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ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS IN 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

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It has sometimes been suggested that the problem of disorderly conduct among the Thessalonian christians was due to agitation about eschatological matters. This article will attempt to show that the eschatological material in 1 and 2 Thessalonians has positive ethical consequences, that the problem of the "disorderly" was a local Thessalonian problem which Paul either found or anticipated when he was first there, and that its consideration in the letters is not related to the eschatological material but is dealt with in a pragmatic way.

Three passages concern us here; 1 Thess iv 13-18; v i-ii and 2 Thess ii 1-12. In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes in response to news from Thessalonica brought by Timothy. It has been suggested that 1 Thessalonians was written in response to a letter from Thessalonica and it may be that λοιπόν at iv 1 should be taken as indicating the transition from the response to the oral message from Thessalonica to the response to the written message which perhaps Timothy brought with him. The three sections iv 9-12, 13-18; v i-ii are answering questions raised by the Thessalonians. However, in two of them (iv 9-12 and v i-ii) Paul begins by saying that they have no need to have anything written to them, but for different reasons in each case. The section iv 13-18 has no such

References:
1) For example W. Hendriksen, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, London, 1972, p. 33.
2) 1 Thess iii 6
4) λοιπόν is almost certainly to be taken adverbially and could be translated, "then", "well then", "so then" or "now then". See L.S.J. 1060, Epict. Diss. i. 24. 1; Plb. Hist. 2. 69. 9.
5) 1 Thess iv 9 οὗ χρείαν ἔχετε γράφειν ύμίν· αὐτοί γὰρ ὑμεῖς ἰδοῦσιν Θεοδίδακτοι ἔστε Ἡ Thess v 1 οὗ χρείαν ἔχετε ὑμῖν γραφέσθαι· αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἶδατε. The reason in iv 9 is confirmed by the fact that they do in truth love one another, and then in verse 10b Paul adds a further exhortation which however is
comment and is to be regarded as new material for the Thessalonians ⁶). The sections iv 13-18 and v 1-11 end in a similar way, which suggests that there may be something new in v 1-11 as well. The addition of οἰκοδομεῖτε in v 11 indicates a strengthening of the Thessalonians faith from an ethical point of view ⁷), which suggests that in v 1-11 Paul may be repeating already known material, but is applying it in an ethical way ⁸).

**Thessalonians iv 13-18**

In this passage verse 18 indicates that some form of exhortation or encouragement was an appropriate use of the material just expounded. It may be that the encouragement in mind is directed to overcoming the grief (iv 13) which non-christians experience. The background to the section can only be guessed at. Apparently a problem arose because christians ⁹) had died, and this had raised, for the Thessalonians, the question of the interpretations of Paul's parousia teaching. This may imply that they thought the parousia would come before anyone died (whether or not this was Paul's view of the matter). The problem is answered, not by more teaching about the date of the parousia, or a modification of the idea that the parousia was imminent ¹⁰), but by new material as to the details of the events at the parousia and the resurrection. This new material carries with it the implication that the imminence of the parousia did not mean it was to be in the first generation.

something he had previously told them (iv 11 b) Since the subject matter is not directly ethical in v 1 it cannot be backed up in the same way ⁶) ¹ Thess iv 15 λέγομεν ἐν λόγω Κυρίῳ A present tense statement giving part of the apostolic tradition ¹ Thess iv 18 παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις may suggest the λόγοι are new The section deals with a question which would only arise after a time, and Acts xvii 1-10 indicates Paul was not in Thessalonica very long (three sabbaths) and his time of departure was not of his own choosing ⁷) See ¹ Cor x 23, P VIELHAUER, Oikodome Das Bild vom Bau in christlichen Literatur vom N T bis Clemens Alexandrinus Diss Heidelberg, 1940, P HOFFMANN, Die Toten in Christus, Munchen, 1966, p 229 ⁸) This might have been a new twist for the Thessalonians, but contrast HOFFMANN op cit p 231, and see H D WENDLAND, Ethik und Eschatologie in der Theologie des Paulus, N K Z , 41 (1930), p 795 ⁹) Although perhaps not necessarily believers See R. E BAILEY, Is "Sleep" the proper biblical term for the Intermediate State ? Z NW 55 (1964) pp 161-167 ¹⁰) This question is dealt with in v 1-11 On the parousia see M DIBELIUS, An die Thessaloniacaer I II an die Philippier, Tubingen, 1923, p 13, A L MOORE, Parousia in the New Testament, Leiden, 1966
Paul's answer prompts us to ask if the problem for the Thessalonians was not "when?", or related to the time sequence of events 11) between the present time and the parousia, but of the character of the events at the parousia, since that is the focus of the answer to their question. Perhaps they thought that in some sense those who had died before the parousia would have only a doubtful or secondary position at the parousia. If it is true that the problem dealt with in this section refers not to the "when" of the parousia but to the "how", then the possibility, or likelihood, of a misunderstanding leading to unacceptable ethical consequences is much diminished, if not eliminated.

I Thessalonians v i-II

The fact that in this passage the imperatives clearly refer to ethical behaviour, but are expressed in terms taken from the eschatological imagery, is in line with the suggestion that Paul is here reminding the Thessalonians of material with which they were already familiar, but is applying it in a way that was perhaps new to the Thessalonians. The imperatives not to sleep, but to stay awake and remain sober are not to be taken literally. Paul does not mean that the Thessalonians should not go to sleep, and he is not here saying that they should never become intoxicated with alcohol. Rather he is speaking of ethical behaviour quite generally, "Der Ap. fordert in einem ethischen Verständnis des Bildes auf...".

The general structure of the passage is clear enough, although the details of the imagery are perhaps not so clear. Verses 1-5 indicate the material which is already known to the Thessalonians which in verse 6 is made the basis for an imperative. The relationship between verse 6 and verse 1-5 is explained in verse 7. Verse 8a repeats the statement of verse 5 13), and further imperatives are added, but by means of different imagery 14), and these imperatives in turn are given a further basis in verses 9 and 10 15).

11) See 1 Thess v i-II; Strack-Billerbeck, 3, p. 635; The Didache, chapt. 16 and Hoffmann, op. cit. p. 228 f.
13) Though it is phrased in the affirmative rather than the negative.
14) Giving the trilogy of faith love and hope, in the same order as in 1 Thess i 3.
15) There may be a degree of parallelism in this section:
Verse 2 uses the imagery of the thief coming suddenly in the night. This image had been used by Jesus \(16\) to indicate the need for constant preparedness since one never knew when the thief would strike. Verse 3 goes further than this and says that even when people say there will be peace and safety, then, suddenly, will be the coming. The image here is probably from Jeremiah vi \(14\) \(17\) and the point is further emphasised by the simile of labour pains at childbirth \(18\).

Verses 4 and 5 apply this imagery to the Thessalonians and their position within the schema. The darkness, in which the Thessalonians are not (verse 4), is the darkness of the night in which the thief comes (verse 2), and the day of verse 4 is the day of the Lord of verse 2. The light and the day images are brought together in verse 5a and the reverse image in 5b (not night and darkness) in a way that draws in Paul and those associated with him in sending the letter \(19\).

Although the imagery of verses 2-5 is somewhat complicated the point at issue is quite clear. It is, that the day of the Lord will come suddenly and at a time unknown,\(20\) and that it will be a day of judgement.

Stated simply like this, it is difficult to see how it could lead directly to an ethical imperative. It is not said, for example, that the judgement will concern people's ethical activity and that therefore they should live in a way that will gain for them a better

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\(1-5\) Motivational material  
6 Imperative  
7 Further motivational material  
8a Motivational material  
8b Imperatives  
9-10 Further motivational material  
\(16\) Mt xxiv 43 f , Lk xii 39 f The image in the gospels is used in regard to the coming of the Son of Man whereas here it is the Day of the Lord which comes See also Lk xxi 34-36  
\(17\) Verse 2 is concerned with those who anticipate a coming but do not know when, verse 3 with those who do not expect a coming at all The Day of the Lord will be bad for these people, see Amos v 18, Dibelius, \(op\ cist\) p 24, R Schnackenburg, The Moral Teaching of the New Testament, London, 1965, p 143  
\(18\) See the slightly different use of this image at Mk xiii 8 and Mt xxiv 8  
\(19\) The second person has been used in verses 1-5a and the first person plural in verses 5b-11  
\(20\) For "the time and seasons" in v 1, see Acts 1 7, Strack-Billerbeck, 2, p 589 and 1, p 601, H Braun, Qumran und das neue Testament, Tubingen, 1966, Bd 1, p 234
outcome in the judgement. Rather, two terms are used which
derive from the milieu of the imagery (sleeping and watching)
in such a way as to imply an ethical application \(^{21}\). In other words,
Paul is simply transferring the terms used to describe an aspect of
the eschatological situation of the Thessalonians to the area of
ethics. This carries no weight as a motivation unless it is assumed
that the ethics of the believer should be consistent with his “theo-
logical position”, and that his theological position can provide the
content for this appropriate ethic. The principle of appropriateness
or consistency is the point of verse 7 \(^{22}\).

Verse 8 begins with a recapitulation from verse 5 of the situation
of the believers, and then gives further imperatives. When, in
verses 9 and 10, the thought returns to motivational material a
line of thought is used which requires for its effectiveness the same
presupposition of appropriateness as was required in verses 2-5.
Verse 9 does not argue that they should follow the imperative
because of the threat of death in the judgement of the day of the
Lord. On the contrary, it is God’s intention that the Thessalonians
should obtain salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ, who has
died for them. This intention is secure \(^{23}\); Paul has throughout
this letter emphasised the certainty of the “saved” position of the
Thessalonians \(^{24}\). The assumption behind the argument of verses
9-10 is that they should live in a manner appropriate to their
position.

The character of this argument is shown up in verse 10, \(ίνα
εμείναι γρηγορώς εμείναι καθεύδομεν \άμα σὺν αὐτῷ \ζησομεν.\) Verse 9
refers to the future judgement, and the salvation is similarly
future \(^{25}\). Verse 10 refers to this same future salvation as “living
with him” \(^{26}\). Hence this verse is not saying that God’s intention

\(^{21}\) This is done by the phrase \(οὐς οἱ λατρευταί\) which seems to refer to the
gentiles in their immorality, and the use of \(νήψει\) xiii which more clearly
has ethical associations. See 2 Clem xiii 1 \(νήψωμεν \επὶ \τὸ \άγαθον,\) DIBELIUS,
\(\text{op. cit.}\) p. 25.

\(^{22}\) See NIEDER, \(\text{op. cit.}\) p. 12, but for a different interpretation see A. B. D.

\(^{23}\) I Thess v 10b. NIEDER, \(\text{op. cit.}\) p. 13. O. MERK, \textit{Handeln aus Glauben},
Marburg, 1968, pp. 54 ff.

\(^{24}\) Eg. I Thess i 4

\(^{25}\) See Rom xiii 11, C. A. A. SCOTT, \textit{Christianity according to St. Paul},
Cambridge, 1927, p. 242; MERK, \(\text{op. cit.}\) p. 55.

\(^{26}\) See I Thess iv 17
that the Thessalonians should obtain salvation \( ^{27} \) will lapse if they do not follow the imperatives just given. Verse 10 is in fact a strong statement against a motivation which is based on salvation through ethical achievement, that is, salvation by works. The motivation appealed to is that the believers' position in the purpose of God carries with it the obligation to conform to the ethical element in those purposes. It is a motivation based on the principle of appropriateness or consistency \( ^{28} \).

This passage is helpful in showing that the parousia, and the situation which it will introduce is of such a character and is in such a relationship to the present situation, that it implies not disorderly behaviour, but behaviour which is consistent with the purposes of God. These purposes of God already affect the life of the christian, so that even if the Thessalonians were being disturbed by people who argued that the parousia was very imminent, this would not imply any change in their behaviour obligations as christians. Indeed, if anything, it would have the effect of heightening those obligations

2 Thessalonians ii 1-12

In this passage the exhortations not to be quickly shaken in mind (verse 2) or to be deceived (verse 3) refer not so much to ethical waverings, as to waverings in belief. However, error in belief seems to have consequences in ethics. This may be seen in ii 12 where there is a certain parallelism;

\[
\text{oí mē πιστεύοντες τῇ ἀληθείᾳ}
\]
\[
\text{ἀλλὰ εὐδοκήσαντες ἐν ἀδικίᾳ}
\]

However, no ethical consequences are drawn from the specific error in ii 12. Rather, the point of the argument in ii 3-12 is to

\( ^{27} \) Taking γρηγοροῦμεν and καθεύδουμεν in the same sense in which they have been used in this passage, contra Scott, \textit{op cit} and Oepke, \textit{N T D}, 8, p 174 and \textit{T W N T} 3, p. 440 See also Dibelius, \textit{op cit}, p 25, who refers to 2 Cor v 9 as a similar paradox Rigaux, \textit{Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniciens}, Paris, 1956, p 572 says that γρηγορεῖν has no parallel for the sense of awake (éveiler), but notes Ps lxxxxvii (lxxxxviii 6) and Dan xii 2 for the sense of death for καθεύδων

\( ^{28} \) The ἵνα in v 10 could depend on either the participle ἀποθανόντος in verse 10 or on the finite verb ἔθετο in verse 9. If it depends on the participle then the ethical life of the Thessalonians is seen as part of the purposes of Christ's death. If it depends on the finite verb then the ethical life of the Thessalonians is seen as part of the purpose of God's election.
show that the parousia could not have come already \(^{29}\) since the parousia of the Lord will mean destruction of the man of lawlessness, and the principle of error now at work.

There is no formal or specific connection between 1-12 and 13-17, and no attempt is made to build on what has been said in 1-12 for ethical purposes in 13-17. This is not to say that the material in 2-12 does not have ethical implications. The use of such words as \(\text{ἀνομίας, ἀπάτη, ἀδικίας, τὴν ἀγάπην τῆς ἀληθείας}\) and the parallelism in verse 12 prevent us from making such a statement. What can be said, however, is that the specific error discussed is not made to have any specific ethical consequences.

It is apparent from the above that the three passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians which contain eschatological material do not provide anything which would suggest that either Paul's position, or those which he was discussing, implied any abandonment of ethical obligations. The two passages in 1 Thessalonians contain material which heightens and confirms a sense of ethical obligation.

**The “Disorderly” in Thessalonica**

The clearest reference to the disorderly brethren in Thessalonica is in 2 Thess iii 6-13. These verses indicate that there were some christians who were living in idleness, being busy bodies and not doing any work \(^{30}\). The problem had come up before and Paul had dealt with it at 1 Thess ν 14, however, the problem had apparently become worse, since in 2 Thess iii he deals with it at length, and firmly. The passage provides information about Paul's behaviour when he was at Thessalonica, as well as instructions to the disorderly and to the rest of the Thessalonians.

When Paul was in Thessalonica he did not walk in a disorderly fashion or accept bread from anyone, but rather he worked day and night (iii 7 f.). The reason for this pattern of behaviour, which meant he was actually yielding an apostolic right, was to avoid

\(^{29}\) \(\text{ἐνέστηκεν}\) has often been the centre of the discussion of precisely what this error was. The logic of the argument however looses cogency if it is taken as “about to come”. See J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, London, 1895, p. 110, Dibelius, *op. cit.*, p. 37, Rigaux, *op. cit.* p. 652 f., C. K. Barrett, *New Testament Eschatology*, S. J.T. 6 (1953), p. 143. This section has certain similarities with Rom 1 (compare \(\text{διὰ τούτου πέμπει i i 11 with διὰ τούτου παρέδωκεν Rom i 24, 26, 28}\) as an apocalyptic interpretation of the present situation.

\(^{30}\) 2 Thess iii 6, 11, 12.
being a burden to any of them. It was also to give them an example, which the Thessalonians were to imitate. Paul’s adoption of this policy while at Thessalonica prompts the question—did he anticipate this sort of problem? If so why? and what were its origins. Unfortunately this passage sheds no light on these questions. We are simply told that he behaved as he did so as not to burden them and to give them an example to follow. It is clear that he assumes that they should follow this example, but he does not say why he gave this particular example 31).

While Paul was with the Thessalonians he included in his tradition a simple rule of thumb—if you do not work, you do not eat. This instruction raises very interesting questions as to the nature and extent of what we might call the “social welfare” activity of the early christians, presumably here, among themselves32). However, for our purposes, we note that the instruction was part of the tradition as first given to the Thessalonians, and was therefore not designed to meet a problem which developed subsequently33).

We can also note that the example and the rule are not said to be related to theological aberrations, and were probably, in fact, not so related, since the rule and the reason for the example, are described in simple pragmatic terms.

We may now turn to the imperatives which Paul gives to the Thessalonians. There are exhortations addressed to the Thessalonians about the disorderly (2 Thess iii 6-10, 13-15) and exhortations addressed to the disorderly themselves (2 Thess iii 11-12). The Thessalonians are told to keep away from all the brethren who are disorderly, and they are told not to be weary in well doing themselves. In verses 14, 15 the same injunction as in verse 6 is given, but more fully and with a wider reference. Not only are they not to mix with the disorderly, but they are not to mix with those who do not obey the first injunction to keep away from them. The disorderly, and those who associate with them, are

31) Compare 1 Cor ix 3-18 On ἀτάκτως see Lightfoot op cit, p 129 and Rigaux, op cit, p 704 f
33) Though, of course, such an instruction would be dependent on an assessment of the situation The policy was, to an extent, local, since it was apparently not followed in Philippi (Phil 1 5), but it was in Achaia, though for somewhat different reasons, 2 Cor 7-11
therefore to be cut off. This refers only to Christian fellowship; they are not to be regarded as enemies, but warned as brothers.

These exhortations to the Thessalonians are made in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, they are made on the basis of the fellowship in Christ which Paul and the Thessalonians shared. Paul also associates what he says here with the instructions that he had given when he was with them. In other words, the Thessalonians are being directed to the tradition which they received in the first instance. The action of the Thessalonians is intended to shame the disorderly and to bring them to change their ways. In verse 12 the disorderly are commanded and exhorted to an orderly life, and the basis of this appeal is the same as that given in verse 6 for the exhortations to the Thessalonians generally. It is an appeal to the common fellowship in Christ which they have with Paul.

The picture we have uncovered is that when Paul was first in Thessalonica he gave, as part of his tradition, a rule of thumb relating to idleness. Why he gave such a rule in his tradition to the Thessalonians is not said, though it is hard to resist the conclusion that he gave it because, for some reason, he anticipated the problem which he had to deal with later. The problem may, of course, have already been present, and the brief comment on it in 1 Thessalonians may point in that direction. Paul deals with the problem by means of church discipline, the exhortations for which he bases on the common fellowship in Christ between the Thessalonians and himself.

It is sometimes asserted that the error of ii 1-12 is related to the problem of the disorderly in iii 1-13, but this does not really stand up to examination. In the first place, there is no prima facie lexicographical case for relating the two passages. In itself, this is by no means a conclusive argument, but more importantly, we

34) The inclusion of ονόματι highlights the character of the person of Christ, and thus the ethical aspects of this fellowship are emphasised. See Merk op. cit., p. 45 f.
35) See 2 Thess ii 15 and 1 Thess iv 1-8.
36) For example, W. Neil, The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, London, 1950, p. 191, "... it was the expectation of the impending end of the world that gave rise to the particular Thessalian problem." But see Dibelius, op. cit., p. 47 f. and Rigaux op. cit., p. 703 f.
37) Of the forty-five different nouns and verbs in 1 Thess v 14 and 2 Thess iii 6-16, only eight appear in 2 Thess ii 1-12, οίδα, ημέρα, είναι, Κυρίω Ιησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἀδελφός, λόγος, επιστολή, τρόπος.
note that none of the eschatological material in ii 1-12 is used to
correct the problem in iii 6-13, especially when we note that there
is material which might well have been used, even if the two pro-
blems were not related as cause and effect. If, of course, they were
related, then it is very difficult to explain why the material avail-
able in chapter ii was not used in chapter iii.

Furthermore, we note that the two sections are separated by a
passage (iii 1-5) which breaks up any line of thought. 2 Thes ii 1
and iii 6 are phrased in a similarly formal way and this suggests
that each is beginning a new section. The problem in 2 Thess iii
6-13 is dealt with in a pragmatic way which hardly seems appro-
priate if the problem arose from an error in theological understand-
ing.

At this point we may make a general point about the relationship
between eschatology and ethics, and in particular about the idea
that an imminent parousia teaching might lead to a diminution
of moral effort, and to idleness. The thought involved here is that
because the parousia is so imminent this present life, and in partic-
ular the sustenance and continuation of this present life, looses
its point. Such a proposition presupposes a lack of connection be-
tween present actions and the parousia. That is to say it presuppo-
ses something like a dualism in which the parousia and the
situation which it introduces is quite different from, and other
than, the present situation. In some eschatological thought this
undoubtedly is the case, but it is very definitely not the case in Paul
because of his insistence upon the reality of the already fulfilled
element in his thought, and because of the ethical character of
conversion and faith which he shows in his letters 38). This means
that it would require more than just an error or one-sided emphasis
in eschatology to produce the result of disorderliness. There is a
continuity as well as a dis-continuity between the present situation
and the post-parousia situation, and that continuity is integral
not only to Paul’s parousia teaching, but also to what he says
about Christ’s death and resurrection, and the reality of the life in
Christ.

We conclude then, that in 1 and 2 Thessalonians the problem
of the disorderly was not related to false or one sided eschatological

38) See for example the ethical way in which the conversion of the Thes-
salonians is described, 1 Thess i 9-10.
teaching, but that it was something which Paul anticipated when he was first in Thessalonica, and which probably had local and perhaps social roots. The eschatological material in 2 Thessalonians does not have any implications which might lead to a loss of moral earnestness, and in 1 Thessalonians positive ethical implications are actually drawn from the eschatological material.