

2009

# The Case for Incorporating Evangelism Into Discipleship : Paul's Ministry to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12)

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THE CASE FOR INCORPORATING EVANGELISM INTO DISCIPLESHIP:  
PAUL'S MINISTRY TO THE THESSALONIANS (1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-4:12)

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

THESIS ADVISER: CRAIG R. KOESTER

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2009

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though I have invested many hours in this thesis by myself, it was not a lone effort. This final version would not have been possible without much-needed help. My long-time friend and mentor, Rick Drenk, has been instrumental in equipping and encouraging me over the years to make disciples of Christ through one-to-one discipleship; many of his ideas regarding evangelism and discipleship are reflected here. He is a modern-day example of what a disciple-maker should be, and I owe him a great debt of gratitude. I am also indebted to the handful of men (especially Glenn Meier) with whom I have had the privilege of working on a one-to-one basis at one time or another over the last fifteen years.

I wish to thank my supervisor at the Toro Company, Dean Ziegenbein, for supporting me in my pursuit of a graduate degree. Co-worker Gary Smith has been a supportive and encouraging friend who has always been eager to discuss what I have learned. My special thanks go to fellow disciple Andrew Pieper, my friend, co-worker, and fellow technical writer, who strengthened the penultimate draft through the use of his keen grammatical and proofreading skills.

I also wish to give Luther Seminary professors Craig Koester and Mary Hinkle Shore high marks for their wise guidance early on in this project and for their commitment to academic excellence as they labored to ensure that this would become a quality work. I am honored to have been their student.

Finally, I thank God for my wife, Sue, and my children, Kelsey and Jake, for their constant support and patience as I pursued my passion to study the biblical texts and beliefs of the Christian faith at Luther Seminary.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1 Cor	1 Corinthians
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
AB	The Anchor Bible
BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
Gal	Galatians
Matt	Matthew
Phil	Philippians
Rom	Romans

## INTRODUCTION

*The great difference between present-day Christianity and that which we read in these letters [Paul's epistles] is that to us it is primarily a performance, [but] to them it was a real experience. We are apt to reduce the Christian religion to a code, or at best a rule of heart and life. To these men it is quite plainly the invasion of their lives by a new quality of life altogether. They do not hesitate to describe this as Christ "living in" them.<sup>1</sup>*

—J. B. Phillips

Thoughtful readers of 1 Thessalonians cannot help but wonder how these spiritually young believers could have been so enthusiastically committed to the Christian faith in spite of all the suffering and affliction they endured on account of that commitment. This "new quality of life" that the first-century Thessalonian believers possessed can be explained in part by how they became such devoted disciples of Christ in the first place. Their spiritual foundation was laid and firmly established in far-from-ideal conditions through the ministry of Paul and his companions, Silvanus and Timothy, whose methods reveal an understanding of the relationship between what we now refer to as evangelism and discipleship that is not widely held by Christians today.

The present-day Western Church often segregates the activities of helping nonChristians understand and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ (evangelism) and of helping Christians grow spiritually to live as devoted followers of Christ (discipleship). In contrast, Paul's ministry to the first-century Thessalonians exemplifies a more effective

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), xiv.

approach to making disciples of Christ by incorporating evangelism into discipleship in a relational setting. This approach is effective because it builds upon the natural development of interpersonal relationships that are essential for spiritual growth to occur, which greatly increases the likelihood that new Christians will become involved and remain involved in the discipleship process.

Before presenting the case for incorporating evangelism into discipleship from the text of 1 Thessalonians 1:1–4:12, a discussion of the following background information will be helpful to the reader:

- A brief explanation of the key terms and phrases used in this thesis
- A brief explanation of other related terms
- A discussion of the pervasive influence that the altar call has had on the modern practices of evangelism and discipleship in the West
- The approach of this thesis

### **A Brief Explanation of the Key Terms and Phrases**

Each of the following terms and phrases are important to this thesis and therefore deserves a brief explanation:

- Evangelism
- Discipleship
- “A more effective approach to making disciples of Christ”
- “Incorporating evangelism into discipleship”

## Evangelism

The term *evangelism*, the nominal form of the verb *evangelize* (from the Greek word εὐαγγελίζω (εὐαγγ. τ, *evangelizō*, “to bring good news,” or more specifically, “to preach the gospel”<sup>2</sup>), is often too narrowly defined by Christians. Furthermore, its mere mention can trigger strong emotional responses (often negative) from both Christians and nonChristians alike.

The difficulty in defining *evangelism* with accuracy lies in its multi-faceted nature. The gloss of *evangelism* given above (“helping nonChristians understand and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ”), while usefully concise for introducing the topic, is a broad brushstroke that does not adequately capture some important factors, much less the nuances, that constitute the term. Scott J. Jones attempts to capture these factors concisely by defining evangelism as “that set of loving, intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God.”<sup>3</sup> This definition is helpful in pointing out and implying a number of important factors regarding evangelism: It is a joint venture of God and God’s people that is initiated and directed by God (as part of the *missio Dei*; see “Mission” below); its practitioners are motivated by the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor<sup>4</sup>; and it is the initial phase of Christian discipleship. But evangelism is also an ongoing *process* that involves communicating the gospel<sup>5</sup> and inviting unbelievers to become a part of the community of God’s people without imposing any obligation or any expectation of their response.

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<sup>2</sup> BDAG, 402.

<sup>3</sup> Scott J. Jones, *Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 19.

Moreover, Christians are not merely called to bear witness to others about God and the gospel but to *be* God's witnesses.<sup>6</sup> Evangelism does not merely consist of activities but is ideally an integral part of the believer's lifestyle.<sup>7</sup>

Evangelism is an emotionally charged issue that many Christians would prefer to avoid, for it often causes fear and dread in the hearts of believers and unbelievers alike. Martha Grace Reese's study of evangelism in mainline Protestant churches in America found that "A huge number of mainline church members and pastors feel awkward, embarrassed, uncomfortable, defensive or angry when evangelism is mentioned."<sup>8</sup> Unbelievers are repulsed by the tactics of religious zealots, and the more sensitive believers, though they may feel guilty about not "going and making disciples," are loathe to confront unbelievers and experience certain rejection afterward. For these believers and unbelievers, the message of evangelism—the Good News of Christ—is neither good nor news.<sup>9</sup> Jones notes that there are many Christians in the West who "are confused about evangelism. Some believe that loving their neighbors entails never inviting them to change their religion, whatever it is or is not. Some rightly point to the unloving ways in which so-called evangelism has been practiced, suggesting that such practices have no place in Christian ministry. They fail to see that not evangelizing such persons at all is also unloving."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jim Petersen, *Living Proof* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1989), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Petersen, *Living Proof*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Richardson, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, 21.

## Discipleship

The term *discipleship*, derived from the Latin word *discipulus* (“disciple,” “student”); Greek, μαθητής, *mathētēs*), also comprises many facets that contribute to its meaning. At its highest level of definition, discipleship is a *lifelong relational process* authorized and modeled by Christ himself for the calling, gathering, developing, and equipping of his beloved followers throughout the world. But as it is in the case for the term *evangelism*, there is more to the definition of *discipleship*:

- *Discipleship is relational.* A disciple of Christ, though always a student, is not necessarily confined to a formal classroom setting. It is not only that the disciple accumulates knowledge (to know what one’s master knows), but more importantly that he or she undergoes a character transformation (to be like one’s master). Mortimer Arias notes that “Jesus’ disciples were trained not only in orthodoxy, the right doctrine, but also in orthopraxis, the right way of doing, living, and dying.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, classes, courses, and educational materials and methods alone cannot make disciples out of people; ultimately, it is through disciples of Christ that God works to make disciples.
- *Discipleship is a lifelong process.* Discipleship does not conveniently begin and end with a twelve-week Christian education course; spiritual growth takes time in the experiences of everyday life. As Johannes Nissen notes, “Disciples are not born, they are made, and it takes a whole lifetime, with no graduation in sight.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mortimer Arias, “Church in the World: Rethinking the Great Commission,” *Theology Today* 47 (January 1991): 410-418.

<sup>12</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*, 3d ed. (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang GmbH, 2004), 29.

- *Discipleship involves both personal and communal growth.* Disciples of Christ are personally growing in their knowledge of and faith in the Lord Jesus (spiritual growth that eventually leads to maturity), and they are also working to expand the Christian community by helping to make disciples of Christ who will in turn make disciples (spiritual multiplication).
- *Discipleship is a personal commitment to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.* Jesus did not demand that people make a commitment to be his disciples, but prefaced his comments with a conditional statement: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me*” (Mark 8:34). It is a lifelong commitment that involves putting one’s master and others ahead of self for the love of the master. Arias describes the personal nature of this commitment: “Discipleship in the kingdom is not merely obeying a commandment but following a person, a commitment to God and the neighbor in Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

“A more effective approach to making disciples of Christ”

While there are numerous approaches to making disciples, not all of them are equally effective in helping disciples to grow in their faith in Christ and to make disciples. But how does one measure and compare the effectiveness of the discipleship methods available? I suggest that there are a couple of diagnostic questions whose answers, given that only God can discern the thoughts and motives of the human heart, can at least approximate and provide a basis for comparing the effectiveness of various discipleship methods. These questions include:

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<sup>13</sup> Arias, 414.

- Are the disciples who are using this discipleship method growing in their knowledge of and faith in Christ?
- Are the disciples who are using this discipleship method being used by God to make disciples of Christ who are in turn making disciples?

The purpose of this question-and-answer activity is not to identify discipleship methods as unbiblical or wrong, for it is not a question of right or wrong method, but rather which method is most effective that is of concern here.

### “Incorporating evangelism into discipleship”

The phrase “incorporating evangelism into discipleship” is intentional. The point of this thesis is not only to argue for a more effective approach to making disciples of Christ through combining the activities of evangelism and discipleship, but to press on further to describe more precisely the proper interrelationship between the two.

The term *incorporating* is used in the phrase above to introduce a part into a larger body or mass; therefore, evangelism is to be considered a part, or subset, of discipleship. Furthermore, the phrase “initiating persons into Christian discipleship” taken from Jones’ definition earlier<sup>14</sup> suggests that evangelism is the earliest or initial phase of the discipleship process. Discipleship, then, begins with evangelism—helping unbelievers to become disciples of Christ, and evangelism becomes more effective through discipleship, because disciples who are growing spiritually are more likely than not to be motivated and equipped to help make disciples of Christ.

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, 18.

## Other Related Terms

Because of their relationship to the terms *evangelism* and *discipleship*, four other terms also deserve a brief explanation:

- The Great Commission
- Mission
- Disciple-making
- Conversion

### The Great Commission

First coined in the King James Version as the heading for the section of Matt 28:16-20,<sup>15</sup> “The Great Commission” has for the last couple of centuries been associated with this passage.<sup>16</sup> Its message (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .”) has been the sole clarion call for many modern-day Christians to evangelize the world.<sup>17</sup> With regard to the Great Commission, Christopher Adsit explains, “Making disciples is the end, the focus, the command. Going, baptizing, and teaching are the means, the method, the activity.”<sup>18</sup>

However, some modern scholars have identified not one but *four* versions of the Great Commission, one for each of the four gospels (the three other passages include Mark 16:14-20; Luke 24:44-47; and John 20:19-23).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Arias argues that the

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<sup>15</sup> Arias, 410.

<sup>16</sup> Nissen, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Nissen, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher B. Adsit, *Personal Disciple-making: A Step-by-Step Guide for Leading a Christian from New Birth to Maturity* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1988), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Nissen, 21.

Great Commission passage in Matthew has been too narrowly interpreted and applied,<sup>20</sup> noting that the gospel that contains the Great Commission also promotes justice for humankind as well.<sup>21</sup> Jones argues that the mandate of the Great Commission should never be divorced from godly love and therefore “must be subordinate to” the two-part Great Commandment to love God and to love one’s neighbor (Matt 22:34-39).<sup>22</sup>

## **Mission**

Mission is a partnership between God and God’s people, and it begins with God’s loving intervention in human affairs to bring about the redemption of humankind and the world.<sup>23</sup> God’s mission (*missio Dei*) is the “divine activity of redeeming the world from sin and accomplishing God’s purposes . . . mission is first and foremost an activity of God in the world.”<sup>24</sup> God’s people are to join God and engage in the *missio Dei* on earth.<sup>25</sup> Nissen defines the human role in mission more specifically as “the church sent into the world, to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate.”<sup>26</sup>

The relationship of the term *mission* to the terms *evangelism* and *missions* also helps to clarify the meaning of *mission*. *Evangelism* is not a synonym for *mission*; *evangelism* is an important component of *mission*, for the activities of mission go beyond that of evangelism.<sup>27</sup> As for distinguishing between the terms *mission* and *missions*, *mission* is essentially the *missio Dei*, or God’s work of calling and redeeming people.

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<sup>20</sup> Arias, 410.

<sup>21</sup> Arias, 413.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Nissen, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Nissen, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, 59.

“Missions (the *missiones ecclesiae*, the missionary venture of the church) refer to particular forms . . . of participation in the *missio Dei*.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Disciple-making**

*Disciple-making* is a term used in this thesis to describe the nature of the activities with which Paul was engaged in his ministry to the Thessalonians. It is defined here as that portion of discipleship which focuses on the activities that contribute to the making of mature disciples, such as evangelism, the teaching of new converts, and the training and equipping of disciples for ministry.<sup>29</sup>

On a related note, a *disciple-maker* is defined here as one who helps to make disciples who grow to spiritual maturity. While it is ultimately God who enables disciples to grow and mature spiritually, it is the task of the disciple-maker to foster a relational setting that is conducive to the spiritual formation of the disciple.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conversion**

Many Christians view their own conversion as the most significant spiritual phenomenon of their lives. In light of the *missio Dei* to redeem people and reconcile them to God, conversion describes, from the human perspective, God’s gracious act of transforming people who were dead in their sins (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13) and estranged from their Creator into forgiven, spiritually alive, and beloved children of God through the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16). Those who respond to the gospel by faith

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<sup>28</sup> Nissen, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Discipleship also includes the spiritual transformation, development, and maturity of the disciple, which is outside the realm of disciple-making.

<sup>30</sup> Adsit, 38.

in Jesus Christ experience a supernatural change in their inner being (heart) that is referred to as spiritual regeneration, or otherwise known as becoming “born again” (John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:3, 7, 23). Paul describes the new status of a believer as being a “new creation” in which “the old has gone and the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Conversion, then, whether it is dramatic and immediate like Paul’s (Acts 9:1-19) or occurs more gradually in the context of a Christian household like Timothy’s (2 Timothy 1:5), is the beginning of the spiritual growth process.

### **The Pervasive Influence of the Altar Call on the Modern Practices of Evangelism and Discipleship in the West**

#### The Phenomenon of the Altar Call

As the Second Great Awakening swept over America during the first half of the nineteenth century, a lawyer-turned-evangelist named Charles Grandison Finney was perfecting and popularizing a method of evangelism that is still widely used today—the altar call.<sup>31</sup> Also known as a “public invitation” or a “public appeal,” the altar call is described by David Bennett as “a method of evangelism within which a . . . planned invitation is given to ‘unbelievers’ to respond to Jesus Christ publicly at the conclusion of a sermon or other gospel presentation, in such a way as: calling out a response, raising a hand, standing, or walking to a designated spot . . . a response to such an invitation would normally be followed by immediate counseling and later by some form of follow up.”<sup>32</sup>

Altar calls gained acceptance in part due to the shift in the theological and sociological climate early in the nineteenth century. Bennett notes, “The concepts of

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<sup>31</sup> David Bennett, *The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 103.

<sup>32</sup> Bennett, xv-xvi.

democracy, equality, individualism, freedom and human ability were all to play their part in the theological and evangelistic changes which were to emerge in the first part of the nineteenth century . . .”<sup>33</sup> The influence of pietism (with its emphasis on a personal experience of religious faith) and the tendency toward reductionism in the Christian creeds and doctrines also were factors that helped make the widespread use of the public invitation system possible.<sup>34</sup> Following in the wake of predominantly Protestant revivals that focused on “eliciting immediate conversions to the Christian faith,”<sup>35</sup> the public invitation system (including the altar call) had its roots in the camp meetings on the western frontier early in the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Later, it found its way to the urban centers and was adopted by prominent evangelists of their day: Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, and, more recently, Billy Graham. They brought the practice (which had evolved slightly over the years) all around America and all over the world.<sup>37</sup>

It is the relationship between the disciple-maker (in the case of the altar call, evangelist) and a *genuine* convert during the discipleship process and the practices of counseling and follow-up after conversion that is of concern here, because the relationship between the disciple-maker and the new believer is often important for the long-term spiritual growth of the new believer to occur. Other forms of evangelism (e.g., small group and one-to-one) also have this evangelist-convert relationship and often use some of these practices as well. For our purposes, we will assume that the altar call

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<sup>33</sup> Bennett, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*. Greenwood Guides to Historic Events, 1500-1900. Linda S. Frey and Marsha L. Frey, eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Bennett, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Hankins, 17.

respondent is a *genuine* convert; he or she did not make a “decision” per se to receive Christ, but in fact it was the work of God. It is to be understood that “. . . whatever sense conversion is a decision, then that decision is totally subordinate to the grace of God.”<sup>38</sup>

### The Relationship between the Disciple-maker and the Convert

The ongoing relationship that the convert has with the disciple-maker is an important factor that increases the likelihood that the convert will continue to be involved in the discipleship process. Jim Petersen notes that “the line between evangelizing a person and helping him follow Christ as a disciple is really unimportant. Too often we make too much of it . . . The content will change, but the relationships and the environment should remain intact.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike small group and one-to-one settings for evangelism, in which evangelist-convert relationships often do exist that can be the natural context for the discipleship process to continue, the mass evangelism setting usually does not allow for the evangelist and convert to personally meet one another, so the convert must meet with a counselor to receive post-conversion care and guidance.

### Post-Conversion Counseling and Follow-up

The effectiveness of evangelistic crusades and other mass evangelism events to make disciples of Christ greatly depends upon the post-sermon counseling and follow-up.<sup>40</sup> The counselor has a brief but potentially important role in helping the convert begin

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<sup>38</sup> Bennett, 211. For a discussion of the deficiencies and dangers of both the methods and the Arminian-based (commonly known as “free will” or “decision”) theology that underlies the public invitation system, or altar call, see pp. 229-249.

<sup>39</sup> Jim Petersen, *Lifestyle Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993), 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> Bennett, 195. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association claims that at its crusades, 2% of conversions occur during the sermon, 48% during the counseling session, and the remaining 50% during follow-up.

his or her new and spiritually tender life as a Christian. The counselor's role is effectively accomplished when the convert is undergoing discipleship under the care of a disciple-maker, preferably in a Christian community for the sake of the convert's ongoing spiritual growth.<sup>41</sup> However, Bennett laments the poor state of post-conversion counseling methods and materials found at evangelistic crusades: "The counseling methods commonly used with the public initiation system are poor, and at times dangerously misleading, in that it seems to be usually assumed that those who come forward can be fitted neatly into a decision group and dealt with by a particular rehearsed method . . . The training and materials given to them are also usually inadequate and to some degree inappropriate."<sup>42</sup>

*Follow-up* is the term that describes what is often a short-term post-conversion care program that new believers are to receive so that they can begin their new life as disciples of Christ. Unfortunately, while new believers need a long-term discipleship process beyond follow-up to grow spiritually, they receive only follow-up, if they receive anything at all. The combination of faulty follow-up and the questionable theology and practices that underlie conversion through human decision to receive Christ often results in temporary Christian converts, not lifelong, committed disciples of Christ.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, follow-up is often led by someone other than the evangelist, exemplifying the discontinuity in the relationship between the convert and the disciple-maker, which segregates evangelism and discipleship. However, the poor longevity of "converts" who attend evangelistic crusades is due not only to the inadequacy of follow-up; Bennett

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<sup>41</sup> Linda McKinnish Bridges, "Terms of Endearment: Paul's Words of Comfort in First Thessalonians," *Review and Expositor* 96.2 (Spring 1999): 226.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, 248.

<sup>43</sup> Bennett, 221.

contends that the problem lies in the numerous false conversions generated through the altar call approach to evangelism.<sup>44</sup> Follow-up programs can be helpful, but without the long-term relationships and an intentional process, new believers will very likely not continue in their spiritual growth and therefore not be adequately trained and equipped to either become, much less make, disciples of Christ. While it is God who makes the disciple grow, it is the task of the disciple-maker to foster a long-term relational setting in which the disciple can develop and mature spiritually.<sup>45</sup> What is needed for making disciples of Christ is not merely follow-up, but *follow-through*.

#### The Overall State of Disciple-making in the Western Church Today

In the explanation titled, “A more effective approach to making disciples of Christ” earlier in this thesis, two questions regarding the comparison of the effectiveness of various discipleship methods were posed:

- Are the disciples who are using this discipleship method growing in their knowledge of and faith in Christ?
- Are the disciples who are using this method being used by God to make disciples of Christ who are in turn making disciples?

In short, the answer to these questions is a resounding “No!” The overall state of disciple-making in the western Church is abysmal. Few western Christians are or have been actively involved in an intentional, long-term discipleship process; and the number of those who are involved in making disciples of Christ who are in turn making disciples is almost non-existent. The present generation of western Christians is, in general,

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<sup>44</sup> Bennett, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Adsit, 38.

spiritually immature, having moral values and lifestyles that are statistically indistinguishable from their non-Christian counterparts.<sup>46</sup> Adsit's lament in the late 1980s is still true today, that "what we have here in America today is the largest spiritual nursery in history."<sup>47</sup> Jones notes the reticence of the Church to make disciples: "The rationale for the existence of parachurch groups, whether they be campus ministries, revival ministries, crusade ministries, or mission societies, stems from failure of the local churches to be evangelistic. Many congregations do not wish to reach out and offer the gospel to outsiders at all."<sup>48</sup>

Disciple-making has become "the forgotten art" and "the missing ingredient" that is so desperately needed in the Church today.<sup>49</sup> We now turn to the example of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians to rediscover a more effective method of disciple-making that incorporates evangelism into discipleship.

### **The Approach of This Thesis**

While it would be imprudent to prescribe first-century disciple-making practices to our modern-day situation without regard for contextualization, it is worthwhile to explore a relevant biblical text, such as 1 Thessalonians, in an attempt to identify a few timeless principles and practices that shed light on a more effective method for making disciples of Christ. Therefore, the approach of this thesis is to closely examine the text of 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12 to identify those principles and practices, with special attention paid toward the relationship between the activities of evangelism and discipleship. The

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<sup>46</sup> Bennett, 221.

<sup>47</sup> Adsit, 73.

<sup>48</sup> Jones, 140.

<sup>49</sup> Ferguson, 14.

results of those activities (i.e., how the Thessalonians responded to Paul's ministry) will also be discussed.

The next chapter of this thesis explains the rationale for selecting 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12 as the textual basis and provides a brief background of Thessalonica in Paul's day and of the situation surrounding the letter in light of Paul's approach to disciple-making. Then three principles for effective disciple-making from Paul's ministry are discussed in detail, as are the results of his approach in Thessalonica and the evidence that Paul did in fact incorporate evangelism into discipleship. Finally, the conclusion reiterates the importance of incorporating evangelism into discipleship, explains the implications of the findings for the Church and for Christian parachurch organizations, and poses a couple of closing thoughts for further study and contemplation.

## PAUL'S DISCIPLE-MAKING MINISTRY TO THE FIRST-CENTURY THESSALONIANS

This section comprises five subsections that discuss the disciple-making ministry of Paul in Thessalonica from the perspective of the method he used and with the relationship between evangelism and discipleship in mind. The five subsections include:

- The Rationale for Using 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12 as the Textual Basis for This Thesis
- The Background of 1 Thessalonians in Light of Paul's Approach to Disciple-making
- Effective Disciple-making According to Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12
- The Results of Effective Disciple-making in Thessalonica
- The Evidence for Incorporating Evangelism into Discipleship in Paul's Ministry to the Thessalonians

### **The Rationale for Using 1 Thessalonians 1:1–4:12 as the Textual Basis for This Thesis**

With all the rich texts in the New Testament available from which to study the relationship between evangelism and discipleship, why select one from 1 Thessalonians? I will attempt to answer this question by answering two fundamental questions that underlie it.

First, why was Paul's ministry selected as the example and not that of Jesus himself? It was certainly not because Paul's ability to make disciples was superior to that of Jesus; rather, Paul, unlike Jesus, made disciples in the post-resurrection era, in which the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in believers ever since the risen Christ returned to his Father in heaven (John 15:26, 16:5-10; Acts 1:6-9). It was the Spirit of God who enabled Paul and other disciples of Christ to take the gospel to the Greco-Roman world.<sup>50</sup> This was the age in which Paul lived and ministered, and it is the same age in which believers in Christ now live and minister also.

Second, why use 1 Thessalonians as the basis text from which to select the passage? It is one of what modern biblical scholars refer to as the genuine Pauline epistles<sup>51</sup>; it was addressed to a predominantly Gentile church which Paul and his companions had founded (1 Thess 1:4-5, 2:13); and it contains sufficient background material on Paul's methodology of evangelism and discipleship from which to draw conclusions for this thesis in the context of a positive relational tone between disciple-maker and disciples vis-à-vis that of Paul's epistle to the Galatians (Gal 1:6, 3:1-4). The final section of the epistle (1 Thess 4:13-5:28), while providing additional insights into the relationship between evangelism and discipleship, would also lead readers into

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<sup>50</sup> Jones, 53; Justo T. González, *The History of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, vol. 1 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 25-26.

<sup>51</sup> John M. G. Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55.3 (July 1993): 513; Edgar M. Krenz, "First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," ABD 6, David Noel Freedman, ed. in chief (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 515. Of the thirteen letters traditionally ascribed to Paul, only seven are considered by modern Pauline scholars to be genuine (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). The remaining six letters are pseudonymous, referred to as "deutero-Pauline" (Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) because they are deemed to be written not by Paul, but probably by his disciples sometime after his death. They wrote under his name in order that the letters might be "received authoritatively" as though from Paul himself (Brown, 6). Generally, the content of these letters is more universal in scope than those considered genuine (e.g., "the universal Church" vs. "the local church," respectively), and the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) in particular, with their emphasis on details about church leadership, point to a time after Paul's death (Brown, 6-7).

matters of eschatology that would necessitate a lengthy discussion that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The first letter to the Thessalonians reveals Paul's passionate heart for the believers in Thessalonica, which he demonstrated not only in his encouraging (and challenging) words to them, but also in his disciple-making methods. Though perhaps "theologically thin"<sup>52</sup> and lacking the great Pauline theological themes of his later epistles, such as the "justification of faith apart from the works of the Law,"<sup>53</sup> this epistle "reflects this pastoral care of a fledgling church more clearly than any of Paul's other letters."<sup>54</sup> First Thessalonians offers readers a glimpse into . . . the life of a non-Jewish Christian community and Paul's missional approach and proclamation of the "gospel about God" to that type of community.<sup>55</sup>

## **The Background of 1 Thessalonians in Light of Paul's Approach to Disciple-making**

### The Date and Authorship of the Letter

First Thessalonians is considered by the majority of modern scholars to be the earliest Pauline epistle and the earliest document in the New Testament.<sup>56</sup> Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians<sup>57</sup> c. 50 C.E.<sup>58</sup> while he was staying in Corinth<sup>59</sup> a few

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<sup>52</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 456.

<sup>54</sup> Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophical Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Krenz, "First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," 516.

<sup>56</sup> F. W. Beare, "First Letter to the Thessalonians," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 4, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 621; Brown, 456; Edgar M. Krenz, "Evangelism and Spirit: 1 Thessalonians 1," *Theology and Mission* 14.1 (February 1987); and Krenz, "First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," 515.

<sup>57</sup> Though the epistle was undoubtedly penned by Paul (Beare, 621), there is debate among scholars as to whether the words of 1 Thess 2:13-16 were originally composed by him. Those who argue against Pauline authorship point to it being a redundant round of thanksgiving, the first thanksgiving section given

weeks to no more than several months after he departed from Thessalonica.<sup>60</sup> Though Paul's missionary companions Silvanus (or Silas)<sup>61</sup> and Timothy<sup>62</sup> are listed as co-authors (1 Thess 1:1), the consensus of present-day scholars is that, though Paul nearly always uses the nominative plural pronoun to indicate all three as authors, the thoughts and sentiments are most likely his own.<sup>63</sup> Furnish argues that 1 Thessalonians "reads much more like the product of one person than like a collaborative effort" (note, e.g., the eruptions of the first person singular in 2:18, 3:5, 5:27).<sup>64</sup> Abraham Malherbe notes: "Different reasons have been suggested for Paul's mentioning co-senders: to make the letters less private in nature, to give more weight to what he has to say in the letters, to confirm the gospel by two or three witnesses, to honor the co-senders he mentions; or he

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beginning at 1:2; its "un-Pauline" and "Pagan polemic" style; and his declaration of God's wrath that had just begun to overtake the Jews, which appears to contradict his later writing that "all Israel will be saved" (Brown, 463). Those who argue for Pauline authorship of 1 Thess 2:13-16 maintain that it is found in all the manuscripts; that Paul spoke against the aggression of the Jews in 2 Cor 11:24; and that Paul writes elsewhere regarding God's wrath toward the Jews (in Rom 2:5; 3:5-6; 4:15; and 11:25), which implies that the final salvation of God's chosen people does not preclude some of them from experiencing God's wrath. "In Paul's thought the jealous Jews at Thessalonica who harassed both him and those who came to believe in Jesus would represent what Rom 11:24 calls the part of Israel upon whom 'hardening' (= the 'wrath' of 1 Thess) had come. If before Paul arrived, Jews who observed the law had attracted some God-fearing Gentiles and prominent women (Acts 17:4), understandably they might have been infuriated when their converts went over to Paul's proclamation of the Messiah in which Law observance was not required" (Brown, 463).

<sup>58</sup> Beare notes that the dating of this letter can be approximated by noting that Timothy, after visiting the Thessalonians, rejoined Paul and Silas about the time that they arrived in Corinth (Acts 18:5). At Corinth, Paul was brought before Gallio, who was proconsul of Achaia in 51-52 C.E., a short time afterward (Acts 18:12-17); therefore, the first letter of the Thessalonians must have been written sometime in 50 or 51 C.E.

<sup>59</sup> Beare, 623; Bruce, xxxii; Furnish, 30; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 71; and Todd D. Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and Its Neighbours*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 183 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 37.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce, 8; Malherbe, AB 32B, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Bruce, 6. Silvanus is the same person as Silas, who was a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22, 27, 32) and Paul's missionary companion (Furnish, 37).

<sup>62</sup> Timothy, the son of a Greek father and Jewish mother, converted to Christianity during Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Galatia. Most probably a native of Lystra, he joined Paul in his missionary endeavors to Thessalonica, Corinth, and Philippi (Bruce, 6). Smith notes that "Timothy's role was to provide additional nurturing or moral training for the young church in the light of the team's grave concerns about its stability" (Abraham Smith, "The First Letter to the Thessalonians," *The New Interpreter's Bible* 11, Leander E. Keck, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 711).

<sup>63</sup> Krenz, "First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," 515.

<sup>64</sup> Furnish, 31.

mentions them because they are well known to his readers and might function as intermediaries between Paul and them . . .”<sup>65</sup>

### The Character of the Letter

Scholars have long noted that the content of this epistle, while not theologically profound, is yet under-girded by a collection of teachings and creeds of the early Church shared by Paul and the Thessalonians.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, in light of the suffering that both the disciple-makers and disciples experienced (1 Thess 1:6, 2:2, 14b-15, 3:4, 7), Paul does not elaborate on the death of Christ, but only serves to point out his resurrection, a resurrection that those Thessalonians in Christ would also share (1 Thess 1:10, 4:13-17).<sup>67</sup> The salient feature that has overshadowed the letter and has historically captured the attention of biblical scholars is the *parousia* (return) of the Lord Jesus in glory and the “premature” death of some of the Thessalonians.<sup>68</sup> Victor Paul Furnish argues that Paul’s purpose of 1 Thessalonians was not to compose “a systematic theology or a comprehensive ethic,” but to carry out his pastoral role as a disciple-maker.<sup>69</sup>

### An Account of Paul’s Ministry to the Thessalonians according to Acts 17

According to the account in Acts 17:1-9, Paul first visited Thessalonica with his companions Silas and Timothy (who had joined Paul and Silas during their missionary journey). Only a few days earlier, they had experienced a most difficult evangelistic

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<sup>65</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 86-87.

<sup>66</sup> Beare, 621; Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 516.

<sup>67</sup> Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 517.

<sup>68</sup> Beare, 621.

<sup>69</sup> Furnish, 32.

campaign in Philippi, having been shamefully beaten and imprisoned (Acts 16:19-24), though they did witness the power of God while in prison, which culminated in a dramatic conversion of the jailor and his entire household (Acts 16:25-34). At Thessalonica, Paul entered the Jewish synagogue “as was his custom” (Acts 17:2), and began to explain from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ who has risen from the dead. The response of the audience to his message was mixed. Many God-fearing Gentiles who were worshipping there came to believe in the gospel that Paul preached over three Sabbaths. However, the Jews there became greatly jealous of the fact that Paul had captured the imagination of the devout Gentiles, so they began to gather and incite the lower-class citizens into a riotous crowd. The entire city became unsettled, and the crowd went to apprehend Paul and his companions at the home of Jason (a Thessalonian who was sympathetic to the missionaries’ cause and who undoubtedly gave them lodging), but they did not find Paul and his missionary partners there. So the crowd brought Jason before the city *politarchs* (officials), charging that he had harbored the men “who have turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) by undermining the authority and laws of Claudius Caesar and by treacherously proclaiming this Jesus as their king. After Jason paid the officials security money, they released him. Meanwhile, Paul and his companions managed to slip away at night to Berea (Acts 17:10).

#### Problems in Reconciling the Accounts of Paul’s Ministry in Acts 17 and 1 Thessalonians

Many biblical scholars today view the book of Acts as a secondary source for historical data on the missionary activities of the early Church due to Luke’s proclivity to condense certain accounts in Acts and to promote his own interests by emphasizing

particular elements<sup>70</sup>; scholars F. F. Bruce and Raymond Brown are notable exceptions.<sup>71</sup> Concerning Paul's visit to Thessalonica, Luke's account in Acts 17 appears to contradict the data found in 1 Thessalonians in a couple of important areas: (1) the duration of Paul's first visit and (2) the demographic makeup of the Thessalonian Church.

First, the Acts 17 account of Paul's visits to the synagogue in Thessalonica on three Sabbaths and his subsequent "hasty departure" following the civil disturbance implies a two-week stay.<sup>72</sup> This appears to conflict with implications from the data in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and a passage in his letter to the Philippians that suggest a longer stay of up to a few months.<sup>73</sup> The tone of Paul's letter to the believers in Thessalonica conveys a sincerely warm, even intimate tone between them that could not have possibly existed had Paul stayed there only two weeks. Beare notes that "the pastoral care with which the apostles had followed up their evangelism (see especially 2:9-12) and the strength of the affection which they had developed toward their converts (2:8, 3:6-10) would suggest, if not absolutely require, a period of months rather than weeks."<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Paul mentions in his letter to the Philippians of how they met his needs while he was in Thessalonica: "Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again" (Phil 4:16). Therefore, on at least two occasions, Paul received

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<sup>70</sup> Brown, 458; Malherbe, AB 32B, 57.

<sup>71</sup> Bruce argues, "The outline of events, gathered from 1 Thessalonians, agrees so well with the fuller record of Acts 16:6-18:5 that the record, though it is substantially later than 1 Thessalonians, may confidently be accepted as providing a historical framework within which the data of 1 Thessalonians can be read with greater understanding . . ." (Bruce, xxi). Furthermore, Bruce states, "It is accepted in this commentary (on the basis of independent study) that the historical value of Acts is high" (Bruce, 61). Brown cautions Pauline scholars who regard Acts as historically unreliable that Luke had accurately recorded the title of the Thessalonian officials as *politarchs*, a Greek word not attested in any extra-biblical writings, but was found in a first-century inscription at Thessalonica (Brown, 458, n. 5).

<sup>72</sup> Beare, 622; Krenz, "First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," 516.

<sup>73</sup> Beare, 622; Bridges, 219; and Brown, 464.

<sup>74</sup> Beare, 622.

financial support from the believers in Philippi,<sup>75</sup> who lived several days' travel one way,<sup>76</sup> which indicates that Paul must have stayed in Thessalonica some time longer than two weeks. Brown notes that Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica is "compressed" and in a "highly stylized picture."<sup>77</sup> This selective reporting on Luke's part does allow for the possibility that Paul may have proclaimed the gospel to pagan Gentiles after he preached for three Sabbaths at the synagogue (Acts 17:2-3). Bruce concludes: From the record of Acts 17:1-9 the impression might be gained that the Thessalonian converts were mainly Jews and God-fearers; but evidently more evangelization was carried on in the city than Luke reports: the missionaries must have stayed longer than the two or three weeks during which they were granted the hospitality of the synagogue.<sup>78</sup>

Second, Luke portrays the Thessalonian Church, at least at the very beginning, to consist of those in the synagogue who responded to Paul's proclamation: "And some of them [Jews] were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:4). But none of these groups (Jews, "God-fearing" Greek men, and women) appears to be part of the demographic makeup of the Thessalonian Church addressed in his first letter.

Regarding the Jews, Beare observes, "One would never learn from reading the letter that there was a Jewish community in Thessalonica at all, much less that it had been the center of the mission and had provided the apostle with the nucleus of the church."<sup>79</sup>

Krenz notes that Paul's letter does not reveal any Jewish minority in the Thessalonian

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<sup>75</sup> Bridges, 219; Brown, 458.

<sup>76</sup> Bruce, xxii.

<sup>77</sup> Brown, 458.

<sup>78</sup> Bruce, 18.

<sup>79</sup> Beare, 623.

church,<sup>80</sup> for it is silent on matters that would have been of importance to the Jews: Old Testament events, customs, or heroes—patriarchs, prophets, etc. The Torah is not mentioned, and therefore there is no discussion of being made right with God (justification).<sup>81</sup>

As for the Gentile believers, Luke’s account speaks of devout or “God-fearing” Greeks, while Paul in his letter describes how his readers had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9b). While it is possible that Paul is recounting the entire process of the Greek believers’ conversion (from being idol worshipers to “God-fearers” to Christians), it is unusual that Paul would not at least mention the synagogue or the “God-fearing” state in which he found them.

Readers of 1 Thessalonians who had not read Acts 17 would never know that “not a few leading women” had joined Paul and Silas. In fact, with the exception that the term •δελφοι (*adelphoi*, translated as “brothers”) in 1 Thessalonians 2:1 can refer to both men and women (and often does), Linda McKinnish Bridges goes as far as to argue that there were no women in the Thessalonian congregation; it is highly probable that the Thessalonian church was exclusively men given the “androcentric nature” of the letter.<sup>82</sup>

While it may appear that Paul wrote his first Thessalonian letter with only Gentile men in mind, passages such as 1:1 and 2:14 (and any other, for that matter), do not

<sup>80</sup> Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 516.

<sup>81</sup> Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 517; Furnish, 29.

<sup>82</sup> Bridges, 212. Bridges argues that only men were members of the Thessalonian community; there were no women present. She offers three reasons for this: (1) “. . . if the community of believers in Thessalonica is housed in an *insula*, as Malherbe suggests, a workshop/apartment where artisan members live, work, and worship, including Paul, the traveling missionary and artisan tentmaker, then the inhabitants would be predominantly men . . . Associations arranged around the public roles of producing and selling goods would belong to the male public domain. Women would have been more visible in the private space of the home rather than in a public workshop”; (2) Bridges quotes Lone Fatum, who defines ἡ ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) used by Paul in 1 Thess 1:1 as “a meeting or voluntary association of freeborn male citizens” (1 Thess 1:1), leading one to believe in an all-male church there; and (3) there is no mention of women with regard to the assembly in Paul’s first letter (Bridges, 222).

necessarily preclude God-fearing Greek men and women.<sup>83</sup> With regard to this lack of material pertaining to Jews, Malherbe rightly responds, “This does not mean that there need have been no Jews in the Thessalonian church, as is sometimes claimed . . .”<sup>84</sup>

In summary, while the accounts in Acts 17 and 1 Thessalonians appear to contradict one another with regard to the duration of Paul’s visit to Thessalonica and the demographic makeup of the Thessalonian congregation, the discrepancies are apparent only and are not without plausible explanation. Therefore, Acts 17 is considered here to be a primary source for historical data regarding Paul’s ministry to the Thessalonians.

#### First-century Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Church

Thessalonica in the first century C.E. was the capital of the province Macedonia in the Roman Empire.<sup>85</sup> Thessalonica was situated in a harbor overlooking the Aegean Sea<sup>86</sup> and along the *Via Egnatia*, the major route from Rome to the eastern cities of the Roman Empire,<sup>87</sup> 50 miles northeast of Berea<sup>88</sup> and about 90 to 100 miles southwest of Philippi.<sup>89</sup> With a population estimated between 30,000 and 80,000 inhabitants,<sup>90</sup> Thessalonica was home to Greeks, Macedonians, and Jews.<sup>91</sup> The population of the first-century Thessalonian Jewish community is uncertain, and the only evidence for its existence at that time is from Luke’s account in Acts 17.<sup>92</sup> Bruce argues that Thessalonica

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<sup>83</sup> Still, 70.

<sup>84</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 56.

<sup>85</sup> Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 515; Furnish, 26; J. Finnegan, “Thessalonica,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* 4, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 629.

<sup>86</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 6.

<sup>87</sup> Beare, 622.

<sup>88</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 69.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce, xxii.

<sup>90</sup> Furnish, 26; Malherbe, AB 32B, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Furnish, 26.

<sup>92</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 6.

was home to a “sizeable” community of Jews,<sup>93</sup> but Furnish asserts that the evidence for such a community goes back only to the second century C.E.<sup>94</sup> Brown notes not only that there were first-century Jews in Thessalonica, but that there were also adherents to a plethora of cults. “Archaeology and historical records indicate places for worshipping the Roman pantheon and the emperor, as well as a host of Oriental deities, e.g., Cabirus (Kabiroi), Isis, Serapis, and Osiris.”<sup>95</sup>

The Thessalonian church at the time of Paul’s first letter was in its infancy—a few months or perhaps only a few weeks old.<sup>96</sup> Consisting of a few dozen members<sup>97</sup> and apparently without any sophistication to their organization or worship style,<sup>98</sup> these new believers experienced their share of external afflictions, but the letter does not betray even a hint of controversy or strained relations within their membership.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the overall tone for this young church is very positive, as is the relationship that Paul and his companions appear to have had with them.<sup>100</sup> That Paul wrote to working-class Gentiles in Thessalonica is evident from statements in his letter that they had turned from worshipping false gods (1 Thess 1:9) and that they were to work with their own hands (1 Thess 4:1).<sup>101</sup> Malherbe suggests that the setting in which Paul would have carried out his evangelistic work among the Thessalonians would not have been a *domus* (home) of the well-to-do, but an *insula*, a building that housed a line of shops in the front of the lower floor facing the road, a workshop or manufacturing area, and a living space for the

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<sup>93</sup> Bruce, xxii.

<sup>94</sup> Furnish, 26.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, 458.

<sup>96</sup> Beare, 622.

<sup>97</sup> Furnish, 29.

<sup>98</sup> Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 517.

<sup>99</sup> Beare, 621.

<sup>100</sup> Beare, 621.

<sup>101</sup> Brown, 458.

shopkeepers, employees, family members, and visitors that was located either behind or over the shop.<sup>102</sup> “It is likely that . . . Paul’s converts came from the artisans, tradespeople, and manual laborers with whom he would naturally come into contact.”<sup>103</sup>

### **Effective Disciple-making According to Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12**

Effective disciple-making is ultimately the enterprise of God; it happens best in the context of long-term relationships; and it is a process founded upon a few sound practices.

#### **Effective Disciple-making Is Ultimately the Enterprise of God**

Paul’s ministry to the Thessalonians demonstrates that effective disciple-making is ultimately God’s business in three ways:

- God had chosen the Thessalonians
- God had worked on behalf of the Thessalonians
- God had chosen Paul to make disciples among the Thessalonians

#### **God Had Chosen the Thessalonians**

There were clues that God had chosen the Thessalonians before Paul ever reached Thessalonica. As Paul and his companions made their way on what is traditionally known as Paul’s second missionary journey,<sup>104</sup> the Holy Spirit would modify their travel itinerary significantly.<sup>105</sup> Bruce argues that the account in Acts implies that Paul had no

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<sup>102</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Brown, 428, 432.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, 433.

intention of going to Thessalonica (or Macedonia for that matter); he was planning to go to Ephesus.<sup>106</sup> Paul had originally planned to take his old traveling and teaching companion Barnabas, who also was set apart by God to minister to the Gentiles, to visit the churches that they had established together on a previous missionary journey (Acts 15:36). However, Paul disputed with Barnabas over Mark, whom Barnabas wanted to take along, but Paul refused, remembering how Mark had abandoned them at Pamphylia during their previous missionary journey (Acts 15:37-38). Instead, Paul took as his traveling partner Silas, a Jew from Jerusalem sent to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas after the Council at Jerusalem a few years earlier (Acts 15:22). At Lystra Paul and Silas met Timothy, the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother; he had a good reputation among the locals (Acts 16:1-2).

After the missionaries had traveled through Phrygia and Galatia, the Holy Spirit began to noticeably alter their travel plans by prohibiting them from proclaiming the gospel (“the word”) in Asia (Acts 16:6). After Paul and his companions had arrived in Mysia, the Spirit forbade them from entering Bithynia (Acts 16:7). At Troas, Paul received a vision of a Macedonian man pleading for him and his companions to come and help them (Acts 16:9). Immediately recognizing this as a vision from the Lord (Acts 16:10), Paul and his companions made their way at once to Macedonia, finally to reach Philippi and Thessalonica and establish a church in each city (1 Thess 1:4-5, 2:13; Phil 1:3-5).

Near the beginning of his letter, Paul, in a mood of thankfulness to God, proclaims that God has chosen the Thessalonians to live as believers who live in light of the gospel (1 Thess 1:4-5a). The underlying reason for Paul’s thanksgiving is that God

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<sup>106</sup> Bruce, xxi.

had “chosen the Thessalonians to receive and believe in the gospel.”<sup>107</sup> Paul assures them of their status as a people chosen of God: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:4-5a). Here Paul testifies as a witness to how powerfully and dramatically some of the people of Thessalonica had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9b), which was no small matter given the cultural and religious environment in which they lived. Another facet of this divine power was the inner strength that these new believers needed to maintain their new religious affiliation in the face of the suffering and afflictions that they experienced from their own compatriots (1 Thess 2:14), who were offended by the new believers’ abandonment of the local Greek religious culture.<sup>108</sup>

The Holy Spirit was revealed to the Thessalonians through joy in the face of their afflictions. Paul does not identify the afflictions that the new believers were experiencing, yet he declares that what they were facing was similar to what he and his companions had faced from certain Jews (1 Thess 2:14-15b). Only by the Spirit of God could these new believers have joy and be content to stay faithful to God, whom they had only recently come to know, in the midst of their suffering and afflictions.

Paul proclaimed and modeled the gospel to the Thessalonians with “full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). While the case could be made that it was the Holy Spirit bringing a full conviction in the hearts of the Thessalonians that led them to believe in Christ, the remainder of the verse (“You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”) points rather to how Paul and his companions delivered the gospel to

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<sup>107</sup> Furnish, 42-43.

<sup>108</sup> Barclay, 515.

them.<sup>109</sup> This conviction was that the gospel is not for the Jews only, but for the Gentiles as well (Acts 13:47). The Thessalonian believers, by imitating Paul and his companions (and thereby imitating the Lord also), acquired that conviction in amazingly short order.<sup>110</sup>

### **God Had Worked on behalf of the Thessalonians**

From the vision of the Macedonian man pleading for Paul and his companions to come into Macedonia to the enthusiastic response of the new believers to Paul's gospel and ministry, God worked through Paul on behalf of the Thessalonian Church. Certainly Paul's manner of communicating the gospel in word and deed in the presence of the Thessalonians was an important component that worked in concert with God's Spirit to turn these idol worshipers into disciples of the Lord. Paul had worked hard and long ("night and day") among the Thessalonians, proclaiming the gospel to them while partially supporting himself financially (cf. Phil 4:16). He describes his role regarding his labor on their behalf as a "spiritual parent"—as both a nursing mother (1 Thess 2:7) and an encouraging father (1 Thess 2:11-12a)—to nurture and exhort them to live according to the status of their divine call (1 Thess 2:12). Paul's parental concern is also evident following his abrupt departure from Thessalonica, for he longed to see the believers, to know how they were getting along in their faith, and to discover whether the foundation that he had established for their new life as disciples of Christ had remained firm despite his absence (1 Thess 3:2-5).

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<sup>109</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 112.

<sup>110</sup> Smith, 695.

What may be more remarkable than God working on behalf of the Thessalonians through Paul is the continued work of God among them in Paul's absence, especially after a relatively brief visit by Paul of no more than two or three months.<sup>111</sup> Paul notes that the new believers were not merely imitators of him, but of the Lord Jesus as well, receiving the word of God joyfully even in the midst of great affliction (1 Thess 1:6). That it is ultimately God's work and not merely Paul's is evident when Paul and his companions are physically separated from the Thessalonians. Timothy's report of the good news of the Thessalonians' faith, love, and steadfastness in the Lord to Paul after returning from Thessalonica only serves to confirm that God had not only preserved, but strengthened, this young and tender Church in light of their afflictions (1 Thess 3:6-8). Regarding love, Paul encourages them to continue loving one another just as God himself had taught them (1 Thess 4:9-10). Furthermore, Paul acknowledges that the "word of God" that he proclaimed to them has been working in and through them since they received it (1 Thess 2:13b).

In response to all the hard work that God had accomplished on their behalf, the Thessalonian believers also had worked hard, doing what they saw their Lord, and his disciple Paul, had been doing among them. They were commended by Paul for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:3). What, more specifically, was this work that the Thessalonians were doing? Staying strong in the faith though they were suffering as a result of opposition from their nonbelieving neighbors (1 Thess 2:14), waiting for the Lord Jesus to return (1 Thess 1:10), loving one another (1 Thess 4:9-10a), and proclaiming the "word of the Lord" throughout their province of Macedonia, neighboring Achaia, and beyond

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<sup>111</sup> Bridges, 219; Brown, 464.

(1 Thess 1:8). Nissen notes that “in the first decades Christianity was spread in the Mediterranean world not only because of great missionaries but also because of ‘anonymous’ Christians (merchants, slaves, artisans, etc.) who traveled.”<sup>112</sup> It is likely that there were Thessalonians among these “anonymous Christians.”

### **God Had Chosen Paul to Make Disciples among the Thessalonians**

Just as the Thessalonians were chosen by God, so Paul was chosen for service to begin the disciple-making process in Thessalonica. It was to Paul that God revealed his vision to compel Paul and his associates to enter Macedonia in order to proclaim the gospel of God (Acts 16:9-10). Paul tells the Thessalonians that he was approved by God and entrusted with the gospel that he had communicated to them (1 Thess 2:4a). Paul reminds them of his special status as their “spiritual parent” chosen by God through recounting the fact that prima facie circumstances can be deceiving, i.e., his sudden departure (Acts 17:10); his motivation for ministry was not for personal gain (1 Thess 2:5b), but to please and glorify the God who had called him to this work (1 Thess 2:4); and his godly conduct while he was with them (1 Thess 2:9-12).

Paul openly shares with the Thessalonian disciples his missionary troubles and the shameful treatment that he received in Philippi (1 Thess 2:2, 15). Though some of the new believers may have wondered if Paul’s troubles were a sign that he had not been chosen by God, more likely than not Paul’s openness endeared himself to them, for they too had had their share of troubles since proclaiming faith in Christ. The troubles of earthly life do not end for the Christian and, in fact, they often become worse on account of one’s witness to Christ. Paul does not hide this from the Thessalonians, and, as a

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<sup>112</sup> Nissen, 109.

result, they do not make peace and comfort a condition of their salvation; their life of “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus” (1 Thess 1:3b) was worth suffering and even dying for.

The knowledge of the shameful beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16:19-24) renders Paul’s statements made to defend his motives in his ministry (1 Thess 2:1-12) almost superfluous, for who would endure such treatment by continuing to proclaim this “gospel of God” to people in foreign lands because of vainglory or greed? However, Paul proceeds to address all objections to being their legitimate spiritual parent who brought them the “word of God” (1 Thess 2:13). First, he and his companions had been approved by God and were entrusted with the gospel in order to communicate it clearly and accurately to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:4a). Second, Paul precludes the possibility of deceiving the Thessalonians for material gain by declaring that his intent is to please God and not humans, including those in Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:4b, 6a). Finally, he and his companions treated the new believers with love and respect (in keeping with his motivations stated above), not making demands upon them that they as apostles of Christ could have legitimately made (1 Thess 2:6).

In addition, the conduct of Paul and his companions ultimately revealed Paul’s intentions. Paul recounts his time in Thessalonica with them as one of nurturing and encouraging them, working hard in his imitation of Christ so that they also might imitate him and, therefore, Christ (1 Thess 1:6). Paul challenges the Thessalonians, in effect, by saying, “You yourselves are our witnesses” and uses bold language to characterize himself and his fellow missionaries as “holy,” “righteous,” and “blameless” (1 Thess 2:10).

## Effective Disciple-making Happens Best in the Context of Long-Term Relationships

The accounts of Paul's interactions with others in his epistles and in Acts reveal his mastery of developing and cultivating interpersonal relationships that served him well throughout his life and ministry. Paul's greetings at the end of Romans (Rom 16:1-24) is a wonderful testimony to how well-connected, how well thought of, and how well used by God this disciple-maker really was.

With regard to the Thessalonians, Paul demonstrated effective disciple-making through long-term personal relationships in three ways:

- He genuinely loved and cared for the Thessalonians
- He earned the Thessalonians' trust, love, and respect
- He could minister to the spiritual needs of the Thessalonian Church effectively

### **Paul Genuinely Loved and Cared for the Thessalonians**

This letter swells with the passionate love that Paul had for the believers in Thessalonica. Bridges notes, "Paul describes his relationship to the Thessalonian believers in warm, compassionate tones of family and friend. More than anything else Paul wants a relationship with these his friends . . ." <sup>113</sup> Who could resist this man and refuse his warm-hearted goodwill? Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and Timothy's visit were examples of the kind of "pastoral care" that Paul and his associates gave toward the young Thessalonian church. <sup>114</sup> Paul, therefore, demonstrates his God-given

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<sup>113</sup> Bridges, 224.

<sup>114</sup> Furnish, 22.

love for the Thessalonians in three primary ways:

- He longed to see them
- He sent Timothy to check on their welfare
- He wrote them a letter

Paul longed to see the Thessalonians

The account in Acts of Paul's ministry to the people in Thessalonica portrays a brief time with them until he is forced to leave, escaping to Berea (Acts 17:10). Paul describes his rapid departure from Thessalonica as being "torn away" from them (1 Thess. 2:17). One can sense Paul's "separation anxiety" at the end of chapter two, as though he is a parent who has been separated from his own children. Paul tells them that he had repeatedly tried to come and visit them again but was prevented by Satan himself (1 Thess 2:18), though he does not elaborate on how he was held back.

Paul longed to see the Thessalonian believers again, not only because he was physically separated from his disciples and friends, but also because they were the fruit of his life's work in the Lord (1 Thess 2:19-20). He desired to see whether his spiritual investment in the lives of those chosen by God to receive the gospel was worth all the effort (1 Thess 3:5). Paul paints a vivid picture of his coming before the Lord Jesus with a prized offering—the Thessalonians, the spiritual fruit of his God-given ministry. Paul is a proud spiritual parent. He and his companions would refer to these new Gentile believers as "our glory and joy" (1 Thess 2:20). Upon hearing Timothy's report on their welfare (see below), Paul was all the more eager to see his Thessalonian friends. Rejoicing before God over the Thessalonians, he and his companions prayed "most earnestly night and

day” for the opportunity to visit them again and supply them with what they needed to continue growing in their faith (1 Thess 3:10).

Paul sent Timothy to check on their welfare

Being somehow hindered by Satan, Paul and Silas, in their intense longing, sent Timothy to get word of the situation in Thessalonica and to encourage the believers there to continue in their faith in light of “these afflictions” (1 Thess 3:3). Whose afflictions (Paul’s or the Thessalonians) and what the afflictions were are uncertain, and a case could be made for either or both. Malherbe asserts that Paul is discussing his own afflictions here.<sup>115</sup> As to why Timothy was sent to Thessalonica, Bruce speculates that he was the best choice, for he was the youngest and least known of the missionaries to the Macedonians. Furthermore, he was also half-Greek, and therefore he might not have attracted the unwanted attention that would have accompanied a full-blooded Jew.<sup>116</sup>

Paul admits his fear of loss in his hard-earned, precious investment and entertained the possibility, at least for a moment, that God would not ultimately preserve the community from the attacks and trickery of that old tempter, Satan (1 Thess 3:5). However, Timothy’s return from Thessalonica and his report to Paul and the others brought the reassuring good news that the Thessalonian Church, though battered and harassed, was holding strong and even flourishing (1 Thess 1:6-8, 3:6). Moreover, the believers in Thessalonica not only remembered Paul and companions, but these young believers also longed to see them again. Timothy noted that they were a community

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<sup>115</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 77.

<sup>116</sup> Bruce, 64.

abounding in faith and in love (1 Thess 3:6). One senses a great sigh of relief in Paul as he rejoices over these disciples so young and yet so alive and fruitful in their new faith.

Malherbe likens Paul's relationship the Thessalonian believers as a Greek moral philosopher to his disciples in that Paul's life and the teachings of the gospel were inseparable in the minds of the Thessalonians. Thus, if Timothy had reported back to Paul that the young believers had forgotten their example (Paul), they would have deserted their faith in Christ. Malherbe argues that when, in fact, Timothy brought back his report of their faith and love, he "proclaimed the gospel (*euangelisamenou*) of their faith and love and that they retained a good memory of him."<sup>117</sup>

Given the hostile reception that Paul and his companions had experienced earlier in a number of cities along the latter portion of their missionary journey, Timothy's report from Thessalonica was tremendous news that brought the missionaries great comfort and encouragement (1 Thess 3:6-7). Paul describes the news as life-giving: "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord" (1 Thess 3:8).

Paul wrote to them

In light of being prohibited from visiting Thessalonica, Paul, who was separated from the believers "in person but not in heart,"<sup>118</sup> wrote them a letter, which was the next best thing to personal contact with regard to establishing and maintaining the relationship that he enjoyed with these Thessalonian believers.<sup>119</sup> The purpose of the letter was to "serve as an interim communication until the prayer (in 1 Thess 3:10) is answered and a

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<sup>117</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 68.

<sup>118</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 78.

<sup>119</sup> Bruce, 58.

reunion [between Paul and the Thessalonian believers] takes place.”<sup>120</sup> Edgar M. Krenz notes that Paul’s purpose of this letter was not to correct any errors in the Thessalonians’ theology, but to uphold the church there and to encourage them to carry on despite their afflictions and difficulties. Paul was building upon the spiritual and relational foundation that he had laid during his visit.<sup>121</sup>

The importance of this letter stems from the circumstances in which the author and readers found themselves and the nature of correspondence in the first century C.E. First Thessalonians was written at a tender stage in the recipients’ life as a church. “In no other letter does he [Paul] write to people who had been Christians for so short a time and who were therefore especially in need of encouragement, preferably through personal contact.”<sup>122</sup> As for written correspondence in Paul’s day, it was a close substitute for in-person communication. Malherbe notes that because “a letter was thought to reflect the character and personality of its writer, one had to be careful to write as though one were speaking to the reader.”<sup>123</sup>

### **Paul Earned the Thessalonians’ Trust, Love, and Respect**

Paul did all that he could to maintain the relationship that he and his missionary partners had established with the Thessalonian church. The benefits of this relationship were manifold, for Paul had earned the trust, love, and respect of these people. His

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<sup>120</sup> Bruce, 66.

<sup>121</sup> Krenz, “First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” 516.

<sup>122</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 130.

<sup>123</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 77.

credibility had risen significantly in their estimation because of the following:

- He had worked hard among them
- He made himself transparent to them
- He shared in and understood their suffering and afflictions

Paul had worked hard among them

What was Paul’s work among the Thessalonians? It was putting the faith that he had in God and the love that he had for the Thessalonians into action. Paul and his companions continually prayed for their Thessalonian brothers and sisters.<sup>124</sup> They proclaimed the gospel, which God entrusted to them, and they were approved by God to share it with these dear Gentiles (1 Thess 2:4). In the spirit of fondness for the Thessalonians, they went “above and beyond” the minimum requirements of evangelists and disciple-makers to the extent that they shared their very lives with them (1 Thess 2:8).

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he and his companions had “worked night and day” to partially support themselves<sup>125</sup> while communicating the message of the gospel to them so that they would not be a burden to the new church (1 Thess 2:9). Smith notes that Paul’s labor while he stayed in Thessalonica had a two-fold purpose: “What is . . . clear is that Paul’s reference to the foundational team’s self-sufficiency not only shows the great affection the team had for the Thessalonian believers, but it also serves as a model for them. Paul would charge the Thessalonians to ‘work with your hands’ with

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<sup>124</sup> With regard to “sisters,” the Greek word • δὲλφοί (*adelphoi*) is often translated “brothers,” but in this context denotes sisters (women) as well (Furnish, 30). Note also that of the Thessalonians who responded, many were “not a few of the leading women” (Acts 17:4b).

<sup>125</sup> Paul received financial support from the Philippians at least twice while he was ministering in Thessalonica; cf. Phil 4:16.

the goal of not being dependent on outsiders (4:11).”<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, though Paul could have rightfully demanded compensation for all the ministerial work that he and his partners had performed in Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:6), he refused to do so for the love of his Thessalonian disciples and on the principle that he would do whatever it took to spread the message of Christ without condition or hindrance (cf. 1 Cor 9:11-12).

Paul was transparent before them

That the apostle bares his heart and becomes vulnerable before the believers in Thessalonica is especially evident from his physical separation from them and his initial anxiety (and subsequent relief and joy) over their welfare (1 Thess 2:17-3:8). Paul describes being “torn away” (•πορφανίζω, *aporphanizō*) from his disciples, a physically and emotionally painful image. This verb describes its subject as being either “a child deprived of his parents” or “a parent deprived of his children.”<sup>127</sup>

One senses the anguish that Paul feels as he describes the agony of not knowing the spiritual welfare of his new disciples—would they remain faithful or would they fall away under the weight of the afflictions wrought by the enemy in the ongoing spiritual war (1 Thess 3:5)? Furnish, in his discussion of Paul’s recollection of his longing to be with the Thessalonians and his response to Timothy’s report on their welfare (1 Thess 2:17-3:10), notes that “Paul allows himself to be seen, even and precisely in his ministerial role, as no less acquainted with the experiences of loneliness, anxiety,

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<sup>126</sup> Smith, 700.

<sup>127</sup> Furnish, 75.

vulnerability, joy, and affection than any other human being (1 Thess 2:17; 3:1, 5, 9).

Like his congregation, he, too, needs to be encouraged and reassured (1 Thess 3:6-8).”<sup>128</sup>

Paul shared in and understood their suffering

The persecution experienced by both disciple-makers and disciples is an important theme of this letter, yet the cause and the nature and causes of the afflictions mentioned in 1 Thessalonians are not entirely clear. Although Paul commends these new believers for embracing the gospel with a Spirit-filled joy in the midst of suffering (1 Thess 1:6), he does not elaborate on the cause of their suffering (which, of course, they knew) for the benefit of modern readers. Furnish asserts that the cause of the believers’ afflictions was their acceptance of the missionaries’ message of the one true God and the corresponding rejection of all other gods, which would have put them in a most dangerous position with the city authorities.<sup>129</sup> John M. G. Barclay notes that, in spite of the implications of Luke’s account in Acts 17, the Thessalonian believers experienced harassment from Gentiles, not Jews.<sup>130</sup> Bruce asserts in the Acts account that the Thessalonian Jews (through the agency of a riotous mob) harassed the missionaries, not the new believers.<sup>131</sup>

The nature of the afflictions that the Thessalonians faced is also unclear and is a matter of debate. Barclay,<sup>132</sup> Furnish,<sup>133</sup> and Jeffrey A. D. Weima<sup>134</sup> all argue that the

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<sup>128</sup> Furnish, 82.

<sup>129</sup> Furnish 28-29.

<sup>130</sup> Barclay, 514.

<sup>131</sup> Bruce, 16.

<sup>132</sup> Barclay, 514; Barclay questions why there were deaths among the believers (1 Thess 4:13) between the relatively brief interval between Paul’s departure and his writing of the first letter (Barclay, 515-516).

<sup>133</sup> Furnish, 28-29.

<sup>134</sup> Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Infant, Nursing Mother, and Father: Paul’s Portrayal of a Pastor,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37.2 (November 2002): 212-213.

Thessalonian believers did not experience martyrdom among them, but instead experienced persecution on the level of social and economic harassment (loss of livelihood, estrangement from nonChristian friends and family, ridicule in public areas, etc.), though it was harsh, nevertheless. Malherbe goes further in this direction, insisting that the nature of the Thessalonian afflictions were more internal than external. He suggests that the Greek word commonly translated as “affliction” (θλίψις, *thlipsis*)<sup>135</sup> here connotes an inward “distress and anguish of heart” of leaving their past to embrace the gospel (1 Thess 1:6); in other words, the emotional upheaval caused by conversion and not an external persecution subsequent to Paul’s departure.<sup>136</sup> Todd D. Still takes issue with Malherbe’s understanding of the Thessalonians’ θλίψις by arguing that the Thessalonians “became imitators of the apostles and of the Lord through their experience of θλίψις. Certainly the missionaries and the Lord (1 Thess 2.15; cf. 1 Thess 4.13) suffered far more than mental distress.” He argues at a later point that Paul declares that the Judean churches were suffering similarly. This comparison suggests that the Judean and Thessalonian Christians shared some type of external, verifiable afflictions. Otherwise, how would Paul have been able to measure the similarity of their suffering? “Paul’s considerable and continued concern for the spiritual steadfastness of the Thessalonians strongly suggests that they were facing something far more serious than psychological *Angst*”<sup>137</sup> and that θλίψις in this context refers to “external, nonChristian opposition.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> BDAG, 457.

<sup>136</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 47-48.

<sup>137</sup> Still, 210-211.

<sup>138</sup> Still, 212.

That Paul and his companions were afflicted by the non-Christian Jews of Thessalonica is clear (cf. Acts 17:5-9 and 1 Thess 2:15). It was the response to Paul's message by Gentiles that "aroused jealousy among the Jewish community as a whole and caused it to harden in an ever fiercer opposition to the mission."<sup>139</sup> Barclay reasons that Paul's reference to his previous suffering in Philippi as he writes about how he boldly communicated the gospel to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:2) meant that he experienced bodily harm in Thessalonica as well.<sup>140</sup> Still concisely summarizes the situation in Thessalonica: "While Paul ran into trouble with Thessalonian Jews in particular for his radical message and methodology, Paul's Gentile converts came into conflict with their own compatriots over their conversion to Pauline Christianity and the re-socialization process that this 'turning' entailed."<sup>141</sup>

Despite our difficulty to identify with certainty the nature of the suffering that Paul and his Thessalonian disciples experienced, it is clear that out of loving affection Paul and his companions shared themselves with these young Christians (1 Thess 2:8) to the point of sharing in their suffering. In their shared suffering and joy, Paul and his Thessalonian brothers and sisters were in the trenches of the Christian life together.

### **Paul Could Minister to the Spiritual Needs of the Thessalonian Church Effectively**

Although Paul and his companions spent no more than a few months in Thessalonica, they were able to proclaim the gospel effectively and to help establish a small community of new believers there. As these new Christians came to know and love Paul as he was helping to establish their church, he had earned the right to help meet their

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<sup>139</sup> Beare, 622.

<sup>140</sup> Barclay, 513.

<sup>141</sup> Still, 288.

spiritual needs. As Paul came to know and love these Thessalonian believers, he recognized what they needed so that they would continue to grow in their love for one another and in their new faith in Christ (1 Thess 3:10).

Paul had earned the right to help meet the spiritual needs of the Thessalonians

As an apostle called by the Most High God, Paul could have made demands upon the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:6), but it is not entirely clear what they would have been. The term Paul uses (*βάρος*, *baros*) means “weight” or “burden.”<sup>142</sup> Weima points out that Paul could have meant that he and his associates had the right to financial support for their ministerial services, but instead he argues for an the alternative meaning, the “‘weight of authority or dignity,’ namely the responsibility that the church has to respect and honor the apostle in their work. Although evidence supporting the first meaning of financial support can be cited, the literary pattern of a denial followed by an aside requires the second meaning of weight of authority or dignity.”<sup>143</sup> Whether Paul had respect and honor or material support in mind with regard to the nature of the demands upon the Thessalonian Christians that he could have made, he chose instead not to act that way toward them. Furthermore, given his impressive curriculum vitae, Paul could have regarded the Thessalonian believers as the little “spiritual” children that they were, but instead he called them his brothers (and sisters) thirteen times in his letter, implying that he regarded them as equal full partners in the enterprise of becoming disciples of Christ and of making disciples for Christ.

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<sup>142</sup> Weima, 218.

<sup>143</sup> Weima, 218.

Paul had earned the right to help meet the spiritual needs of the Thessalonian believers by means of his loving manner toward them (1 Thess 2:8), his identification with their suffering (1 Thess 1:6, 3:3-4), and his impeccable character in which no one could distinguish between his message and his life (1 Thess 2:10). Malherbe notes that Paul's method of ministry can be likened to that of the ancient Greek moral philosopher: "The pattern provided by a teacher's life was prized because it lent concreteness to his teaching, thereby making it more persuasive."<sup>144</sup> Malherbe notes that it is only fitting that the Thessalonian believers would turn to Paul, the one who brought the gospel to them, to help meet their need for spiritual guidance in their new life with God.<sup>145</sup>

Paul knew what the Thessalonians specifically needed to continue growing in their faith

Paul had not only proclaimed the gospel of God to these disciples of Christ but had helped to establish them in their faith, and they had become dear to him and his companions (1 Thess 2:8). Through his relationship with his disciples, Paul was able to ascertain their specific needs so that they could advance in their spiritual development. While Paul readily acknowledges how far the Thessalonians had already come in many aspects of the Christian life—their "work of faith" and "labor of love" (1 Thess 1:3), the spread of their faith in God (1 Thess 1:8), becoming "imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea" (1 Thess 2:14), living to please God (1 Thess 4:1), and their exercise of brotherly love (1 Thess 4:9-10)—he nevertheless continually petitioned God that he might visit them again so that he could supply them with "what was lacking in their faith" (1 Thess 3:10).

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<sup>144</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 53.

<sup>145</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 52.

Having been lifted up by the apostle as an exemplary church, what could the Thessalonian believers have needed to continue growing? There are a few clues in Paul's letter: one from his prayer in 1 Thess 3:11-13; another from his exhortation (on sexual purity) without a "you already know this, but . . ." (1 Thess 4:3-7) and ending with a warning (whoever disregards this disregards not man by God") (1 Thess 4:8a); and an issue important to the Thessalonians that is discussed at the end of this letter but is outside the scope of this thesis (1 Thess 4:13-5:28).

In his prayer of 1 Thess 3:11-13, Paul explains the "work of faith" and "labor of love" that these Thessalonian believers were already doing, for which he was grateful to God: "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and bound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." The Thessalonians were being encouraged to continue doing what they had begun doing: to increase loving one another and those outside the community and to live blameless lives in light of the imminent *parousia* (return) of the Lord Jesus in glory.

After Paul recounts Timothy's report in a manner that the reader can feel his relief that the young church was alive and well (1 Thess 3:6-8), he then transitions into the role of an exhorter, encouraging the Thessalonian believers to continue on in the way of life as disciples of Christ, as Paul and his companions had taught them and modeled for them (1 Thess 1:6). In 1 Thess 4:1-12, Paul encourages them to live their lives pleasing God more and more; to maintain holiness and purity through self-control over their bodies and not to give into the temptation of sexual immorality; to love one another and "outsiders"

all the more, to live quiet and peaceful lives, to mind their own business, and to work with their own hands. Paul is quick to praise the areas in which the Thessalonians are progressing nicely in their walk with the Lord—They are growing in their awareness of the Lord’s ways and are intentionally living to please God (1 Thess 4:1), and they are loving one another and their neighbors throughout Macedonia (1 Thess 4:9-10a). It is noteworthy, however, that Paul does not add “just as you are already doing” or “concerning such-and-such you have no need for anyone to write,” when he encourages them to stay sexually pure and abstain from the lustful passion of their godless Gentile counterparts (1 Thess 4:3-5). Bruce proposes that Timothy “brought back a report on sexual laxity among the Christians of Thessalonica . . .”<sup>146</sup> Given the pagan background of many of the Thessalonian believers, it is very possible that this was the case.<sup>147</sup>

One area lacking in the Thessalonians’ faith was a better understanding of what happened to those among them who had “prematurely” died before the second coming of Christ (1 Thess 4:13-18). Paul addresses this issue for most of the balance of the letter and reassures them that those who have died (“fallen asleep”) will rise and be with the Lord forever (1 Thess 4:13-16).

#### Effective Disciple-making Is a Process Founded upon a Few Sound Practices

Ministries established in the context of long-term interpersonal relationships, as essential as they are, cannot be effective in the long run without sound practices that serve to support the aspects of welcoming love and clear communication of the gospel of

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<sup>146</sup> Bruce, 85.

<sup>147</sup> Bruce, 82; Smith, 718.

God. These are practices that were employed by Paul in Thessalonica and include the following:

- He effectively communicated and lived out the Christian gospel
- He took into account the fact that he and his disciples were in a spiritual war
- He was dedicated to help his disciples grow in their new life and to hold onto their new faith

### **Paul Effectively Communicated and Lived out the Christian Gospel**

Paul powerfully articulated what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ by tirelessly communicating the gospel to the Thessalonians and helping them to grow spiritually and by substantiating his message by putting it into practice in his own life.

Paul communicated the gospel to the Thessalonians and helped them grow spiritually

In contrast to his well-known explanation of the gospel in his letter to the Roman Church (“it [the gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”; Rom 1:16b; cf. Rom 3:23-24; 5:8; 6:23, 10:9, etc.), Paul, when he mentions the gospel in 1 Thessalonians, does not reveal its contents, but rather its power as described in the dramatic spiritual turnabout in the lives of the new Christians in Thessalonica.<sup>148</sup> Paul believed in the message of the gospel that he and his companions shared with the Thessalonians, because its workings had revolutionized his own life (Phil 3:7-14) and it had given him a mission worth suffering and even dying for (Acts 20:24). The Thessalonian believers received Paul’s message of the gospel as words not merely from

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<sup>148</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 125.

Paul, but from God (1 Thess 2:13). They took the gospel to heart and it transformed them into disciples of Christ who, in turn, transformed the lives of others (1 Thess 1:8).

All that Paul taught the Thessalonians with regard to the daily matters, conduct, and character were not only completely compatible with this gospel, they stemmed from it. Paul had taught the Thessalonians how to live in a manner that pleases God (1 Thess 4:2), for God's will is the benchmark for how they were to live in light of judgment (1 Thess 4:3).<sup>149</sup> A reading of his first letter to them leaves one with the impression that he never tires of or gives up on the task of taking the Thessalonians to the next step in the process of their spiritual development. Not only did Paul proclaim the gospel to them (1 Thess 2:9), but he continually prayed for them (1 Thess 1:2), exhorted them to please God in the practical matters of life (e.g., being sexually pure, loving one another all the more, minding their own affairs, and working with their hands; cf. 1 Thess 4:1-12), and encouraged them to live their new life "worthy of God" (1 Thess 2:12). All these activities served to reinforce his intent that they would continue to grow toward spiritual maturity.

Paul substantiated his gospel by putting it into practice in his own life

Paul and his companions not only put the gospel into words, but into action, amplifying its power and effectiveness among the Thessalonians. The manner in which Paul came and delivered his life-giving message to Thessalonica as recorded in 1 Thess 2:1-12 attests to this. From the beginning of his ministry there, Paul, who had recently experienced unjust suffering and shameful treatment in Philippi on account of the gospel, boldly communicated this message to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:2).

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<sup>149</sup> Krenz, "First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," 516.

The disciple-maker then recounts the manner in which he presented the gospel to them in the midst of unnamed conflict (1 Thess 2:2); he approached them without error, impurity, or deception (1 Thess 2:3), for God had authorized him to proclaim the gospel (1 Thess 2:4). Moreover, Paul testifies before them and God that he did not share the gospel having the need for human praise (1 Thess 2:6) or greed for some personal gain at the Thessalonians' expense (1 Thess 2:5). Instead, he desired the pleasure of God (who knows the human heart and therefore Paul's genuineness) and had made a practice of not receiving material support from those churches in which he was working,<sup>150</sup> partially supported himself (cf. Phil 4:16) while he was in Thessalonica by working, probably as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Paul declares, "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers" (1 Thess 2:10).

Commentators who have written about this passage have pondered why Paul thought it necessary to recount his experience in proclaiming the gospel to the new believers. Some argue that Paul's purpose for writing this passage was apologetic; he may have thought to address those Thessalonians or (more likely) their non-Christian family, friends, and neighbors who questioned his actions and motives.<sup>151</sup> Thessalonica was well acquainted with itinerant teachers peddling their religious and philosophical wares for their own personal gain, so it was natural that her citizens would be wary of the missionaries and their new converts.<sup>152</sup> Bruce notes that "Paul and his colleagues found themselves repeatedly obliged to defend their motives and behavior against those who impugned the purity of the former and the integrity of the latter."<sup>153</sup> Brown offers (but

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<sup>150</sup> Smith, 700.

<sup>151</sup> Barclay, 513; Bruce, 24.

<sup>152</sup> Weima, 214.

<sup>153</sup> Bruce, 24.

does not argue for) the possibility that Paul shares the account of his suffering for the sake of the gospel to counter the charge that he had fled the city as a coward and had abandoned the young church (Acts 17:9-10).<sup>154</sup> However, Malherbe is not convinced that this is the case: “There is no evidence in the letter to suggest that Paul’s rehearsal of his dealings with the Thessalonians is a defense against the charges that had been brought against him or that he suspected might be leveled at him.”<sup>155</sup>

Others contend that Paul’s purpose for writing was *parenetic* (a type of encouragement that persuades or influences behavior, not through teaching others new material but reminding them of what they already know).<sup>156</sup> Malherbe asserts that there is a similarity between Paul’s ministry and that of ancient moral philosophers with regard to the continuing influence a teacher has on a disciple: “A disciple continued to be guided by the exemplary life of his teacher in his absence by remembering him . . .”<sup>157</sup> These Thessalonian believers were so influenced by Paul that they, in turn, imitated him (and therefore Christ) to the extent that they also became an example for others to follow (1 Thess 1:6-7).<sup>158</sup>

Paul’s purpose for writing to the Thessalonian believers was more likely parenetic and not apologetic. For not only does Paul applaud the Thessalonians’ imitation of his example, but his knowledge of the fact that they had kept the faith and love as they continued standing fast in the Lord (1 Thess 3:6-8) prior to writing his letter would have rendered an apology of his character and ministry unnecessary.

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<sup>154</sup> Brown, 46.

<sup>155</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 74.

<sup>156</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 70.

<sup>157</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 207.

<sup>158</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 78.

## **Paul Took into Account That He and His Disciples Were in a Spiritual War**

Paul was convinced that God had called him out of being an enemy of the Christians (and of Christ) to now being their brother and a devoted disciple of the Lord Jesus. God's call upon him did not make his work easy, however, for he and others who shared in the task of disciple-making were embroiled in a cosmic spiritual war. The first century was a time of great expansion of the early church, and Satan was fiercely raging war against those who would proclaim their allegiance to the gospel of Christ (1 Thess 3:5; 1 Peter 5:8).

The apostle responded to this spiritual war in at least three ways:

- He depended upon the Holy Spirit to make disciples among the Thessalonians
- He realized that he himself needed to stay strong spiritually in light of the ever-present struggle
- He fully committed himself to his God-given mission to make fully devoted, growing disciples of Christ

Paul depended upon the Holy Spirit to make disciples among the Thessalonians

In this earliest Pauline epistle, the Holy Spirit is rarely mentioned (1 Thess 1:5, 6; 4:8; and 5:19). Yet the Spirit is present, and one could argue that the establishment and perseverance of the Thessalonian Church is a testimony to the Spirit's triumphal work in this ruthless spiritual war.

It was noted earlier that Paul's travel itinerary prior to his stop at Thessalonica frequently changed. Throughout the journey that eventually led him there, Paul, on the

one hand, had depended upon the Spirit for guidance as to where he would proclaim the gospel (Acts 16:6-7). But the apostle also admits being prevented by Satan from seeing the Thessalonians some time after they were separated from one another (1 Thess 2:18). In the cruel deception that accompanies spiritual warfare, how could Paul accurately discern whether he was moved or prohibited by the Spirit of God or by the enemy? Bruce's suggested answer is straight-forward: We may ask how it could be known when a check to apostolic planning was due to the overruling direction of the Holy Spirit (as in Acts 16:6, 7) where Paul and others were prevented from evangelizing proconsular Asia and Bithynia) and when it was due to satanic intervention . . . It was probably evident—in retrospect, if not immediately—that the one check worked out for the advance of the gospel and the other for its hindrance.<sup>159</sup>

Paul acknowledges that he had delivered the gospel to the Thessalonians “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). Malherbe notes that “Paul’s assured conviction in speaking did not rest on rhetorical finesse or his own moral accomplishment, but on divine power . . .”<sup>160</sup> The work of the Spirit was to convey the gospel to the Thessalonians until they had “turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess 1:5b, 9b) and to affirm that the new believers were chosen by God by filling their hearts with joy when they had “received the word in much affliction” (1 Thess 1:6b). It is noteworthy that Paul does not mention in his letter the particular message of the gospel that he personally presented to the Thessalonians and that which

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<sup>159</sup> Bruce, 58.

<sup>160</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 113.

they received, but rather he recounts God’s power “to which his Spirit-enabled ministry bears witness.”<sup>161</sup>

Paul remained spiritually strong in light of the ever-present spiritual warfare

As an apostle called by God to proclaim the gospel, Paul possessed a mind of profound wisdom (2 Peter 3:15-16), a passionate zeal for Christ (Phil 3:7-14), a pastor’s heart for people (1 Thess 2:9-12), a Jewish upbringing to the esteemed level of Pharisee (Phil 3:4b-6), and Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37). All of these things helped him to become an effective disciple-maker who could traverse between the first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds with relative ease. Fredrick Buechner paints a vivid picture of Paul’s itinerant activities and work ethic:

But get around he [Paul] did. Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Colossae, not to mention side trips to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Crete, Malta, Athens, Syracuse, Rome—there was hardly a whistle-stop in the Mediterranean world that he didn’t make it to eventually and sightseeing was the least of it. And whenever he had ten minutes to spare he wrote letters. He bullied. He coaxed. He comforted. He cursed. He bared his soul. He reminisced. He complained. He theologized. He inspired. He exulted. Punch-drunk and Christ-drunk, he kept in touch with everybody. The postage alone must have cost him a fortune, not counting the energy and time.<sup>162</sup>

Yet for all his exceptional abilities and experiences as an apostle of God, Paul would note, several years later in his first letter to the Corinthian Church, that he was keenly aware that he could disqualify himself from obtaining God’s imperishable prize through a lack a self-discipline (1 Cor 9:24-27). Paul also had his share of formidable enemies—Satan, the nonChristian Jews like those in Thessalonica who rejected his “law-

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<sup>161</sup> Furnish, 44.

<sup>162</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 129, quoted in Bridges, 217.

free pedagogy and praxis,”<sup>163</sup> and the non-Christian citizens and civic authorities (such as the Thessalonian *politarchs*) of the Roman Empire who accused him of proclaiming Christ as king in the place of Claudius Caesar.<sup>164</sup>

As a disciple-maker and spiritual father of the Thessalonians, Paul remained spiritually strong for the sake of his disciples and for the advancement of the gospel. How he did so is not immediately apparent from 1 Thessalonians, yet only when one realizes that Paul, who is imitating the example of Christ (1 Cor 1:11), describes himself as an example for the Thessalonian believers to imitate (1 Thess 1:6) does the answer become clear. “When a writer offered himself as an example, he thereby committed himself to continue living in the desired manner.”<sup>165</sup> Therefore, the key to Paul’s spiritual strength to live for God and to fulfill his God-given call was that he did not take the basics of the Christian life for granted. What he taught his new disciples for the purpose of their spiritual growth (“we exhorted . . . and encouraged . . . and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God,” and “you received from us how you ought to live and to please God”),<sup>166</sup> whether in person or in his writing, he himself was continually putting into practice (1 Thess 2:10).

Paul fully committed himself to his God-given mission to make fully devoted, growing disciples of Christ

Paul’s intense longing to see the Thessalonians, his sending of Timothy to them, and his first letter to them are evidence not merely of his love and concern for them. They were also his response to their forced separation from one another in light of his God-

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<sup>163</sup> Still, 188.

<sup>164</sup> Brown, 460-461.

<sup>165</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 72.

<sup>166</sup> 1 Thess 2:12 and 1 Thess 4:1, respectively.

given mission to make them committed disciples of Christ. One can sense Paul's agony as he expresses his desire to see his Thessalonian friends (1 Thess 2:17, 3:10-11). He not only wanted to rekindle their friendship, but to know whether his investment of hard work in the Spirit among them had paid off and if some spiritual fruit yet remained in Thessalonica despite Satan's onslaught: "I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain" (1 Thess 3:5b).

What had motivated Paul to be so committed to the Thessalonians' spiritual development as disciples of Christ? Years earlier, Paul (also known as Saul, who at that time was a persecutor of Christians; cf. Acts 9:1-2) had received God's call to a mission of bringing the gospel to nonbelieving Jews and Gentiles. At Paul's conversion, the Lord revealed his plans for Paul to his disciple Ananias, who would lay hands on Paul in order that he might see again after encountering the risen Jesus: "Go, for he [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16). In 1 Thess 2:19 Paul reveals that his greatest desire ("our hope or joy or crown of boasting") is to present his Thessalonian disciples as a pleasing offering to the Lord Jesus at his *parousia*. Bruce observes: "Here and now his [Paul's] converts are his prize . . . but he looks forward to the occasion of final review and reward, when he will present his converts to the Lord who commissioned him, as evidence of the manner in which he has discharged his commission."<sup>167</sup> It was Paul's joy and pleasure "to do the will of the One who had entrusted him with the gospel."<sup>168</sup> Nothing would deter him or his partners from discharging their duties of delivering the gospel and nurturing those

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<sup>167</sup> Bruce, 56.

<sup>168</sup> Furnish, 53.

who had received it until it firmly took root and bore fruit in their lives. “At no point did the severity and persistence of their opposition or the tests of God change their character, weaken their resolve to shape the distinctiveness of the Thessalonian church, or lessen their commitment to the gospel. This was a gospel worth starting with and staying with.”<sup>169</sup>

### **Paul Helped the Thessalonians to Grow in Their New Life with God and to Hold onto Their New Faith**

Paul was able to remain with the believers in Thessalonica until they grasped the fundamental message of the gospel before he was forced to leave their city. After he had separated from them, he maintained a long-distance relationship with them and helped them to continually grow in their new faith.<sup>170</sup> Paul did this through

- continually praying for the Thessalonians;
- continually nurturing and encouraging them in their new faith; and
- holding them accountable for their lives in Christ and for the progress they were making in their spiritual growth.

Paul continually prayed for the Thessalonians

All aspects of the Thessalonians’ new life in Christ provided opportunities for Paul to pray continually to God on their behalf, for Paul was “constantly mentioning” them in his prayers (1 Thess 1:2).

Paul’s prayers reveal his “night and day” concern for their immediate spiritual needs and his desire to see them in person again so that he can “supply what is lacking”

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<sup>169</sup> Smith, 701.

<sup>170</sup> Smith, 710.

in their new faith in Christ (1 Thess 3:10). The verses that immediately follow convey what has been referred to as a “wish prayer” by scholars because it is expressed in “the optative [a mood expressing a wish] rather than the imperative mood.”<sup>171</sup> In this prayer, Paul expresses his desire for their spiritual development (“sanctification or ongoing maturation”):<sup>172</sup>

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess 3:11-13).

It is only natural, then, for Paul to encourage the Thessalonians, as they grow to imitate him (and therefore the Lord Jesus) ever more closely, to develop the spiritual discipline of continual prayer: “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17).

Paul continually nurtured and encouraged the Thessalonians in their new faith

The first letter to the Thessalonians is filled with Paul’s expressions of nurture and encouragement for the new believers (1 Thess 1:3-5a, 6-10a, 2:7-8, 11-14, 17-18a, 19-20, 3:6-13, 4:9-10a) and even through incidental comments, such as “just as you are doing” (1 Thess 4:1c) and “you have no need for anyone to write you” (1 Thess 4:9a). However, it was Paul’s ministry of nurture and encouragement while was with them that would subsequently enable them, in the midst of their suffering and afflictions, to develop their exemplar qualities that had not escaped the notice of their neighboring churches in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess 1:7). Paul uses two metaphors in his letter to

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<sup>171</sup> Bruce, 70-71.

<sup>172</sup> Smith, 700.

characterize this nurturing and encouraging ministry: a “nursing mother taking care of her own children” (1 Thess 2:7) and an encouraging father (1 Thess 2:11).

The apostle captures his nurturing role as a minister in the form of a nursing mother caring for her own children, which connotes the idea of supplying young children with the nourishment they need. According to Smith, “Nurses in that society were cherished for the affection they showed to children, and the idea of a nurse caring for her own children intensifies that affection.”<sup>173</sup> Weima argues that though the word Paul uses (*τροφός*, *trophos*) technically denotes a wet nurse, the following phrase “her own children” (*τὰ ἑαυτῆς τέκνα*, *ta heautēs tekna*) equates her to the children’s mother as well.<sup>174</sup>

A few verses later, Paul describes his role as an encourager, which is similar to that of a father who exhorts and charges his children to live godly lives that befit their call “into [the Lord’s] own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:12). In the first century, the father had authority over the entire household,<sup>175</sup> yet that certainly did not preclude him from being loved dearly by his children.<sup>176</sup> This change in metaphors from a nursing mother to an encouraging father implies that the spiritual growth of the Thessalonians was an ongoing process, and that the missionaries who helped them to begin the discipleship process would continue to play a role in their spiritual development.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Smith, 699.

<sup>174</sup> Weima, 221.

<sup>175</sup> Weima, 224.

<sup>176</sup> Weima, 225.

<sup>177</sup> Smith, 699.

Weima argues that Paul and his associates also use the metaphor of “infants” (*νήπιοι, νεῖπιοι*) in 1 Thess 2:7 to highlight their innocent motives<sup>178</sup> (in contrast to the impure motives of religious and philosophical charlatans) when they presented the gospel to the Thessalonians. However, in the extant Greek manuscripts, either *νήπιοι* or *ἄπιοι* (*ἔπιοι*, “gentle”) is used, which is the result of one of two types of copyist errors: *haplography* (the omission of a letter) or *dittography* (the inadvertent addition of a letter).<sup>179</sup> So scholars debate whether the phrase in 1 Thess 2:7 should be rendered “we were gentle (*ἄπιοι*) among you” or “we were infants (*νήπιοι*) among you.”<sup>180</sup> Weima insists that the translators of most English Bibles today have mistakenly chosen to use the word *ἄπιοι* rather than “the more strongly attested reading” *νήπιοι*.<sup>181</sup> Furnish agrees, noting that *νήπιοι* “is attested by a substantial majority of the earliest (and diverse types of manuscripts, both in the East and in the West . . .”<sup>182</sup> Bruce and Smith both disagree, however. Bruce admits that “infants” is well attested, but insists that it is inappropriate for the “immediate context” of the passage, for the image of “infants” is abruptly followed by “nursing mother” (“But we were infants among you, like a nursing mother . . .”)<sup>183</sup>; Smith argues against “infants” on the grounds that Paul never uses the word *νήπιοι* in a positive light.<sup>184</sup> Given the uncertainty of the word’s identity in the passage, Paul may not have used the *νήπιοι* in 1 Thess 2:7. Therefore, this thesis does not

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<sup>178</sup> Weima, 219.

<sup>179</sup> Furnish, 58.

<sup>180</sup> Smith, 699.

<sup>181</sup> Weima, 214.

<sup>182</sup> Furnish, 57.

<sup>183</sup> Bruce, 31.

<sup>184</sup> Smith, 699.

discuss the use of *νήπιοι* as a metaphor to describe a facet of Paul's manner of ministry to the Thessalonian Church.

Paul held the Thessalonians accountable for their lives in Christ and for the progress in their spiritual growth

In addition to the love and fondness that he had for the Thessalonian believers, Paul, as their disciple-maker, maintained a long-term relationship with them that made it possible for him to hold them accountable to continue growing in their faith. While he was with them, he and his partners “exhorted,” “encouraged,” and “charged” them to live “in a manner worthy of God” in response to God’s call (1 Thess 2:12). Paul’s sending of Timothy was not only a gesture of pastoral love toward the Thessalonian believers but an act of holding them accountable as their adopted spiritual father, for he wanted a report from Timothy on the progress of their faith in light of the enemy’s efforts to tempt them to abandon it (1 Thess 3:5). Paul was responsible for their continued spiritual growth and development.

Being affirmed in his relationship with the Thessalonian Christians, Paul was able to establish ethical parameters<sup>185</sup> that enabled them to know the will of God so that they could live to please God all the more (1 Thess 4:1). In the following verses (1 Thess 4:2-8), Paul holds them accountable for refraining from sexual immorality and gives them two more prohibitions, which are meant to elaborate on the first, but unfortunately their meanings are ambiguous to modern readers.<sup>186</sup> The new believers are either to control their own bodies or, alternatively, the men among them are to take wives for themselves “in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God”

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<sup>185</sup> Bridges, 216.

<sup>186</sup> Smith, 718.

(1 Thess 4:4), and they are not to transgress against one another (• δελφός, *adelphos*, literally “brother”) “in this matter” (1 Thess 4:6).

Greco-Roman pagan society was noted for its sexual immorality in light of Judeo-Christian teachings and practice,<sup>187</sup> and it is possible that Paul explicitly mentions the first prohibition after hearing Timothy’s report on the “sexual laxity” in the Thessalonian Church.<sup>188</sup> The second prohibition is a more specific version of the first, whether the phrase τὴν αὐτοῦ σκεῦος κτάσθαι (*to heautou skeuos ktasthai*) in 1 Thess 4:4 means “to control one’s body” or “to take a wife for oneself.” Whether one translates the noun σκεῦος (*skeuos*) as “body” or “wife” involves the meaning of its associated infinitive κτάσθαι (*ktasthai*), rendered “to control” or “to take (or acquire),” respectively.<sup>189</sup> Bruce argues for the rendering “that each of you learn to gain control over his own ‘vessel’ [a special reference to the genitalia]” because there is no support in the Scriptures for the use of the word σκεῦος (literally, “a clay jar or pot”) to mean “wife.” Furthermore, 1 Samuel 21:5 states that “when the priest of Nob tells David that he and his companions may eat of the holy bread ‘if only the young men have kept themselves from women,’ David replies, ‘the young men’s vessels (כלי) are holy’ ” (Hebrew כלי, which can be translated σκεῦος).<sup>190</sup> Furnish, on the other hand, argues for σκεῦος to be rendered as “woman” or “wife” and the infinitive κτάσθαι that precedes it to be rendered as “to get or

<sup>187</sup> Bruce, 86-87; Smith, 718.

<sup>188</sup> Bruce, 85.

<sup>189</sup> Smith, 718.

<sup>190</sup> Bruce, 83.

obtain.”<sup>191</sup> He argues that there is little support for the infinitive *κτάσθαι* being rendered as “take control,” and leaves the reflexive pronoun *ἑαυτοῦ* to weaken and become a personal pronoun.<sup>192</sup> Regardless of the ambiguity of this passage (1 Thess 4:4), Paul desires that the Thessalonians live self-controlled and holy lives.<sup>193</sup>

The final prohibition, which is arguably a more specific version of the first as well, is ambiguous to modern readers because it is not known to what *ἐν τῷ πράγματι* (*en tō pragmati*, “in this matter”) refers—what matter? Smith posits that the phrase may prohibit “any kind of sexual activity that would wrong the husband or father of the woman involved, as if *pragma* [“matter”] refers to one of the two previous injunctions [1 Thess 4:6a]. Still others read *pragma* as a command about proper business practices,”<sup>194</sup> but this option is not convincing because it would be out of context in this section.

With regard to these prohibitions, Paul held the Thessalonian Christians accountable in order to impart to them practices that would enable them to live a new “life of consistency,” following the example of Paul and the other disciple-makers. “If the church remained committed to its practices, perhaps the outsiders would be persuaded by their consistent quality of moral excellence and join them as believers in Paul’s deity.”<sup>195</sup>

### **The Results of Effective Disciple-making in Thessalonica**

Paul’s presentation of the gospel in word, in action, and in partnership with the Holy Spirit bore spiritual fruit among the Thessalonians, evidenced by the results of his

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<sup>191</sup> Furnish, 89.

<sup>192</sup> Furnish, 89.

<sup>193</sup> Smith, 718.

<sup>194</sup> Smith, 718-719.

<sup>195</sup> Smith, 721.

disciple-making ministry among them:

- The Thessalonian disciples were in the process of continually growing in their knowledge of and faith in Christ (spiritual growth)
- They were in the process of helping to make disciples for Christ (spiritual multiplication)

#### The Disciples in Thessalonica Were in the Process of Continually Growing in Their Knowledge of and Faith in Christ (Spiritual Growth)

The fact that the Thessalonian believers were continually growing in their new life in Christ is known from Paul's first letter. They had left their old pagan life and had embraced a new life with the living God; they had learned how to persevere in the face of suffering and afflictions from their own compatriots; and they had learned how to love one another in the context of Christian community.

#### **They Had Left Their Old Pagan Life and Had Embraced the New Life with the Living God**

Paul only briefly mentions the pre-Christian history of the Thessalonian believers in his first letter in that they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God . . .” (1 Thess 1:9b). Against a backdrop of emperor worship and polytheistic tolerance in Thessalonica, the gospel message that centered around a crucified holy Jewish man who had risen from the dead a couple of decades ago for the sake of the world must have sounded very strange to their ears at first. But not only did they receive this gospel of God from Paul, they “grasped the conviction” of his example (and therefore, of Christ's) to the extent that they themselves became an example for their

Christian neighbors.<sup>196</sup> For this transformation, Paul thanks God: “And we thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13).

### **They Had Learned How to Persevere in Spite of Suffering, Trials, and Afflictions**

That the Thessalonian believers quickly adapted to their new faith and experienced a life-changing transformation despite their suffering and afflictions is a compelling testimony to the power of God. Most likely, they suffered harassment from their compatriots, or *συμφυλέται* (*symphyletai*), because they no longer participated in the Roman civic cultic practices<sup>197</sup> and were considered a threat to the “social and political well-being of the city.”<sup>198</sup> These new believers imitated Paul and his associates by sharing in their suffering with joy for the sake of Lord and the gospel.<sup>199</sup> Bruce observes: “Persecution, according to the NT, is a natural concomitant of the Christian faith, and for the believers in Thessalonica to undergo suffering for Christ’s sake proves that they are fellow-members of the same body as the Judean churches.”<sup>200</sup>

### **They Had Learned How to Love One Another in the Context of Community**

Paul commends them on their love for one another: “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another (1 Thess 4:9). The community-building skills of the

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<sup>196</sup> Smith, 695.

<sup>197</sup> Barclay, 514.

<sup>198</sup> Furnish, 46-47.

<sup>199</sup> Bruce, 15.

<sup>200</sup> Bruce, 45.

Thessalonians founded upon their God-inspired love were impressive, for Paul notes that their love had already overflowed beyond the boundaries of their city and out across Macedonia (1 Thess 4:10). And though Paul credits God for having taught the Thessalonian Church the manner of Christian love, Paul again is their model for loving others as revealed in his prayer on their behalf: “. . . and may the Lord make you [the Thessalonian believers] increase and abound in love for one another and for all, *as we do for you . . .*” (1 Thess 3:12; emphasis mine). Moreover, he is concerned not only about their mutual love for the sake of their community but also that their testimony of brotherly love in the context of community is proclaimed to the nonChristian world.<sup>201</sup>

#### The Disciples in Thessalonica Were in the Process of Helping to Make Disciples (Spiritual Multiplication)

Though the evidence for spiritual multiplication among the Thessalonian Christians is not explicitly stated, there are implications that these believers were already making disciples as they were maturing in their new life. These clues include that they were a witness to other first-century churches and to the world, and they were acquiring an outward focus and concern for their nonChristian neighbors.

#### **They Were a Witness to Other First-Century Churches and to Their World**

The young Thessalonian Church had already earned the admiration and respect from other first-century churches, having become a model for Christians in Macedonia and Achaia to emulate (1 Thess 1:7). Their reception of Paul and his gospel was well known (1 Thess 1:9), and their God-given love for one another and in Macedonia was

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<sup>201</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 259.

thriving without Paul's need to mention it (1 Thess 4:9). But their witness to the Christian faith was not understood and often maligned by their nonChristian neighbors, who were offended by these new believers' refusal to participate in their civic activities and social practices. Barclay explains:

Many sources, both within and without the NT, portray the surprise and resentment felt by nonChristian friends when Christian converts declined to take part in normal social and cultic activities. There was also a strong sense of betrayal. Family members who broke ancestral traditions on the basis of their new-found faith showed an appalling lack of concern for their familial responsibilities. Christians deserted ancestral practices, passed on since time immemorial, for a novel religion . . . of recent manufacture. The exclusivity of the Christians' religion—their arrogant refusal to take part in, or to consider valid, the worship of any God but their own—deeply wounded public sensibilities. Such an unnatural and ungrateful attitude to the gods even branded them as 'atheists.' Moreover, it was highly dangerous for even one segment of the community to slight the gods, whose wrath was ever to be feared. Civic peace, the success of agriculture, and freedom from earthquake or flood were regularly attributed to the benevolence of the gods. Both Christian and nonChristian sources testify that if anything went wrong the Christians could get the blame.<sup>202</sup>

Nevertheless, this young church would strive to be a witness to those around them.

Perhaps their life together “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:1) would influence their unbelieving family, friends, and neighbors to consider their example and respect their commitment to the Christian faith, to worship their God, and even to join their community.<sup>203</sup>

### **They Were Acquiring an Outward Focus and Concern for Those around Them**

Though 1 Thessalonians does not make it explicit, there are hints that the church was already involved in disciple-making through their lifestyle and their proclamation of

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<sup>202</sup> Barclay, 515.

<sup>203</sup> Smith, 721.

“the word of the Lord” and their faith (1 Thess 1:8a). Because the Thessalonians were living as faithfully to Christ as their knowledge and maturity would allow, reports of the turnabout in their lives amidst the mores and culture of their neighbors and their steadfastness in the face of suffering and afflictions were a powerful testimony that their conversion and new lifestyle were genuine; it was the work of God through his chosen apostle, Paul.

Paul encourages his Thessalonian friends to “live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thess 4:11-12). Paul modeled this by working hard in their presence and insisting on not being a financial burden to them while he was proclaiming Christ and his gospel there (1 Thess 2:9). Paul envisions the Thessalonians being a self-sufficient community that abounds in love for God, for one another, and for their nonbelieving neighbors (1 Thess 4:9-12). It was through their example of love and work consistently demonstrated that would gain the respect of some nonChristians and draw some of them into their community.<sup>204</sup> According to Malherbe, “The love shown by Christians for each other when in need drew the attention of outsiders . . . and it has been suggested that it was this virtue, which was also honored by pagan moralists, that was perhaps the strongest single cause for the spread of Christianity . . .”<sup>205</sup>

Regarding the Thessalonians’ proclamation of faith, Paul points out that they have spread “the word of the Lord” in Macedonia and Achaia, and their faith has gone everywhere (1 Thess 1:8). Bruce observes that the Thessalonian believers “functioned as

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<sup>204</sup> Smith, 721.

<sup>205</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 260.

a missionary church” right from the start.<sup>206</sup> Malherbe marvels, “Even allowing for Pauline hyperbole, the notice that the Thessalonian evangelism had extended beyond their city, to Macedonia and even Achaia, during the few months of the church’s existence is remarkable.”<sup>207</sup> The Thessalonians, therefore, were ambassadors for Christ from Macedonia to their world even at an early stage in their spiritual development (1 Thess 1:8).

### **The Evidence for Incorporating Evangelism into Discipleship in Paul’s Ministry to the Thessalonians**

The evidence for Paul employing methods in his ministry to the Thessalonians that incorporated evangelism into discipleship is apparent when we consider the following:

- He had helped the Thessalonians understand the gospel (evangelism) and grow in their faith (discipleship)
- He focused on establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with the Thessalonians
- He understood that disciples who are growing spiritually are more likely to make disciples

#### **Paul Helped the Thessalonians Understand the Gospel and Grow in Their Faith**

Paul helped the Thessalonians to understand the gospel (evangelism) and he helped those who responded to Christ to grow in their faith (discipleship); his ministry

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<sup>206</sup> Bruce, 16.

<sup>207</sup> Malherbe, AB 32B, 130.

made no distinction between the two activities in word or in practice (cf. Furnish, 82). Paul's plan for the Thessalonians' spiritual growth was always with the long view of their spiritual development in mind. In his letter, he makes only a couple of passing comments on their conversion as a result of his evangelistic efforts (1 Thess 1:9b, 2:13), for his concern was to help them acquire a more mature and complete faith by supplying what was lacking in their faith (1 Thess 3:10). His prayer for their future was that they would progress further as disciples of the Lord:

“. . . may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all . . . so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:12-13). This should be the desideratum of all true disciples of Christ. Paul had planted a Christ-centered community of growing disciples in Thessalonica that would flourish to become a crowning achievement, or a victory wreath, presented by God to Paul for fulfilling his God-given call in Thessalonica.<sup>208</sup> This was in part the result of Paul's commitment to the Thessalonians' long-term spiritual development that required a long-term relationship with them on his part to follow through and help actualize.

#### Paul Focused on Establishing and Maintaining Long-Term Relationships with the Thessalonians

Paul focused on establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with the Thessalonians—whether before, during, or after their conversion to following Christ. Long-term relationships bridge the gap between evangelism and discipleship, making the whole disciple-making enterprise more effective, because the new believers have learned

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<sup>208</sup> Bruce, 56.

to trust the disciple-maker. It is a tender and most vulnerable time for new converts just beginning to learn to live as followers of Christ. Malherbe, in talking about any group, whether religious or philosophical, points out that “conversion brought with it social as well as religious and intellectual dislocation, which in turn created confusion, bewilderment, dejection, and even despair in the converts . . . This distress was increased by the break with the ancestral religion and mores, with family, friends, and associates, and by public criticism. [These groups] . . . took special care to assimilate new members and foster their personal development.”<sup>209</sup> Relationships made in the new community helped the Thessalonian believers to compensate for the undoubtedly damaged relationships that they experienced with their non-Christian family and friends.<sup>210</sup>

#### Paul Understood That Disciples Who Are Growing Spiritually Are More Likely to Make Disciples

Finally, Paul focused on the spiritual growth in the lives of his Thessalonian disciples,<sup>211</sup> and it led to spiritual multiplication (the making of disciples).<sup>212</sup> As the Thessalonians had grown in their faith in Christ, they soon learned to imitate Paul and his associates, and therefore Christ as well (1 Thess 1:6). Therefore, just as Paul had a heart to reach people for God so that they might become reconciled to God, so also the Thessalonians learned to look outward beyond their boundaries of their Church and community, fueled by their God-given love that overflowed out of their community for others to behold.

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<sup>209</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 46.

<sup>210</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 50.

<sup>211</sup> Smith, 699.

<sup>212</sup> Ferguson, 27.

Spiritual growth and spiritual multiplication are interdependent. Without spiritual growth, there would be no impetus of divine love to motivate the believer to multiply through disciple-making. Without spiritual multiplication, spiritual growth eventually becomes stunted, thus preventing disciples from growing to their full potential as spiritually mature followers of Christ—equipped and prepared to proclaim God’s love in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

The overall state of discipleship in the western Church is abysmal. Few Christians are intentionally making disciples of Christ who are, in turn, making disciples. On the whole, what we have in the West today is a generation of spiritually immature believers who are, for the most part, entangled in worldly cares and materialism (Matt 13:22) to the extent that their values and lifestyle are not significantly different from those of their unbelieving neighbors. Many believers are not growing spiritually through their relationship with Christ, and most are not actively involved in disciple-making.

I have argued in this thesis from the example of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians that the western Church needs to incorporate evangelism into discipleship in the context of long-term relationships between disciple-makers and disciples to become more effective in disciple-making. First Thessalonians offers us a few timeless principles that can help us to become more effective in our efforts to make disciples of Christ:

- *Effective disciple-making is ultimately the enterprise of God.* God chose the Thessalonians and had worked among them, and God chose Paul to minister to the Thessalonians. God had worked through Paul to make disciples, and God had also worked on behalf of the Thessalonians in Paul's absence. Paul understood that he was helping to fulfill God's mission and not his own.
- *Effective disciple-making happens in the context of long-term relationships.* Paul genuinely loved and cared for the Thessalonians; he earned their trust, love, and

respect; and, because of his relationship with them, he could minister to their spiritual needs effectively.

- *Effective disciple-making is a process founded upon a few sound practices.* Paul followed these practices in his ministry: He effectively communicated and lived out the gospel, took into account that he and the Thessalonians were in a spiritual war, and helped them to grow in their new life and to hold onto their new faith.

Paul made no distinction between evangelism and discipleship in his ministry to the Thessalonians; for him, evangelism was the beginning of the discipleship process. Moreover, he developed personal relationships with the Thessalonians that fostered their spiritual growth. As a result, the Thessalonians were able to rapidly grow toward spiritual maturity and engage in the disciple-making enterprise themselves.

It is impossible almost two thousand years later to re-enact Paul's method of disciple-making used in a historical and cultural situation that no longer exists. However, the western Church and Christian parachurch organizations can still profit from further study into Paul's missionary methods with today's situation in mind to identify how these timeless principles and practices can be implemented for making disciples of Christ. But perhaps there is an even more important matter worth contemplating: the fact that 1 Thessalonians exudes Paul's passionate commitment to his God-given mission to make fully devoted, growing disciples of Jesus Christ. J. B. Phillips, in the "Translator's Preface" in his book *Letters to Young Churches*, describes the passion and commitment that Gentile churches under Paul's care had which our modern-day Church in the West desperately needs in order to fulfill her part in the *missio Dei*:

Many Christians today talk about the “difficulties of our times” as though we should have to wait for better ones before the Christian religion can take root. It is heartening to remember that this faith took root and flourished amazingly in conditions that would have killed anything less vital in a matter of weeks. These early Christians were on fire with the conviction that they had become, through Christ, literally sons of God; they were pioneers of a new humanity, founders of a new Kingdom. They still speak to us across the centuries. Perhaps if we believed what they believed, we might achieve what they achieved.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, xiv.

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