

Study Guide for Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians & Galatians

Approaching Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians & Galatians: Initial Reflections

Assigned Reading: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapters 11, 12, 16, 20, 21.

After you listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Powell, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians.
- 2) To provide focus questions for group discussion of 1 Thessalonians and Galatians in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about Paul and his letters to the Thessalonians and the Galatians.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

In interpreting the letters to the Thessalonians and the Galatians one important goal is to get a sense of the content and argument of each letter as a whole. Read through the 1 Thessalonians and Galatians again in one sitting and do the following:

- Summarize in your own words the issues Paul is addressing and how he relates the gospel to the situation in the community he is addressing.
- Make a list of important themes in the letters and some of the ways your own understanding these two letters is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Ehrman. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.

Deeper Engagement with 1 Thessalonians and Galatians

In the introduction to Paul's gospel and mission we discussed the transition from the Jesus movement as a Jewish renewal movement in Judea to Paul's mission of establishing a transnational network of communities throughout the Roman Empire. Galatians 1:11-24 indicates that Paul interpreted his encounter with the risen Christ in terms of Jeremiah's call to be a "prophet to the nations". Paul was guided in his work as apostle to the nations by the conviction that in raising from the dead a Galilean Jew who had been executed as an enemy of the Roman order, the God of Israel had acted definitively to initiate the transformation of the cosmos. The resurrection of Christ inaugurated a new age inasmuch as those who were baptized into Christ embraced a new identity and new way of living in community empowered by the Spirit and patterned after the self-giving love of Christ.

Once Paul established an assembly of Christ (*ekklessia*) in one of the Greco-Roman cities, he continued to shape the identity and practices of believers through the letters he wrote after he left. It is evident from both 1 Thessalonians and Galatians that those communities were comprised mostly of Gentiles who had been pagan idolaters (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; Galatians 4:8-10). Although these Gentiles were not expected to observe all the ethnic and ritual commands of Torah, their allegiance to the one God of Israel meant that they could no longer participate in the pagan rituals that were an integral part of the fabric of Greco-Roman society. In this respect, Gentile believers who were baptized into Christ assumed a new identity in which they were no longer pagan, and yet neither were they really Jewish. In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes to reinforce believers' new identity and way of life in Christ vis-à-vis the imperial context in which they must continue to live. In Galatians Paul writes to reinforce the Galatian believers' identity in a context in which there is some pressure to become full-fledged Jews.

An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation

Part of Paul's genius is that he is a pastoral theologian who is always interpreting the different contexts in which believers lived out their faith so that he can relate the gospel of Christ to the particular circumstances and issues they were dealing with. That is why each one of Paul's letters is so different from the others, and why it is so difficult to synthesize his theology. In the following exercise, you will read each letter on its own terms with a view to ascertaining the particular story of the community implied in the letter and the distinctive way Paul relates the story of Christ to the situation he was addressing. Then you will compare and contrast the two letters. Do this on your own in preparation for your group discussion.

1 Thessalonians

- Write a brief paragraph or two telling the story of the assembly of Christ in Thessalonica based on what Paul tells us in the letter. What does the letter disclose about the specific issues in the community Paul was addressing?
- Briefly summarize the story of Christ Paul tells in 1 Thessalonians. What are the characteristics of the way of life in Christ Paul models and exhorts believers to adopt? What is counter-cultural about this pattern of life in Christ in the context of the Greco-Roman city of Thessalonica? How does Paul's presentation of the gospel message in 1 Thessalonians serve as the basis for the new way of life in Christ he urges believers to embrace?

Galatians

- Write a brief paragraph or two telling the story of the assembly of Christ in Galatia based on what Paul says in the letter. Identify passages that disclose information about the specific issue(s) Paul was addressing in that community? What would male believers have to gain from allowing themselves to be circumcised?
- In Galatians 3:1-14, as well as other places in the letter, Paul reminds the Galatian believers of the gospel he first preached to them and the impact it had on their lives. In particular, he emphasizes the crucifixion of Christ and their reception of the Spirit. What is the relationship between the gospel and the Spirit in Galatians? How

do the gospel and Spirit together engender freedom and new life for those who live by faith? How is this freedom to be lived out in the community?

Discussion Question

In both 1 Thessalonians and Galatians Paul writes to shape the identities and practices of believers in accordance with the gospel of Christ. However, the tone and content of the two letters is very different because the context and situation Paul was addressing was different.

- Why is “holiness” an important theme in 1 Thessalonians (see 1:5; 3:13; 4:8; 5:26) and not in Galatians while “justification by faith” is a key theme in Galatians but is not mentioned at all in 1 Thessalonians?
- How would you adapt Paul’s emphasis on “holiness” in 1 Thessalonians and “justification by faith” in Galatians to your own cultural context? What are some of the key issues regarding identity and practice in your congregation? What analogies, metaphors and images from your own cultural context would you use to discuss the significance of “holiness” and “justification by faith”?