

2 Thessalonians: Correcting False Teaching on Christ's Return

By Steve Ray

The messenger clambered off the ship with mixed emotions: joy and distress. The mission had been successful but new problems had arisen. It was like climbing up a sandy slope: three steps up and sliding two steps back. He had to find Paul quickly. The problems were serious and needed immediate attention.

When the Church today is struggling with problems, it is easy to imagine and long for a Golden Age in the early years of the Church, especially during the life of the apostles. But, the Church has never had a Golden Age. There have always been troubles. St. Paul struggled daily with false teachers, deceptive brethren, persecution, immoral conduct in the churches, and believers confused about the truth.

The messenger scurried through the streets of Corinth and found Paul and assured him of the continuing faith and love among the Thessalonians, which was no small feat because they were being persecuted suffering for Christ. They had been greatly helped a few months earlier by Paul's letter comforting them about their loved ones who had died they would be raised bodily from the dead when Christ returned and his return was soon. Their worries about the dead had been resolved by Paul's earlier letter. What a great relief those who had died and been buried would rise bodily at the sound of the trumpet. But now another misunderstanding or false teaching had infiltrated the ranks.

Paul's good news had been warmly received. But the new problems which had raised their ugly heads. Paul was deeply concerned. He feared the persecution would cause some to stumble and fall away from the Lord, but more distressing was the news that someone was deceiving his friends, even writing false letters in his name. He had to warn them quickly not to listen to false teaching whether it was in a letter supposedly from him or even from a prophecy or a spirit proclaiming that the day of the Lord had already come. The Second Coming of Christ, or the *parousia*, was both immediate and extended. It was coming soon, but it had not already taken place, nor would it today or tomorrow.

The false teaching had caused two problems. First, it had unsettled those who thought they had been left behind—missed the boat; and second, it was causing many to become lazy and idle expecting Jesus to return before the week was out. The crisis in Thessalonica was not just theoretical. It was real. Imagine the situation:

The guy sitting next to you on Sunday just quit his job to prepare for Christ's return. He is now hoping you will help to pay his bills. The man sitting behind you is asking for food since he is not working anymore either, and his children are hungry. In fact, many are "living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work" (2 Thess 3:11). Some members of the church had inferred that the *parousia* was so imminent that there was no point in going to work! Why work? Why invest in the future, maintain property and run a

businesses if Jesus was coming in the next few days or weeks?

Paul chastises them, reminding them of his hard-working example he worked day and night to be a burden on no one (2 Thess 3:8) and he gives a strong exhortation that “if any one will not work, let him not eat.” (2 Thess 3:10) “Everyone is to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living” (2 Thess 3:12). A balance was to be achieved between waiting and working.

Yet, Paul had warned them that Christ’s return was imminent but there were signs that would appear before Jesus appeared. The return of Christ would be preceded by a general apostasy and the appearance of the man of sin. In the meantime a restraining force would keep things in check. What these three things actually are has been the focus of raging debate through the centuries, and is more than can address here, though it certainly we be a worldwide rebellion against God, led by one who will incarnate the forces of lawlessness and anarchy. These were the signs that would precede the *parousia*.

Paul’s letters were primarily to correct such problems and to call the believers to doctrinal purity and moral excellence. He prayed for a Golden Age but knew that would arrive only with the Second Coming of Christ.

We should notice an important word which is used twice in this short letter: tradition. Some non-Catholics like to portray all tradition as a bad thing—as man-made additions to God’s revelation in the Bible. They are fond of quoting Jesus’ words, “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men” (Mk 7:8), But not all tradition is to be avoided, only the traditions of men that invalidate the word of God. In fact, Scripture itself commands adherence to the apostolic tradition. Paul makes it very clear that there is good tradition which is from God and handed down through the apostles. Paul writes “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (see also 1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 3:6).

Luther broke with the Catholic Church to strike out on his own and he popularized the radical new idea of *sola Scriptura*. Where did such an idea come from? The Church had always followed the pattern of the Jews regarding authority. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai he was invested with three things: the written Law, the oral law and a teaching authority represented later by the stone chair in the synagogues called the chair, or cathedra of Moses. The early Church, blossoming from the root of Judaism, adopted the same pattern: the written scripture, the apostolic tradition, and the chair of Peter. Peter and his successors had been invested with the authority to bind and loose which was earlier an authority exercised by the scribes and Pharisees who sat on the chair of Moses (Mt 23:2).

When Martin Luther rejected the Catholic Church and broke with her authority, he sparked an unhappy revolution. After tossing the teaching authority of Peter as embodied

in the papacy, and rejecting the Sacred Tradition, he was left with the “Bible alone” as a source of authority. This became the mantra of the revolution *sola Scriptura* the Bible alone! The results should have been predictable. Within a matter of years the confusion was rampant among the “Reformers” and even in the first generation of schism the leaders couldn’t even agree among themselves about the interpretation of the Bible. At the end of Luther’s life he lamented “There are now as many theologies as there are heads”. Luther’s truncated view of authority is unbiblical, unworkable, unhistorical, and unreasonable.

In the last century it was popular among theologians to challenge the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians. But Paul’s second letter is a logical extension of the first and such speculations about authorship are quite unwarranted. This epistle was written by St. Paul as attested by all the wisdom of the Fathers and the councils of the Church. Paul wrote the letter around AD 51 or 52 from Corinth. The letter was “co-written” by Silvanus and Timothy and one of them, or a secretary, did the writing but Paul signed it himself to assure the Thessalonians it was really from him.

Paul’s second letter was rushed off to Thessalonica (modern Salonica in Greece). This letter is a gem which pulls back the curtain to give us a glimpse into the future and to provide precious information about the coming of our Lord. It encourages us in modern times of struggle and suffering to hold fast to the traditions and to wait in faith, hope and perseverance for the Golden Age, the coming of the Lord. Even so, come Lord Jesus!