

“He who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 5:24

1 Thessalonians, the earliest of Paul’s letters, has some significant things to say that are said with a certain drama, both in words and in thought. It seems that Paul just wrote it spontaneously. How did he do it? How could he have just written these kinds of things that we find in the letters of Paul?

There is a scholarly book on Paul which has printed out all of his letters in parallel to each other. It also takes each of the letters in order, that is, Romans, and then prints out all the parallels to that. And then 1 Corinthians and so forth. As a consequence, one comes to see that Paul follows the pattern of the letter of the day. We have thousands of papyri that are letters of the day. Paul also follows a certain pattern that he uses for himself, either in exact formulas or a paraphrase of what he has written elsewhere.

This raises the question: How is Paul working? It shouldn’t surprise us that Paul follows a standard form for letters. It surprises us because today people don’t write letters as much as they used to. Now it’s emails and texting. But it used to be that people wrote letters.

If you were writing a business letter, you followed the business letter form: “Dear Sir/Madam. . . .” It doesn’t mean that there was anything “dear” about that company and whoever those anonymous people were. And the letter ended “Sincerely,” but it had nothing to do with “sincerity.” It is simply a way of using the pattern of a business letter.

Then there is the friendly letter, which had its own pattern. A sister writes to her older sister: “Dear Mary: I’m sorry I haven’t written to you in a while. Things here are about the same. The weather is a little colder. Jonny had a cold and stayed home from school for two days. We’re going to go to Bob’s for Thanksgiving. Look forward to seeing you at Christmas. Hope all is well. I’ll be better about writing in the future. Love, Jane.”

If you took twenty or thirty such letters and line them up in parallel, you would find an astonishing sameness. The details would be different, but actually it’s kind of fun. People have certain patterns and they repeat them.

Paul is falling into the patterns of his day. His letters start out: "I, Paul, and ... so-and-so to so-and-so, Grace and peace." "Grace" is the way a Greek letter would begin, and "Peace" (Shalom) is the way a Hebrew letter would begin. Paul puts them together and it keeps repeating. There is nothing particularly significant about the greeting. It is like saying: "Dear So-and-so." He might say a little bit more and then there would be the thanksgiving: "I thank God for you." And then something about his travel, and then the main body of the letter, then his greetings to other people, a doxology, and Amen.

When we look at all of Paul's letters in parallel, we see how he repeats himself directly or paraphrases himself. The big exception to this is in Galatians, where he leaves out the thanksgiving. We know he's saying to the Galatians: "You have left the truth of the Gospel." He's saying: "We can't be thankful." It's significant that the thanksgiving is left out.

In 1 Thessalonians there are five chapters. The first chapter, after the introduction in verses 1-2, is totally a thanksgiving: Thanks be to God. Thank you. Thanks, thanks, thanks. (In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 the note of thanksgiving echoes again.)

What's going on here? In the comic opera, *The Barber of Seville* (1816), there is a closing between two fellows, a bass and a baritone, singing: "Good night." It's very musical. One sings "Good night," and the other one sings "Good night." It goes on for more than five minutes. Finally one of them stamps his foot and says: "Good night" and leaves.

What is the "Thank you" for in this extraordinarily different way of writing in Paul and in the letter as it is known from the time? We don't know for sure. He talks about how they have become Christians, and how they are examples, and how they look for the coming of the Lord. They are from Thessalonica, which in that day was in a province called Macedonia.

In other letters of Paul's, such as 2 Corinthians 8:1, he thanks the people who gave a collection for the poor. We know from Josephus and other sources that there was a famine in Jerusalem in 48 A.D. The poor, and most of the Christians were of the lower class, were suffering, though there were those from elsewhere who gave a collection. He mentions this several places, not here in 1 Thessalonians, but it can be that he is inferring it, not saying it directly.

It is significant when we look at the parallels, we see that one of the almost direct parallels is in 1 Corinthians 1:4-9. It's odd because Corinth was the most crime-

ridden and corrupt seaports of the ancient world. It was known as the worst. If you think of that letter that we call 1 Corinthians, that congregation was a mess. In chapter 5 he talks against incest; chapter 6 is against prostitution and homosexuality; chapter 7 against marrying outside the faith and slavery; chapters 8-10 eating food offered to idols; chapter 11 women having their heads covered and those who abuse the Lord's Supper; chapters 12-14 about the gifts of the Spirit; and chapter 15 about those who deny the resurrection. The congregation is a mess. To be sure, there were even more problems, but that's what he was asked directly about.

In contrast, in Thessalonica there doesn't seem to be any problem. What is significant is the parallel what he says in 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 and what he says in these three chapters plus at the end of the first letter to the Thessalonians because he basically says the same thing. It's not "these (Thessalonians) are spectacular Christians," and "you (Corinthians) don't have it together." In both cases he says the same thing. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 he writes:

"May the God of peace sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

He says the same thing to the mixed-up and problematic people in Corinth, as we read in 1 Corinthians 1:7-9:

"You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

What Paul writes to the troublesome Corinthians is the same as what he writes to the Thessalonians. What we see here in terms of all the troubles is: Yes, there are troubles, but the Lord is taking care of them, just as Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:24: "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

It is very much the same as he writes in Romans 8:30: "And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." Notice that it is all in the past tense and there is a peculiar Greek tense here that is not past continuous but a state of being. It is done (aorist).

What we learn in Luther's Small Catechism is an echo or paraphrase of the Gospel message. What Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 1:4: "For we know, brethren beloved by God, he has chosen you. . . ." finds an echo in Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him."

Then in the closing verses of 1 Thessalonians Paul writes of God's continuing work that is again echoed in the Small Catechism. First Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "May the God of peace sanctify you wholly; and may your soul and spirit and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Then Luther in the Small Catechism:

"But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

Notice Luther, like Paul, puts this is all past tense. Sometimes we think: There is "the Bible" and then Luther sat down and made up a religion. But no, Luther was not just making it up. All Luther is doing is what Paul himself does, that is, putting it together and paraphrasing it.

Finally it is summed up by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:24: "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." Amen