solitary figure who pursued his mission alone. The apostolic witness is much wider than what is chronicled in the Epistles and Acts, as churches were strategically planted in key cities in scattered Roman provinces, from which the knowledge of Christ might emanate. Without companions the evangelization of the Roman Empire would have foundered.<sup>1</sup> Ministry is not about heroic individuals but about forming thick bonds of love and friendship that can sustain gospel work. Like these early Christian communities, it is the only way congregations can make their way forward today as they become the gospel together.<sup>2</sup> In a time when faithful Christian witness is ever harder to demonstrate, we need friends to walk the pathway with us. We cannot be countercultural without a sustaining community.

1. See E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire: Identity and Adaptability* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981). Hinson stresses how Paul recognized the "operation of the Spirit through many persons . . ." (35).

2. See Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 75.

## *The Mission to the Thessalonians*

Acts 17 provides the main source for a chronology of the apostolic mission to the Thessalonians; the information in the Epistles themselves is rather spare and retrospective. Caution is in order when making Acts the primary interpretive lens for the Epistles.<sup>3</sup> Traveling a major trade route from Philippi in the west, which took them through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica (approximately one hundred miles), Paul and Silas began a ministry by preaching at the local synagogue in a significant “free city” (self-governed) of the Roman Empire.

Actually, the language denotes that he “argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead” (17:2–3). Although Acts recounts that they were there for three Sabbaths, that is most likely not the extent of their time in Thessalonica, as the strength of the community formed there suggests a longer sojourn. When we get into the commentary proper, we will see the depth of friendship that was even construed as familial ties forged by Paul, Silas, and Timothy.<sup>4</sup>

It was customary for these messengers to begin with Sabbath participation if possible; but their preaching was not confined to an established synagogue. Acts narrates many other places of Pauline witness: varied Gentile settings (14:27; 15:12); a place of prayer by the river (Acts 16:13); the marketplace (*agora*) (17:17); the Areopagus, center of Athenian worship (17:22); the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council (23:1); Roman appellate court (21:33); aboard ship (27:23); to name only a few.

Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica after a brutal time in Philippi, the first Christian incursion into Europe. You recall Paul’s vision of the Macedonian imploring him and his companions, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). What began as a generative mission with Lydia (Acts 16:13–15)—perhaps the figure in

3. So argues Earl Richard, “Early Pauline Thought: An Analysis of 1 Thessalonians,” in *Pauline Theology, Volume I: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 40.

4. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch refer to this language as “fictive kin Jesus groups” in *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 9.



Paul's vision of Macedonia was after all a woman—and her band of devout God-fearers became a public outcry against the apostles' witness when they exorcized the slave girl with a spirit of divinization (16:16–18). Because she was a source of money to those who controlled her, the authorities, following the bidding of her owners, subjected Paul and Silas to public humiliation by stripping them of their clothing, beating them, and then casting them into prison.<sup>5</sup>

Praying and singing hymns at midnight, an earthquake, doors and shackles thrown open, the conversion of the jailer and his household were events surrounding the story of the apostolic prison break that are well-known. The prisoners did not flee, however. Paul and Silas invoked their Roman citizenship, demanding that their release be a public apology by the officials, who then escorted them from jail personally. Departing jail, they headed to the new community of believers housed in Lydia's home. Lydia was brave enough to harbor the so-called felons after the magistrates, who were now firmly convinced that messing with these messengers was unwise, had released them.<sup>6</sup> They were only too glad to see them on their way out of Philippi!

Paul and Silas then made the journey to Thessalonica. This visit also created quite a stir, no doubt because of the startling message about Jesus as the Messiah. Some believed, among them devout Greeks “and not a few of the leading women” (17:4b). This may reflect Luke's own class bias about who really belonged in the new faith community. It also reminds us of the significant role women played in early Christianity, a fact too often ignored in commentaries and histories. Only recently has this oversight begun to be remediated, primarily through the work of women scholars. Luke recounts the response of jealous Jews who kindled mob violence, which triggered a “city in an uproar” (17:5b). This would not be the only time Paul's life was in danger because of his determination to make the gospel known throughout the empire.

5. See Willie James Jennings's insightful reflection on the prison sequence in his volume in this series, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 164.

6. The pattern of house churches headed by women is prominent in Philippi. Not only does Lydia have a founding role in her city, we read later of Euodia and Syntyche, also leaders of house churches among the Philippian Christians (Phil. 4:2).

Jason, a leader in the Jesus movement in his city, had been hosting the apostolic vanguard; so he and other believers were dragged before the “politarchs,” a Macedonian title for city authorities.<sup>7</sup> His Christian hospitality was repaid with allegations of fomenting dissension against the monarchal claim of the emperor to be the only king. Like a faithful disciple, he took his share of suffering. The proclamation of Paul and his companions stressed that Jesus was the true ruler, God’s approved sovereign authority. The contest between the risen Christ and Caesar will unfold throughout the early centuries of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> It will be the source of much suffering and persecution, and Christ’s challenge to the empire was virulent. The visitation to Thessalonica ended with these words: “The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go. That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea . . .” (Acts 17:8–10 NRSV). Clearly, the townspeople and the apostolic team understood afresh how destabilizing their message of a new reign could be.

After this visit of perhaps a few months to Thessalonica, Paul became anxious about how the gathering of Jesus followers was faring, and consequently he sent Timothy, most likely from Athens, to visit and bring a report about how the fledgling Christian community was managing in its hostile context. It was after the positive word from his ministry colleague that Paul wrote the novice believers there to encourage their perseverance. Remembering his own difficulties in the city, he wanted to reassure those who were remaining steadfast in their faith, albeit with many adversaries. The loving regard he showered on the Thessalonians is unparalleled in his other correspondence. As the initial recorded congregation, first fruit of the apostolic mission, they held a position of high regard, especially as a test case for Paul’s strategy of cultivating differentiated Christian communities.

7. At this time in the first century, Thessalonica is a part of Macedonia.

8. There is a profound tension in how to interpret Acts: Is Luke narrating a collision with Greco-Roman culture, or is he minimizing the threat of direct competition with the Roman government? See C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) for a highly nuanced assessment of this nexus.

## *Who Received This Letter?*

A letter held a prominent place in the first century. It stood in the place of the actual presence of its author, and it had a significant rhetorical and instructional role for the receivers. The author meant for it to be read aloud and even performed, as the community gathered, because some would be illiterate. The repetition of phrases would make committing much of it to memory possible. While not yet given canonical status, these epistles to the Thessalonian congregation would circulate among the believers and reinforce earlier proclamation from the apostles. Its early provenance, arguably the first letters of Paul, offered a portal for understanding the contextual challenges of bearing witness to Jesus Christ, who threatened the structures of the Roman Empire.<sup>9</sup> Crucified at the hands of the empire, he now reigns with God and empowers followers to turn the world upside down.

Letters could be of varied genres.<sup>10</sup> In the Thessalonian correspondence, two primary literary conventions are on display. The hortatory approach seeks to persuade the recipients to continue to live a certain way; this is also called *paraenesis*, encouragement toward an ethical lifestyle. The second approach, called *protrepsis*, urges “the addressee to change . . . life-orientation.”<sup>11</sup> Encouragement and affirmation are the primary themes; these precede further instruction about how to live in a liminal time. More simply, some suggest that these are letters of friendship.

My professor friend, E. Frank Tupper of blessed memory, said his method of teaching was a “hermeneutic of friendship.” His care for students allowed them to hear his theological wisdom in a context of mutual regard. Such is the case with this communication from those who planted the church in Thessalonica; and the loving words from

9. I will argue later that 2 Thessalonians most likely comes from the hand of a pseudonymous author, as the language and theological vision are markedly different than the first epistle.

10. Paul’s letters reflect the rhetorical conventions of his day. For an overview of the varied approaches, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

11. Mark Harding, *Early Christian Life and Thought in Social Context: A Reader* (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 114.

Paul, the primary author, elucidate what bonds the apostolic team sought to create.

### *The Significance of Thessalonica*

Thessalonica was the home of diasporic Jews, Gentile artisans and commercial entrepreneurs, learned philosophers and sophists, devotees of the imperial cult, and a considerable number of enslaved people. As a port city on a major Roman highway, it was a cosmopolitan place and a strategic location for birthing a Christian community.

Founded early fourth century BCE, Thessalonica was both a significant Roman city, capital of Macedonia, as well as a thoroughly Hellenized cosmopolitan center. According to the Greek historian Strabo, Cassander, king of Macedon, named the city after his wife Thessalonice, the half-sister of Alexander the Great.<sup>12</sup> Thessalonica was a major crossroads, which contributed to its commercial success. The Egnatian Way, the main thoroughfare between East and West, came through the city, linking Byzantium to the east with the western Adriatic ports. Because it was a free city rather than a Roman colony, certain pursuits were permissible. Thessalonica was where the ambitious came and where, with some success, they would remain for its many emerging opportunities.

Boasting one of the finest harbors in the Aegean, it teemed with sailors, artisans, traders, educated orators, and philosophers, both Jew and Gentile, who were mobile in their pursuits. The testimony of Acts 17 suggests a Jewish presence as early as the first century, which is not surprising given the widespread dispersal, even prior to the Diaspora, following the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.

Religious affections went beyond the imperial cult, as many other deities of Egyptian, Greek, and Phrygian origin were venerated. Like many swarming multicultural cities today, Thessalonica provided a context for lively competition among religious adherents. The close alignment between state and cult meant that some

12. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 5, and Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 14, for this background information.

options were more dangerous to pursue, and the weightiest theological question: Who is God? was contested, as two “lords” were on the scene now that Jesus is proclaimed as the risen Christ. We will engage this question at length, especially as “two comings” will arise in 2 Thessalonians.

Because of his own suffering for bearing witness to the grace he had come to know through Christ Jesus, Paul and his companions

**The Thessalonians were hardly impoverished when it came to religious options.**

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1998), 3.

rightly assumed that the Thessalonians would also face persecution. To become followers of Jesus, they would have to renounce their affiliation with the imperial cult, which would put them at odds with the larger ethos. Although he never explicitly names the imperial cult, it suffused the varied contexts Paul sought to evangelize. Around

49–51 CE Paul wrote to offer encouragement and clarification of earlier instruction. His fear that they might abandon the gospel was allayed by Timothy’s good report of their perseverance in faith (*pistis*), which entailed ethical probity and the pursuit of righteousness.

The supply of the Spirit, the transforming indwelling presence of God, was doing its work among them. While there might be ongoing concerns about ethical expectations and eschatological hopes, the new converts had managed to create a community that expressed tangibly the body of Christ as a demonstration of resurrection life. They were living in a commendable way that put them at odds with the major sacramentals of their culture. And they had given up much to do so. The apostolic team assured them that it would be worth it when Christ was fully revealed.

### *Significance of Thessalonians for Today*

Because believers today face many of the same challenges to coherent faith, the Thessalonian epistles still provide grist for Christian communities. While these early letters do not have the theological

heft of other undisputed Pauline writings such as Galatians or Corinthians, and especially Romans, they supply wise guidance on how to trust the truth of the gospel by faith, how to live peaceably together in love, and how to look to the future in hope. Indeed, this triad of faith, love, and hope (so ordered in 1 Thessalonians) is the interpretive framework for these letters.

Why would believers today find this apostolic guidance persuasive? Removed by centuries and geography, current Christian communities face similar seductions and self-preserving temptations. The surrounding culture always seeks to bend all to its outlook and practice, and most of us succumb in compromising ways to the pressure to conform. Many in our time do not distinguish being a follower of Jesus from being a good citizen; and clearly, American identity and its absorption with market economy is its own form of idolatry. When all human meaning is boiled down to economic fortunes, we have lost our souls.

There is also cultural idolatry in our time: the preservation of white supremacy. The Black Lives Matter movement has exposed to a new level the latent racism that perdures in the white population, while government strategies to reduce immigration display similar colorized preferences. Many have described 2020 as a year of “racial reckoning.” The many Black persons killed by police forces, mass incarceration, and health care disparities are glaring reminders that the original sin of America—chattel slavery—still lingers.<sup>13</sup> America has yet to repent fully for this egregious subjugation of fellow humans, in addition to the earlier displacement of Native Americans from their land, another form of original sin.

The long reach of patriarchy, with its presumption of noblesse oblige, continues to disfigure key markers of race, gender, sexual, and religious minorities with its concomitant claim of being the measure of otherness. Sexism is regnant, especially in churches, as complementarians continue to summon Paul’s writings to support subordination of women to male jurisdiction. We also witness daily

13. See Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016). He asks a critical question: “What would it mean for us to die to whiteness?” (73).

the assaults on the character of women who dare defy a patriarchal hegemony.

An additional urgent concern is the growing climate crisis. Just as Paul longed for the Christians of his day to live in an ecosystem of mutual interdependence, we must expand our vision to include nature. More than ever before, common survival depends on cultivating interdependence with all creation. Those concerned with twin issues of justice and sustainability, according to Sallie McFague, must collaborate to overcome the dystopian reality of global warming.<sup>14</sup> The Thessalonian correspondence helps us think about the desired future with God and can offer reassurance for our living. The hint that the return of Christ to this world is for its renewal rather than a rapture that abandons it prompts constructive thinking about God's ultimate purpose for our earthly environs.

Pioneering ecological theologian Joseph Sittler places care of the creation at the center of faithful discipleship. He insists that the christological work we need to be doing includes nature. It does not view this world as simply an expendable backdrop, a theater of redemption that involves only humanity. He reads the Pauline letters, especially Romans 8, as a call to expand the cosmic dimensions of our view of Christ. As I consider the summing up of human history, I do so with a view to the freeing of creation from its subjection to futility, its plaintive groaning.<sup>15</sup> As the planet warms, we cannot read Scripture without full recognition that eschatological thinking is not about removing humans from the context without which we cannot be human. All of this earth provides home to those who bear God's image; Christ's lordship will be manifest in all that God declared good.

Two decades into the twenty-first century, North America displays great anxiety politically, socially, economically, and personally. Differentiation from dominant culture requires a sense of the futility of placing all confidence in the machinations of governing structures and corporate partners with their corrupting patterns. Those who

14. Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 2.

15. See the collection of Sittler's writings, *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

chart a pathway that follows the itinerant Jesus will not be able to secure their future by relying on the normative interpretive framework of our epoch. This places us in close connection with these early believers.

Simply put, Paul wanted this bounded community of new converts to bear witness to God's redemptive work in the world. Only as the gospel is embodied is it compelling and accessible. Only as persons form a supportive community that is clear about its identity would its witness be sustainable, then as now. The Thessalonian community offers a helpful archetype of Christian living under duress, with lessons we can learn from its perseverance in a hostile context.

### *Commonality of Christian Challenges*

The struggles of these early Christians remain in our time: how to determine the true and living God amid competing "gods;" how to maintain sexual ethics characterized by discipline and mutuality; how to make work an expression of faithful service; and how to live in the hope that Jesus will put the world to rights, as promised, overcoming death forever. The apostle engaged these in a forthright manner, and his wisdom is still relevant. Indeed, without this grounding early testimony, we would have no rudder for navigating our own challenges as "resident aliens," language popularized by Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.

In many respects, 1 and 2 Thessalonians have a contemporary appeal because of their emphasis on Christian practice more so than on doctrine. The Practicing Our Faith project, guided by Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, has demonstrated that persons are more drawn to concrete practices that introduce them to a distinctive way of life rather than learning catechetical nuances they struggle to apply.<sup>16</sup> In a sense, doctrine follows practice. We remember that early Spirit-infused Christian practices of baptism, eucharist, hospitality,

16. See the first volume in the series, Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), where the project is illuminated in the first chapter. Many significant volumes follow.



the transgressing of ethnic boundaries, and preaching and teaching shaped the texts that sustain Christian identity. Continually refining their practices allowed their theological imagination to develop.

While Paul did not advocate a complete withdrawal from a pagan culture, what some today call a Benedict option,<sup>17</sup> he nevertheless offered direction for how to live as a faithful minority. This may be hard for North Americans to fathom as the Christian majority perdures in culture, congress, and communities, often displaying arrogance toward the religious “other,” especially Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Yet restive changes are stirring, and the growth of nonaffiliated persons as well as venerable global religions now challenges the hegemony of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) profile that has long prevailed with its many discriminatory practices.

My work in theological education has taken me to Myanmar frequently over the past decade. My former seminary has a partnership with Myanmar Institute of Theology, a leading educational institution of Christian religious studies for undergraduate and graduate students. There, I have learned much from fellow Christians about what it means to live as a religious minority in a primarily Buddhist nation. The clear acknowledgment that their context is religiously plural gives them a respect for the lived religion of others even when that respect is rarely reciprocated. As six to seven percent of the population of Myanmar, Christians there suffer for their expressions of religious liberty. They cannot build churches or institutions without government permits that require an arduous process to procure. They are constantly under surveillance by powers of the state, and the Preservation of Race and Religion Laws, enacted in 2015, clearly favor Buddhism at every turn. Thus, they find themselves clearly at odds with the prevailing culture and thereby hone a persistent form of faith that I find instructive for what passes as Christianity in the United States in its truncated expression. Especially today, white evangelicals have sidled up to a form of governance that uses

17. See the interesting proposal offered by Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

18. See the important work of Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012).

Christianity as a prop for political expediency and have lost much credibility about the contours of their faith by doing so.

### *My Reflection on Writing This Commentary*

Writers of commentaries invariably begin with a sense of trepidation because much has already been written on their particular texts. Generations of scholars have devoted linguistic, exegetical, social scientific, rhetorical, and theological research to the discrete portion of Scripture they are engaging afresh. They also know that it is an encompassing task to understand the original claim on the readers and hearers of the text and the present claim on contemporary congregations. Scripture continues to shape Christian imagination and performance, and the ongoing conversation with it fosters what is essential to our practice. Stephen Fowl puts it succinctly: “Christians must read scripture in the light of their ends as Christians—ever deeper communion with the triune God and with each other.”<sup>19</sup> This has been my purpose.

Writing a theological commentary places one squarely at the intersection of Scripture and theology.<sup>20</sup> Systematic theology and biblical scholarship have followed divergent pathways for over two centuries, diminishing both church and academy. Recovering and crafting new forms of theological hermeneutics are refreshing the church’s preaching, the character of theologians, and communion with God, which are ultimately the goals of biblical interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

Approaching the Thessalonian correspondence has an exacting dimension because it is the earliest of the Pauline writings.

19. Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), vii.

20. Too often the Bible has simply been used as a source book for theology; its content has been subordinated to doctrinal claims as Peter the Lombard’s *Sentences* illustrates. Telford Work offers a creative approach in *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) by using systematic theology to construct a new doctrine of Scripture as revelatory of the Triune God’s redemptive purpose in the world. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), argues that biblical studies and systematic theologies “need each other for survival and credibility” (4).

21. I have been aided in thinking about the relational aspect of theological hermeneutics by Jens Zimmermann in his dense but helpful study *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

An interpreter desires to set the stage for additional reflection on the formative texts of the New Testament that ground the nascent expressions of Christianity. Learning the semantic emphases and theological perspective offered in these slight epistles holds promise for interpreting the further apostolic corpus.

A theological commentary pursues a different goal than does an exegetical or expositional study: it seeks to provide a consideration of the vision of God, the redemptive project through Jesus Christ and the Spirit, and the effects in the establishment of Christian communities. It follows the Trinitarian history of God as it unfolds with humanity. It is less interested in the nuances of the writing's original language, the shape of rhetoric, the precision of geographical and historical anchoring, and a specialized understanding of the first century Mediterranean world. Although these contextual matters are of concern, the primary strategy of this commentary is to bridge the theological understanding of Paul's early proclamation with the needs of Christian believers in our time.

Scripture forms believers, ancient and current, with careful interpretation affording continuing generations a sense of the founding and sustaining of their faith. Additional sources such as early creeds, commentaries from early Christian interpreters, and the larger intellectual tradition of Christianity—both East and West—factored into this writing. No one person can fully grasp the power and beauty of these enduring texts, yet every epoch requires faithful listening and interrogation of these literary treasures.<sup>22</sup>

Writing this commentary during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic adds another layer of perspective. Since January of 2020 to the time of this writing, over one million (and counting) Americans have died from the deadly virus, and the tally is still mounting around the world, well into the millions. It has been over a century since this kind of health challenge swept across the globe, and some speak in apocalyptic terms about its significance. As refrigerator trucks pull up behind hospitals to serve as temporary morgues for bodies yet to be cremated or buried, there is a palpable sense that death is winning

22. A helpful resource is John W. Miller's *How the Bible Came to Be: Exploring the Narrative and Message* (New York: Paulist, 2004), especially the chapter "First Steps toward Understanding the Bible as a Theological Unity," 77.

over life. More than ever, one's belief that history is in God's hands matters.

Some in our time liken the pandemic to the bubonic plague that struck Europe in the fourteenth century, "not in the number of dead but in terms of shaking up the way people think," according to medical historian Gianna Pomata.<sup>23</sup> She reflects on how some in that earlier epoch saw the disease as sent by God to chastise the unrighteous, as do some today. She is more interested in how minds shift as new empirical evidence comes to the fore and is valued. She believes that now "something as dramatic is going to happen, not so much in medicine, but in economy and culture. Because of danger, there's this wonderful human response, which is to think in a new way."<sup>24</sup> It is my hope that this commentary will help us think in new ways in apocalyptic times. While accenting this present COVID-19 disruption may render some of the observations irrelevant in the not-too-distant future, nevertheless I contend that there are far-reaching implications for all aspects of life that arise from the global pandemic.

In a recent op-ed column, conservative writer Ross Douthat suggests that it is important for persons of faith to try to make sense of our disorienting epoch. The "aspects of our circumstances that seem ridiculously scripted to the atheist are, for religion believers, a reason to meditate on what is revealed, how we're being tested, and what lessons and examples we can draw from watching tragedies unfold."<sup>25</sup> This commentary invites a theological assessment of our circumstances.

I am drawn to W. B. Yeats's poem "Second Coming," which he wrote during the twin horrors of World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic. Also apt for our time, Yeats's poetry speaks of the chaotic machinations humans can wreak on one another, on the whole order of creation. In addition to the pandemic, racial reckoning, climate crisis that spawns fires and evermore terrifying storms,

23. Lawrence Wright, "Annals of History: A Scholar of the Plague Thinks That Pandemics Wreak Havoc—and Open Minds," *New Yorker*, July 20, 2020, 18.

24. Wright quoting Pomata, in "Annals of History," 19.

25. Ross Douthat, "The Tragedy of Donald Trump," *New York Times*, October 4, 2020, 9.

continuing sexism and marginalization of sexual minorities, we have a fractured political system.

The 2020 presidential election in the United States had the possibility of derailing the very democracy we enjoy, and the continuing

**Turning and turning in the  
widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the  
falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre  
cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon  
the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is  
loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is  
drowned;  
The best lack all conviction,  
while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.**

W. B. Yeats, "Second Coming,"  
Poets.org, <https://poets.org/poem/second-coming>.

repercussions mount. When an incumbent president threatens the orderly transfer of power if he or she does not agree with the outcome, the anarchy about which Yeats writes may not be out of reach. Even now, the former president continues to make claims that the election was fraudulent, even though no courts have upheld his challenges. Hopefully by the time this commentary is in print, most of the repercussions of this turbulent election will have subsided. When foreign powers use social media to interfere with the freedom of the electorate, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." When the Supreme Court is politicized for

partisan purposes, "things fall apart." In the aftermath of the election, we witnessed what demagogic rhetoric can foment as loyalists to a defeated president stormed the nation's capitol. Tantamount to a coup, these acts of violence have deeply shaken our country.

Scripture gives voice to God's future, even in a time of conflict and threat. Thoughtful guidance for living in the present catastrophes is present in this literary deposit from early Christianity. It moves beyond quietism and calls for public witness, offering a theology and commendable culture for the common good of fellow citizens.

Just as many in the early Christian community of Thessalonica were anxiously awaiting the end of time and the return of Jesus Christ, there are those today who wonder if "end times" are on us as life has little normalcy and economic pressures for the great

majority are mounting. With escalating global cataclysms of war, displaced persons, poverty, and racial tensions, persons who look to the Bible for guidance can find very practical instruction about how to live with forbearance with others through reliance on the strengthening of the Holy Spirit. The pandemic has exposed fissures in the social landscape, and we have the opportunity to mend these with faith and grit. And we have wise forebears in faith that instruct us. In 1527, Luther wrote instructively about his own encounter with cataclysmic illness in his time and the claim the suffering of others had on him to minister through his committed presence. Luther offered a better approach than expecting to be rescued/raptured, escaping it all; that sense of Christian exceptionalism—as if we are not a part of the common travail of humanity—ignores God’s concern for the exigencies all humans face in a groaning creation. It also reinforces the notion that this world is not truly our home and that one must flee it in order to be near God.

With God’s permission the enemy has sent poison and deadly dung among us, and so I will pray to God that he may be gracious and preserve us. Then I will fumigate to purify the air, give and take medicine, and avoid places and persons where I am not needed in order that I may not abuse myself and that through me others may not be infected and inflamed with the result that I become the cause of their death through my negligence. If God wishes to take me, he will be able to find me. At least I have done what he gave me to do and am responsible neither for my own death or for the death of others. But if my neighbor needs me, I shall avoid neither the person or the place but feel free to visit and help him.<sup>26</sup>

In this commentary we will explore the significance of the Parousia, the appearing or return of Christ, and seek to interface that expectation with the fears and concerns of faithful persons today. The Thessalonian correspondence is perhaps best known for its eschatological emphasis, so a constructive engagement in our time will prove fruitful. We will seek to understand why the apocalyptic fireworks are part of the rhetoric and how to think about them

26. Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. T. G. Tappert (London: SCM Press, 1955), 242.

this many years removed. We will see that our different context requires a different accent. The emphasis on community will prompt renewed interrogation of the plague of isolation in our time.

Writers in our time speak of the loneliness that stalks so many, and the required self-quarantining during 2020, and beyond, exacerbates the sense of absence many inhabit. Even those who feel

**“You can kill a person with an apartment as well as with a machine gun. It only takes a little longer.”**

Martin E. Marty, *Friendship* (Allen, TX: Argus, 1980), 11.

called to being solitary ultimately realize that they are best in community and that being a hermit has its limits.

I recently officiated at the graveside service of a treasured friend. Only about forty-five of us were able to gather outside, at a distance from one another; in regular times,

hundreds would have attended to honor this one beloved to so many. Because we were made for one another, as N.T. Wright puts it in *Simply Christian*, we live with a sense of incompleteness when we cannot gather fully.<sup>27</sup> The incarnational impress of the Jesus story remains core; as embodiments of God’s presence, as was Jesus, we long to express our common humanity through graceful touch and close presence. It may be a while before this can occur.

As people connect with a few family members or carefully screened friends who are free of infection, there are demands for heightened attentiveness to courtesy and grace as the recurring rhythms of life involved these few. The pandemic has required an almost monastic sequestering over these months of writing this commentary, which most likely has been a boon for this extrovert. My actual location has been in my study at home; my social location is that I write as a privileged white theological educator, a Baptist Christian, and one who has faced significant challenges vocationally because of my unwavering advocacy for the propriety of women in all forms of ministry. I have not had the challenge of trying to work while educating children at home; nor have I experienced the

27. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 30.

extreme economic challenge so many are facing. Yet, day-by-day dystopian news and alarmist opinions occupy my waking hours and disturb my sleep. Spending time with these early writings has given perspective. I trust it will for you also, even as we begin to regain our social footing because of vaccinations.

As we engage these Epistles, let us imagine ourselves at the beginning of faith and envision essential practices for following the risen One. It will kindle new faithfulness.

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