
Exegesis 22: The gospel in Word and power

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A consideration of 1 Thessalonians 1:5 with its relevance to our preaching

The book of Acts only gives us a snapshot of Paul's preaching at Thessalonica. 1 Thessalonians gives us a far broader picture of the impact of the gospel there, and its effect throughout the whole region (see chapters 1 and 2). 1:5 is a thrilling summary of what happened when Paul preached.

I

The opening word, *hoti*, ("for" NKJV) directs us to the previous verse. As Eadie puts it, v.5 "assigns the grounds on which the assertion begun with *eidotes* [i.e. knowing] rested."¹ *Hoti* is either causal, "because", or epexegetical, "how that"; either understanding gives much the same sense.² Interpretation of this verse must be based on its connection with v.4.

"Our", in "our gospel", focuses attention on the content of the gospel message. It is the message received by Paul which he and his colleagues believed and preached, the essential elements of which are discoverable from his preaching in Acts, and his letters. "Gospel" carries with it associations about the manner in which it is presented. You do not lecture about "gospel"; good news is not to be presented dispassionately, half-heartedly or apologetically. The verbs that belong with "gospel" are seen in the Acts account, "reason", "explain", "prove", "proclaim", "persuade" (Acts 17:2-4; NIV). "Gospel" also implies a situation which is sad and tragic, into which it comes as a message of hope and gladness, a message whose reception is marked particularly by joy (v.6).³ Those who bring good news do all they can to urge it upon those who need it.

II

The word *egenethe* is unexpected. The Revised English Bible (REB) appears to take it with "our" and translates "when we brought you the gospel we did not bring it in mere words", and this translation is supported by Louw and Nida.⁴ On the other hand Hiebert⁵ says, "Paul's emphasis upon the gospel itself, not the messengers, is further evident from the fact that he says 'our gospel came... unto you' rather than 'we came to you with the gospel'". Many other writers agree with this. The word is used twice more in verses 5 and 6, "what kind of men we were" (v.5), and "you became followers of us" (v.6). In all three instances there is an emphasis on the verb. 'Came' is the correct translation here, and there is a certain forcefulness about the word.

eis, "to", "into", rather than *pros* or *en* may suggest that the gospel gained an entry into the hearts of the Thessalonians. Too much emphasis ought not to be placed on prepositions, but the context suggests that this is so.

The gospel did not come in word only, but it did come in word. It was a message

concerning Jesus Christ expressed in words addressed to the mind, and through the mind to the consciences, emotions and wills of the Thessalonians. Because the gospel was not in word only, but also in power etc., it reached the innermost soul of the Thessalonians producing a transformation in them.

In these days “Word” is used with a particular nuance to mean “Word of God”. However, “word” here simply means “message” or “words”. It would introduce a completely erroneous polarity to read this verse as if it said, “Our gospel did not come to you in Word only, but also in power...” Discussions about Word and Spirit need to be especially careful at this point.

It is improbable that Paul intends us to think in terms of just two possibilities; either the gospel comes in word only, or else it also comes in power etc. Do we not have here the two extremes of what might be called a sliding scale? Paul was accustomed to preach the gospel with the Holy Spirit’s power, and took steps to try and ensure that this was the case (1 Cor 2:1-5). In Thessalonica the gospel came with particular power, “much assurance”, *plerophoria polle*. It is doubtful whether Paul actually envisaged the possibility of preaching the gospel “in word only” (cf. 2:13), though he does say that dressing it up in words of human wisdom would rob it of its power (cf. 1 Cor 1:17). Even in Athens where some scoffed, others said they would listen to him again, and some believed, including a member of the Areopagus and a prominent woman (Acts 17:32-34). His general attitude is expressed in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”

III

There is a textual variation in the phrase “but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance”. This study follows the text of UBS 3⁶ by including *en* before *plerophoria*. Fee argues for its omission, maintaining that “one can offer no reasonable explanation for its omission by scribes”. On the other hand he can only offer Aleph, B, 33 and lat. for textual support and this seems perilously thin.⁷ He then maintains that the second *kai* should be understood exegetically, “but also with power, *namely*, with the Holy Spirit and full conviction”. Calvin links “in power and in the Holy Spirit” together as a hendiadys to mean “in the power of the Holy Ghost”⁸, but this is almost certainly a mistake. Eadie says, “The second *kai* is not exegetical, but in the phrase *en Pneumati hagio* it has an ascensive force, and the second clause says something much fuller and higher than the first.”⁹

Does *dunamei* refer to miracles that accompanied the preaching? Lunemann says, “By *dunamis* is not to be understood miracles by which the power of the preached gospel was attested...; for if so, the plural would have been necessary...”¹⁰ Fee points out that though miracles would have accompanied the preaching, “the *primary* emphasis in v.5 seems to be on Paul’s Spirit-empowered preaching of the gospel that brought about their conversion.”¹¹ There can be little doubt that this is right. Signs and wonders do not guarantee conversions, nor can they be adduced as evidence of the election of those who witnessed them.

Plerophoria is used four times in the New Testament. Even without its accompanying adjective it means “full assurance”, “certainty”.¹² By adding *polle* Paul expresses

considerable emphasis. Translations include “full assurance”, “deep conviction” (NIV), “complete certainty” (Louw and Nida), and “full persuasion” (Eadie).

IV

Does “in power...” refer to Paul’s experience in preaching, or to the Thessalonians’ as they heard? Did Paul experience *plerophoria* or the Thessalonians? Eadie takes up what Paul says about knowing the Thessalonians’ election, “And he knew it on two grounds – first, a subjective ground, from the memory of his own consciousness in preaching; his own recollections of divine assistance poured in upon him as he proclaimed the truth... Secondly, an objective ground, their immediate and cordial reception of the truth, ‘and ye became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction and in joy of the Holy Ghost.’”¹³ Verse 5 presents the subjective ground; verse 6 the objective.

Commenting on the words “much assurance” Eadie adds, “But the meaning is that they preached at once in the full persuasion of the truth of the gospel,... This inborn assurance, combined with the Spirit’s inworking and the powerful utterance vouchsafed to them, were to them a token that there were in their audiences those whom they could soon recognise as God’s elect...”¹⁴ But can a preacher really know that God has his elect among his hearers by feelings of assurance and power experienced when preaching? Is it not possible for the Spirit to be resisted when the preaching comes in power (Acts 7:51)? May not a preacher speak in weakness, fear and much trembling and yet be surprised by many conversions? It is, of course, possible to hold that Paul is referring both to his own assurance and that of the Thessalonians, and many writers suggest this. Certainly Fee seems right to say that these phrases refer to the “Spirit-empowered *effectiveness*”¹⁵ of Paul’s preaching. Bruce seems to identify the primary referent when he says, “The reference is to the Thessalonians’ deep inward persuasion of the truth of the gospel, a token of the Holy Spirit’s work in their hearts.”¹⁶

One of the reasons Eadie and others understand verses 5 and 6 as they do is the final clause of v. 5, “as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.” Doesn’t this show that the focus of v. 5 is entirely on the preachers? Not necessarily. Bruce, whose comment on *plerophoria* we have already seen, adds at this point, “The spiritual power and conviction with which the message was received matched the spiritual power and conviction with which it was delivered.”¹⁷ This, however, probably still misses the mark. Fee understands the clause as a parenthesis, pointing out that the structure is, “our gospel came (*egenethe*) to you... and you became (*egenethete*) imitators of us”.¹⁸ Its main purpose is to prepare for what Paul is going to say about the Thessalonians imitating them and the Lord. We tend to forget that those living in pagan cities had never seen Christians before Paul and his colleagues visited them. In an important footnote Fee says, “Indeed, his calling on his converts to “imitate” him as he “imitated” Christ is almost certainly the key to the ethical instructions given in his churches, where they have no “book” to follow. 1 Cor.11:1 provides the starting point: Paul considered himself a follower of the example and teaching of Christ; his following Christ then served as a ‘model’ for his churches, who in turn, as in v.7 in our present passage makes clear, became ‘models’ for one another.”¹⁹

The final clause does not then directly refer to the Spirit-effective preaching of Paul,

and the earlier part of the verse applies primarily to the Thessalonians because:

- a) Paul is talking about the way in which “our gospel” *came “to you”*.
- b) “Much assurance” on the part of the preachers would not necessarily give any certainty that the hearers were chosen by God.
- c) When the gospel came with much assurance into the hearts of the Thessalonians, so that they welcomed the word, were filled with joy by the Spirit, and were prepared to suffer affliction (v.6), this was real evidence of their election.

V

Does the text help in understanding exactly how this work of the Spirit took place in the Thessalonians? Did the Spirit work primarily through the speakers, in the hearers, or through the gospel itself? While we must beware of unnecessarily compartmentalising aspects of the Spirit’s work which belong together, there are implications for our thinking and praying that hang on the answer.

We naturally tend to focus on what Paul says of himself; both because we want to learn from him and because we hope that if we become more like him the results of our preaching will be more like his! Obviously there is much we can learn. “What kind of men we were” is amplified in 2:1-12, i.e. men full of the joy of the Holy Spirit in the midst of opposition, bold in God to speak the gospel (2:2) – thus assured of its power to save – men of integrity (2:3-6) gentleness (2:6,7), love (2:8,11), and self-sacrifice (2:9). Yet becoming like that, greatly desirable though it is, cannot guarantee that what happened at Thessalonica will be repeated now in any given situation.

In the text “power” seems closely associated with “gospel”; “Our gospel came, not in word only, but in power...” John Woodhouse, in a chapter subtitled, “Preaching and the Holy Spirit”, comments on this verse, “Paul is describing one experience, what they experienced when ‘our gospel came’. The gospel is never just words.” And having also quoted 2:13 he says, “The gospel comes in power and in the Holy Spirit precisely because it is the *Word of God*. Notice, too, that Paul says that this Word of God is at work “in you who believe”. Paul can equally say that God is at work “in us” by his Spirit. These are not two works of God, but one. It is by his Word that God’s Spirit is at work.”²⁰ This contrasts rather pointedly with the exposition of Dr Lloyd-Jones, “The first thing is the message that was preached. ‘Our Gospel came unto you not in word only,’ that is the message. But there was this other factor, ‘not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance’. Now there are the two things: the message and the power of the Spirit upon it.”²¹

There is much to be said for Woodhouse’s view. The gospel is always the power of God for the salvation of those who believe. It is not just “word”; it is Word of God; it is the Spirit who speaks it (Heb 3:7). Conversion is the result of the invasive, life-giving power of the Word. The Word is like a seed; it has innate power which brings new life and new birth (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18). But Woodhouse’s view, or his exposition of it, is inadequate. At Thessalonica something took place which did not – and does not – always happen. Moreover this preaching demonstrated the election of the Thessalonians. The gospel would itself still have been the same – perhaps Paul’s persuasion of its efficacy would have been the same – but if the Thessalonians had not been chosen of God the gospel would not have come in the way it did.

What happened at Thessalonica cannot simply be ascribed to the implicit power of the gospel. The gospel, powerful though it is, is always resisted by the unregenerate heart. It is probably right to see the power of the Spirit as coming with and through the message, but it came with *conquering* power because these were the elect, beloved by God. The gospel is the power of God: it would be a mistake to separate the gospel from the living, active God who speaks it and speaks through it by his Spirit to call those dead in their sins to new life in his Son.

This verse reminds us that Spirit-effective preaching is gloriously possible. It should raise our expectation and stir our prayers. The gospel is powerful through the Spirit as an instrument in the hands of a sovereign God who uses it to save those whom he has chosen. The wonder of it is that such a gospel is entrusted to us to preach (2:4).

References

- ¹ John Eadie, *A Commentary On The Greek Text Of The Epistles Of Paul To The Thessalonians*; Macmillan and Co.; London; 1877; p.39.
- ² Gordon D Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1994, p.40; FF Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*; Word Biblical Commentary, Word, Waco, 1982, p.13.
- ³ Fee, p.46,47.
- ⁴ Johannes P Louw and Eugene A Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based On Semantic Domains*, United Bible Societies, New York, 1988/9, vol.1, p.371.
- ⁵ D Edmund Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, Moody Press; Chicago, 1971, p.53.
- ⁶ *The Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, 3rd Edition, Stuttgart, 1983. Although *en* is in the text it is put in square brackets as a disputed reading.
- ⁷ Fee, p.40. It is, however, likely that the *en* before *humin* later in the verse should be omitted; see his discussion p. 41.
- ⁸ John Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1972; p.336.
- ⁹ Eadie, p.42.
- ¹⁰ Gottlieb Lunemann, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles of St Paul to the Thessalonians*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1880, p.27.
- ¹¹ Op. cit. p.43; italics his.
- ¹² Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker; *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1979, p.670. Some dispute this meaning, opting for "fullness", but this does not seem to fit the context.
- ¹³ Eadie, p.40.
- ¹⁴ Op. cit., p.42/3.
- ¹⁵ Fee, p.44; italics his.
- ¹⁶ Bruce, p.14.
- ¹⁷ Op. cit., p.15.
- ¹⁸ Op. cit., p.46.
- ¹⁹ Op. cit., p.46, footnote 35.
- ²⁰ John Woodhouse, The Preacher and the Living Word, in *When God's Voice Is Heard*, ed. Christopher Green and David Jackman, IVP, Leicester; 1995, p.57/58.
- ²¹ DM Lloyd-Jones, "Not in Word Only", in *The Sacred Anointing*, ed. Tony Sargent, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1994, p.276. See also Michael A Eaton, *Baptism With The Spirit*, IVP; 1989, pp.215-220.

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