

Should the Minister Get a Job? A Case Study on Normativity in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

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It is a well-known feature that Paul worked outside of direct ministry for the purpose of supporting himself, evidently making tents for a living (Acts 18:3). From his example, some have inferred recently that this approach is the superior means of accomplishing gospel ministry.² A segment of the American house-church movement seeks to simplify the task of church planting in this way, entirely eliminating the expenses of buildings and paid clergy.³ However, the arena where bivocational ministry is advocated the most is in missions. Since the church seems to be facing a financial crisis, as demonstrated in deputation experiences that extend between three and five years, perhaps the church may look to its members who are willing to vocationally support themselves on the mission field. In response to this financial dilemma, missions practitioners suggest “tentmaking” as a viable alternative to traditional methods of raising support.⁴ In this way, the tentmaker works a part time or full time job on the target field, seeking to build relationships on the job, with the hope of gospel witness. Furthermore, in whatever time is left, the tentmaker works in the direct ministry of preaching, prayer, visitation, counseling, etc.

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² Older pastoral ministry manuals suggest secular work as a solution to financial woes connected to being underpaid in the ministry. Mark Lee presents such a scenario in *The Minister and His Ministry*: “If a minister and his wife feel that one or the other must supplement their income with extra work, let them discuss the matter with the officers of the church and so avoid misunderstanding. If the case is well presented [sic] the officers may detect the need which was missed before and propose a more equitable salary for their pastor.” *The Minister and His Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 122. More recently, authors on pastoral practice have encouraged pastors to consider “bivocational” ministry in certain instances, arguing that Paul was bivocational. The two instances which Doris Borchert cites where this is especially effective is in new church plants and in church situations where one attempts to rejuvenate a church that has “plateaued.” David P. Gushee and Walter C. Jackson, eds., *Preparing for Christian Ministry: An Evangelical Approach* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), 148–49. See also Dennis W. Bickers, *The Tentmaking Pastor: The Joy of Bivocational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) and C. Neal Johnson, *Business as Mission: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009) for advocacy of “business as mission.”

³ One of the tenets of the house church movement is the idea that the traditional church wastes large amounts of money on its buildings, programs, and even on its ministers. A tentmaking mentality, on the other hand, streamlines the ministry effectiveness of the church, enabling it to pour its funds directly into evangelism and discipleship. For a rejoinder to this idea, see “Financing Apostolic Ministry,” at <https://church-planting.net/FreeDownloads/Operations/Ministry%20Financing.pdf>, accessed August 1, 2020.

⁴ The term “tentmaker” generally designates a vocational minister who engages in secular work alongside of traditional ministry functions. The phrase “Business as Mission” is an approach to life and work that sees business as ministry when it is carried out with the Great Commission in mind. “Business as Mission” advocates argue that all of life is mission for the believer.

Hermeneutical Considerations

Although other motivations exist for a missions strategy that includes tentmaking,⁵ the most obvious question at this juncture is whether or not the Bible supports the idea of tentmaking as the *preferable ministry model*. Paul did it; should we?

Questions of Normativity

The term “normativity” in biblical studies is generally prescriptive. If a passage of Scripture instructs the original reader to do or think something, the activity or belief is considered “normative” if subsequent readers of this passage are required to do or think likewise. For instance, Paul instructs the Thessalonian church to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17). The command is easily understood and applied without question by all generations of believers. However, nine verses later Paul instructs the same church to “greet all the brothers with a holy kiss” (1 Thes 5:26). In contrast to the previous command, few believers practice this type of greeting in churches today. Each text contains an imperative verb, yet only the former command is considered “normative” for all believers in the church age. Most interpreters would argue that the “holy kiss” practice is grounded in first century Greco-Roman culture and is therefore not required for believers in churches today.

Paul’s Example

In some respects, Paul’s practice may not provide a helpful model for today’s minister. For example, Paul typically sought to start churches in cities with synagogues, preaching Christ first to the Jews. Many cities of the twenty-first century do not have a synagogue, so following Paul’s pattern in this respect would mean avoiding these cities, or at least postponing evangelism there. Paul’s pattern also raises the question of whether to prioritize the Jewish population in a city with a synagogue before sharing the gospel with that city’s gentiles.

In another instance Paul made a vow to the Lord and shaved his head in demonstration of his adherence to the law (Acts 21:23–24), believing that this would assure a Jewish audience that he had not abandoned his Jewish heritage. Surely this is not a necessary aspect of church ministry today. On the other hand, Paul sometimes eschewed Jewish norms; contrary to typical Hebrew practice, he decided not to get married (1 Corinthians 7).⁶ In one case he followed Jewish norms; in the other he rejected them. It is important to note that Paul had a particular reason to avoid marriage due to the

⁵ The viability of utilizing tentmaking to reach “creative access” countries is not the subject of this paper. The importance of such access is underlined by the fact that, as of the beginning of the twenty-first century, eighty-three percent of the world’s unbelievers live in such countries. See Tetsuano Yamomori, *God’s New Envoys: A Bold Strategy for Penetrating Closed Countries* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1987). Paul was able to travel freely throughout the Roman empire without passport or visa. Today’s world, however, is not so easily accessed. To live in these countries in the twenty-first century, one must often have a secular job. Thus, today’s tentmaking missionary has entirely different motivations than Paul’s. See also Patrick Lai, *Tentmaking: The Life and Work of Business as Missions* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012), for a defense of tentmaking for the purpose of gaining access into visa restricted nations.

⁶ For a classic examination of Paul’s methods of ministry, see Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

nature of his ministry, along with the difficult circumstances he faced. Regarding application to the members of the Corinthian church, for some he encouraged a celibate life; others he exhorted to marry. In each instance, Paul had compelling reasons to do and to say what he did, so it is valid to question the normativity of these practices today, particularly if one's circumstances do not closely resemble Paul's. If we made Paul's example normative, ministry methods today would look quite different.

Following Paul's missionary strategy narrowly would require ministering only in those places where Christ is not known (Rom 15:17–24). If every minister of the gospel did this, no one would oversee the ministries that have already been started. Rather, Paul often sent members of his missionary team to establish and maintain churches that had been planted at an earlier date. We may therefore conclude that Paul's exhortation to his churches to imitate him does not extend to every detail of his life.⁷

Even more perplexing are the commands of Paul, as they seem to wield more authority than mere example. Thus, should today's church members "greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Thes 5:26; 1 Cor 16:20)? Are women never to speak in church (1 Cor 14:33–36)? Since Paul describes women speaking in church in an approving manner in an earlier pericope (1 Cor 11:2–16), it is likely that the injunction in chapter 14 requires some qualification.⁸

All of this amounts to somewhat of a dilemma for the student of the word of God. Adhering to Hirsch's classic distinction between "meaning" and "significance" means admitting to a single interpretation of a passage, with many applications.⁹ However, are there any limits to those applications? Since it is patently clear from both Thessalonian epistles that Paul vocationally supported himself for the purpose of helping the church grow in Christ, should not all clergy be ready and willing to do the same?¹⁰ Even more, should they not follow Paul's example and actually get a job in addition

⁷ Paul encourages others to follow his example or even to imitate his life in at least six texts of the New Testament: 1 Cor 4:15–17; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thes 3:7–9; 2 Tm 3:10–11.

⁸ Thomas Schreiner argues that Paul was addressing a particular problem in Corinth with its women: the women of the church were causing a disorder, so they were to remain silent. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles, Guides to New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 153. Schreiner rightly observes that since Paul permits women to speak in church in 1 Corinthians 11, his instructions in chapter 14 must be occasional in nature; they should not be construed as providing an absolute rule for the church.

⁹ It is important to understand Hirsch's use of the terms "meaning," "understanding," "interpretation," and "significance." "[Meaning] embraces not only any content of mind represented by written speech but also the affects and values that are necessarily correlative to such a content." E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 8. "Interpretation" joins two successive activities—first, the "understanding of meaning," and second, the "explication of meaning" (which includes meaning and significance). *Ibid.*, 19. In other places Hirsch seems to use the terms in a different sense. *Validity in Interpretation* describes "understanding" as "that which is prior and different from interpretation," similar to Martin Heidegger's "pre-understanding." *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), 135. In this text Hirsch names "understanding" as a "construction of meaning," or a combination of meaning and significance. "Interpretation," on the other hand, is an "explanation of meaning." *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰ Bloecher opines that although Paul argued that preachers of the Word were entitled to financial support, he would not accept it, rejecting this right so that he could reach "the maximum number of people for Christ." "Getting Perspective," in *Working Your Way to the Nations: A Guide to Effective Tentmaking*, ed. Jonathan Lewis, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 18. This unqualified statement appears to imply that if you really care about reaching the maximum people for the gospel, you should emulate Paul. You should get a job.

to their ministerial duties? This question becomes more poignant when one observes Paul specifically exhorting believers in Thessalonica to work based on his own example:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate (2 Thes 3:7–9).¹¹

Paul appears to argue that his practice of working with his hands was beneficial for the Thessalonian church; therefore, the Thessalonian believers should imitate Paul in this respect. Moreover, perhaps today's clergy should set a similar example.

Solving the Significance Dilemma

Schreiner solves the significance problem by analyzing every possible application of Scripture in four steps: 1) “formulating a principle from the passage; 2) consulting all the Pauline teaching on the issue; 3) constructing his teaching into a unified whole; and 4) determining whether Paul's advice is solely explicable from the specific situation he addressed or whether it stems from God's intention in creation.”¹² The first challenge for employing Schreiner's method is the difficulty of coming up with an appropriate principle to accurately reflect the meaning of the text. For instance, what principle might be appropriate for Paul's instruction that women should wear veils (1 Cor 11:2–16)? Since it would seem that wearing veils was a cultural feature of Paul's day, should one draw from this passage the principle that a woman's head must be covered in some way, presumably by a hat or scarf? Or should the principle be to show submission to the husband in a culturally acceptable manner? One principle is physical in nature, while the other is somewhat abstract.

A second difficulty with Schreiner's grid is the order of the steps that he advocates in his theological method. By moving from an examination of the target passage (step 1) to Paul's relevant teaching in all of his writings (steps 2 and 3), the theologian may inadvertently draw conclusions which obscure his understanding of the particular circumstances of the target letter's recipients. Perhaps it would be better to place step 4 in front of steps 2 and 3.¹³

Thus, it is advisable for the exegete to thoroughly seek the meaning of the passage before formulating a universal principle. Likewise, he should postpone an examination of other texts in order for the target passage to be understood on its own merits. If one must resort to 1 Corinthians in order to understand and properly apply 1 Thessalonians, what does that say about the original reader of 1 Thessalonians who did not have access to Paul's later writings? Is he left without a valid application?

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scriptures quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹² Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 159.

¹³ Schreiner's order does allow for the fourth step as a check against unwarranted conclusions that occur during the first three steps.

This is not to diminish the importance of a coherent theology that is derived by considering the teaching of the entire canon of Scripture. Rather, it is to postpone this step in one's theological method so that the individual writing can be adequately heard. Thus, one may find that Paul's reason for working with his hands in Thessalonica is unique. Once this is discovered, it is entirely appropriate to investigate why he worked with his hands in other cities.

Third, Schreiner's baseline for his cultural analysis (step 4) appears to be limited to those things that are grounded in creation. He states in his final step that one can ascertain if an activity is normative by "determining whether Paul's advice is solely explicable from the specific situation he addressed or whether it stems from God's intention in creation."¹⁴ Therefore, human practices may be divided into two categories; those practices that stem "from God's intention in creation," and those practices that are situational, or culturally bound. Although this strategy may work well regarding the question of male headship (1 Cor 11), it does not provide a good rubric for appropriate foods for people to eat (Gn 1:28–30).¹⁵ Moreover, the guidelines for acceptable foods changed several times in the various dispensations that God established.¹⁶ Thus, we acknowledge that God may have different expectations for people of different eras and cultures.

Contrary to Schreiner, J. Robertson McQuilkin argues that the biblical "form" should not be dismissed so easily in seeking an appropriate application.¹⁷ He is concerned that so many teachings of Jesus and the apostles could be regarded as "historic-specific" that they would not be regarded as being normative for today's reader.¹⁸ He suggests, "Scripture itself may limit the audience in the immediate context through a specific statement of the author or through an obvious requirement of the historical setting."¹⁹ Therefore, according to McQuilkin, unless the Scriptures indicate that a form is only for a select audience, then it can be considered normative for today.²⁰ Thus, the challenge for the interpreter of Scripture is to discover if sufficient evidence exists in the text to limit the application of the "form" to the original audience.

¹⁴ *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 159.

¹⁵ For a thorough discussion on the question of whether or not women should wear headcoverings while engaged in church worship, see David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 505–32. Garland discusses the merits of the various interpretations of this passage and concludes that the traditional view is best: head coverings for women who worship in church are necessary due to the cultural contexts where they exist. To not do so will bring shame and dishonor upon the church of God (see especially pp. 505–11).

¹⁶ See Gen 9:3–5; Lev 11:1–47; and Acts 10:9–43.

¹⁷ *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 281.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "Problems of Normativeness in Scriptures: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 219–22. Robert Thomas agrees with this approach, as it best represents a high view of inspiration. Thomas, however, presents an eclectic grid for determining normativity: 1) Does the context limit the recipient or application? 2) Does subsequent revelation limit the recipient or the application? 3) Is this specific teaching in conflict with other biblical teaching? 4) Is the reason for a norm given in Scriptures, and is that reason treated as normative? 5) Is the specific teaching normative as well as the principle? 6) Does the Bible treat the historic context as normative? 7) Does the Bible treat the cultural context as limited? Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 390.

For McQuilkin, cultural “forms” in Scripture are somewhat more complicated:

Most of us might agree that washing another’s feet at mealtime, leaving ladies’ hair uncut, and other such commands are culturally specific and therefore do not apply universally. Specifically, they do not apply to us! However, we have discovered that the same principle can apply to virtually any teaching of Scripture. But to set aside any Scripture simply on the basis that it is cultural and therefore valid for only one specific cultural setting, is to establish a principle that can be used to set aside any or even all biblical teaching.²¹

McQuilkin’s overarching concern is that Scripture not be robbed of its authority due to a cultural interpretation.²² Would it not be possible to argue that Christ’s teaching on divorce or Paul’s warning against homosexuality could be divested of authority by saying that they were addressing specific cultural problems?

One can appreciate McQuilkin’s approach to applying the Scriptures. He allows for cultural adjustments in applying texts, but he assumes that practices that are described in Scripture are authoritative, unless the Bible clearly indicates otherwise. However, McQuilkin makes a category mistake when approaching the question of “work” in the Thessalonian epistles. Instead of categorizing Paul’s work practice as a “historic-specific” matter, McQuilkin labels it as a cultural feature of Thessalonian life.

Paul used a cultural argument to support his injunction to work with one’s hands (1 Thes 1:11). Scripture may not give a reason for a teaching, but if it does, the reason becomes part of the teaching. Here, the reason given is not some eternal moral principle, but a cultural argument: “so that you may behave *properly* (emphasis his) toward outsiders and not be in any need” (4:12). In other words, the enduring principle is given that Christians should earn their livelihood as a testimony to non-Christians. It reflects the cultural pattern (“properly”) that, for Christians in Thessalonica, would mean manual labor. Since the argument is based on culture, if that cultural situation is not present, only the principle (not the command) should be made normative. In this case, the cultural factor is not imposed externally but is part of Paul’s argument. Paul does not make the cultural context of the command a universal norm, and we are not obliged to duplicate the cultural context of the command to work.²³

McQuilkin’s assertion that Paul is addressing a cultural feature in Thessalonica is based on the clause, “so that you may behave *properly* towards outsiders and not be in any need”; he suggests that the term “properly” indicates observance of appropriate cultural norms in a particular context.²⁴ On this basis Thessalonian believers were commanded to do *manual labor* because this practice was appropriate to the culture of this city. However, for the contemporary believer the universal principle is to earn a livelihood through work.

Although the adverb “properly” (εὐσχημόνως) could refer to appropriate cultural behavior, it is not likely that it indicates that here. The clause cited above is part of a sentence that extends from 4:10b to 4:12, and is structured as follows:

²¹ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, 290–91.

²² J. Robertson McQuilkin, “Limits of Cultural Interpretation” *JETS* 23 (1980), 113–20.

²³ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, 291.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

But we exhort you, brothers
 that you abound more and more,
 and that you aspire to live quietly,
 and that you practice your own business,
 and that you work with your own hands,
 just as we commanded you
 that you might walk properly towards outsiders,
 and that you might not have need of anything.

Paul's exhortation contains four infinitive clauses that are grammatically parallel to each other and act as the object of Paul's exhortation. The first of these clauses expands on the idea that was introduced in the previous sentence (4:9–10a), that of "loving one another." Paul instructs the Thessalonian church to abound more and more in their love for one another. Specifically, this would be accomplished by living a quiet life, avoiding being a busybody, and engaging in labor for the purposes of supporting oneself. All of these elements comprise what it means to live "properly" before unbelievers.

Thus, it is odd that McQuilkin would isolate the idea of "working with one's hands" as the only culture-specific practice described in the exhortation.²⁵ Rather, it is reasonable to conclude that Paul was addressing a work issue that had arisen in the church at Thessalonica, and that he endeavored to take several measures at correcting the problem. Therefore, McQuilkin could have achieved a better conclusion by treating this situation as a "historic-specific" practice.

It appears best to assume that Paul's exhortations, commands, and even his example are normative for today, unless the text provides some limitations to the application of the text.²⁶ Yet several issues remain. Does proper interpretation lead to appropriate application? If this is indeed the case, then one must pursue the meaning of the text, assuming that it will contain indicators that limit the application of its teaching to the modern audience. This study seeks first to prove that point.

Second, is it possible to discover if an activity is normative for the modern reader simply by examining data contained in the letter itself? Must one resort to arguments from other portions of the Bible to arrive at an answer?²⁷ This paper will seek to discover if Paul teaches, through his example and

²⁵ See footnote 33.

²⁶ For other helpful perspectives on normativity, see G. W. Knight III, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scriptures: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 241–53; and Alan F. Johnson, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scriptures: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 257–82.

²⁷ I ascribe to a theological method that utilizes first exegesis and then biblical theology. I recognize the value of chronologically tracing a theme through Scriptures but argue that biblical theology first examines what a biblical author says about a theme and, at times, even confines that study to a particular audience. Since Paul's tentmaking practice occurs in both Thessalonica and Corinth, this approach is especially important, for Paul may have engaged in secular work in these cities for different reasons. Following this step, one may expand to other books of the Bible to gain a wider perspective and to observe progressive revelation on a theme. Systematic theology may then be employed, utilizing historical theology and other sources that are helpful to interpretation and application. I owe much of my thinking on this to Michael Stallard, who introduced a form of this methodology to me in his Advanced Theological Method class, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clark Summit, PA. Harold Hoehner supports this approach: "Specific passages must be examined in light of the theological framework of the specific work of the writer of Scriptures. This is biblical theology. This step attempts to prevent the

instructions, that it is better for the minister of the gospel to support himself through “secular” work by examining the Thessalonian epistles alone. This is not to disparage a wider approach to biblical theology that examines a theme in the entire canon chronologically; rather, it reserves it as the “next step.” I advocate that one should begin by approaching a writing as the original reader only could, as a self-contained communication.²⁸ Therefore, both 1 and 2 Thessalonians will be utilized because they were written to the same people, with little intervening time between their composition.²⁹ In addition, Paul develops the “work” theme progressively through each epistle, culminating his argument in the final chapter of 2 Thessalonians.

Therefore, this paper will demonstrate that the significance of a text is restricted by the meaning. It will be seen that Paul’s decision not to be remunerated by the Thessalonian church was based on his narrow set of circumstances at this church. Thus, his decision to do “secular” work is not to be considered as normative for clergy today.

The “Work” Theme in Thessalonians

Although Paul speaks of “work” often in his letters, he does so nowhere more frequently than in the Thessalonian epistles.³⁰ One wonders if he does not set the tone for his first letter in his initial words of commendation: “remembering before our God and Father your *work* of faith and *labor* of love and *steadfastness* of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 1:3, emphasis added). The work terminology (work, labor, and steadfastness³¹) used here is descriptive of how much effort the Thessalonians have put into their growth in Christ. Although Paul does not address the issue of “working for a living” here, he seems to plant seed thoughts to the effect that the believers at Thessalonica were willing to work. This thought is furthered in the second epistle in Paul’s

theologian from taking passages out of context or bending passages of Scriptures to fit a personal theology.” Roy B. Zuck, ed., *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 9.

²⁸ One could also propose that the Thessalonian reader had access to antecedent Scriptures, but we cannot assume that he had actually read or heard these documents.

²⁹ The case for 2 Thessalonians being the first communication to the church is not a compelling one. That 1 Thessalonians speaks of persecution in the past, while 2 Thessalonians speaks of it in the present is not enough to convince this author (cf. 1 Thes 1:6 and 2:14 with 2 Thes 1:4). Rather, the pastoral tone of 1 Thessalonians seems much more in keeping with how Paul would have communicated with new believers. Second, the eschatological concerns of the first letter are simpler than that of the second one. Nonetheless, one cannot be dogmatic on this point. It appears that the second letter was written shortly after the first, allowing time for Timothy to return to Paul in Corinth to give a second report of the Thessalonian condition. Therefore, it is likely that the entire span of Paul’s span of communication with the church there took place within five or six months, placing the date of 1 Thessalonians at about AD 50.

³⁰ “Work” terminology—*ἐργάζομαι, ἔργον, κόπος, ὑπομονή, μόχθος, κοπιάω*—occurs in Pauline literature as follows: Romans, .93%; 1 Corinthians, .46%; Philippians, .96%; 1 Thessalonians, 3.37%; 2 Thessalonians, 6.38%; 1 Timothy, .89%; 2 Timothy, 1.2% (*Bible Works* 7.0.012g, copyright, 2006). Therefore, less than 1 percent of all the words in Romans are “work” terms, but in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, “work” language comprises over three percent of the words in the first epistle and over six percent in the second.

³¹ Although “steadfastness” (*ὑπομονή*) might not strictly be considered “work” terminology, it remains part of Paul’s overall conception of work. Paul links “work,” “labor,” and “endurance” together in the Christian life because the latter term denotes a constancy that is so often missing in some (see 1 Thes 1:3). Likewise, it must be true of those who provide for their families’ physical needs.

thanksgiving section where he praises the Thessalonians for their progress in faith and love (1:3), but prays that God might count them worthy of their calling, and that they might progress further in the *work* of faith that had already developed in their lives (1:11).

In fourteen instances in the Thessalonian letters “work” terminology denotes some sort of job that one might have, whether it be labor for the gospel’s sake, or whether it be for secular employment.³² For instance, Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to hold those who labor in the gospel in highest regard “because of their work” (1 Thes 5:12–13). In addition, he describes his own ministry among the Thessalonians as “work” (1 Thes 3:5). It is therefore reasonable to say that, as part of his strategy for writing both epistles, Paul emphasizes the importance of work, both in one’s walk with Christ and in one’s responsibility to provide for the physical needs of his family. Yet this final issue provoked the most concern in both Thessalonian letters, as can be demonstrated.

“Working with Your Hands”³³

Paul’s admonition to do physical work came during his first visit to Thessalonica at the founding of the church: “But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, *as we instructed you*, so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”³⁴ Paul is compelled here to reemphasize what he had already taught, presumably during his initial visit to Thessalonica. Paul cites this original exhortation in the second letter, further demonstrating the point that his teaching on this matter can be tracked to his earliest times with the Thessalonians (2 Thes 3:10). Evidently, either Paul noticed tendencies towards laziness within the Thessalonian church, or this teaching was part of his normal discipleship training. In either case, Paul felt the need to reemphasize this point in his first letter to them.

Furthermore, the apostle felt the need to be more explicit about this topic in his closing exhortations in the first letter: “And we urge you, brothers, *admonish the idle*, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”³⁵ Following Paul’s instructions to church members to show special respect to those Christian workers who “labor” (*κοπιᾶω*) among them for their work’s (*ἔργον*) sake (5:12–13), Paul admonishes believers to warn the “idle” (*ἄτακτος*).³⁶ He

³² 1 Thes 2:9; 3:5; 4:11; 5:12, 13, 14; 2 Thes 3:8, 10, 11, 12.

³³ It is interesting that Paul speaks of work in this manner. “Working with your hands” probably describes nearly every job of the first century. If one were to follow this admonition explicitly, one would have to rule out many of the jobs of the twenty-first century.

³⁴ 1 Thes 4:10b–12, emphasis mine.

³⁵ 1 Thes 5:14, emphasis mine.

³⁶ The adverb form (*ἀτάκτως*) occurs in 2 Thes 3:6 and 3:11. Both the adjective (*ἄτακτος*, 5:14) and the adverb (*ἀτάκτως*, 3:6, 11) may be rendered as “disorderly,” “insubordinate,” “idle,” or “indolent.” Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.vv.* *ἄτακτος*, *ἀτάκτως*. Although I have translated these as “idle” above, these terms may have the sense of “disorderly” or “insubordinate”; however, this possibility does not adversely affect my argument. The critical element is that believers described here have not subjected themselves to the teaching of the apostles and are therefore

“urges” (*παρακαλέω*) these believers not to neglect these issues in the church.³⁷ From this it seems all too evident that Paul is addressing particular believers who have dishonored God by their laziness. It is reasonable to assume that Timothy and Silas brought word back to Paul of this condition, among other things, prior to his writing the first letter.³⁸ Thus, their report became part of the occasion for the epistle’s concerns. It can be concluded then, that at the writing of 1 Thessalonians, there were those in the church of Thessalonica who did not work to support themselves.

The second epistle raises the same issues, though with more urgency. Evidently, Paul’s admonition to the church about how to respond to those who persisted in their laziness was ineffective. The church had failed to warn these slothful saints sufficiently so that the problem had evidently grown worse. Now Paul was compelled to command the church to withdraw from every believer who lived this way (3:6–14).³⁹ The strength of the apostle’s command cannot be overstated here. He commands them “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,” employing the full confessional name of Christ (3:6). Paul regards the situation as perilous. Not only does the idle believer put a financial strain upon the rest of the congregation; he also spends his time in pursuits that damage the work of Christ (3:11). The only recourse is to separate from the disobedient brother in order to make him ashamed. Nonetheless, Paul qualifies, “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (3:15). The brother’s salvation is not in question, but his Christian testimony is.

Clearly, two problems existed in relation to a work ethic at the Thessalonian church. First, there were believers who did not support themselves sufficiently in the workplace. Second, the church was far too lenient in their treatment of these disobedient brothers. Paul warned them on at least two occasions prior to the writing of the second epistle, and they did not act. Now he constrains them to comply by apostolic command.

Paul’s Personal Work Ethic

Paul’s work habits, although not entirely unique to Thessalonica, were rather strict: Paul refused to receive any remuneration for his ministry from believers at Thessalonica.⁴⁰ As has already

in subordinate. A careful application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to Christian ministry would warrant the same process of separation for any type of unrepentant disobedience among believers.

³⁷ In seven instances Paul uses *παρακαλέω* to challenge the church: 1 Thes 4:1, 10, 18; 5:11, 14; 2 Thes 2:17; 3:12. But in three places, he combines this “urging” with “brothers” (*ἀδελφός*), which further strengthens the command: 1 Thes 4:1, 10; 5:14.

³⁸ According to 1 Thessalonians 3:1, Silas and Timothy seem to come to Paul when he sent for them. Following this request, Paul instructs Timothy to visit the church at Thessalonica again (1 Thes 3:2) in order to establish the believers there. At this point, it is clear that Paul was unaware of their spiritual progress (3:5), and so sends Timothy to gain an accurate report. Timothy’s report of the Thessalonian condition, then, comes to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1–5). Thus, the occasion for the first epistle to the Thessalonians occurs at this point. Paul writes to them to thank the Lord for their progress in the faith and to instruct them in some areas where they lack.

³⁹ Apart from the section on the “Man of Lawlessness” in chapter 2, this is the longest sustained discourse in 2 Thessalonians.

⁴⁰ He did, however, receive funds twice from Philippi (Phil 4:16). In order to support his claim that Paul consistently refused any wages for his preaching ministry, Lenski argues that these were “love” gifts, and not payment for ministry: “These were gifts of love, which for that reason Paul could not refuse; they were not pay, wages, support, not a

been noted, the church had persistent problems in the area of a proper work ethic. Therefore, Paul's personal work ethic took on new significance, for his example in this respect needed to be above reproach.

Paul argues that his visit to Thessalonica was not a failure (2:1). Even though there was opposition, Paul rests on the fact that God had entrusted him with the gospel (2:4). So as not to taint the gospel, the mission team was vigilant not to minister out of impure motives: they did not seek man's praise, but God's alone (2:6). In addition, the team determined to place no burden on the fledgling church, especially as it pertained to finances (2:6b–9). Paul calls them all to witness these things that he is now claiming—the facts are undeniable (2:10–12).

Paul formulates two arguments that support the financial integrity of the missionary team that worked in Thessalonica. First, as apostles of Christ, they had every right to receive remuneration from their converts (2:6b). Given Paul's plural form for "apostle," he does not use this as a technical term, but rather as a designation for all those who were sent out to serve Christ in gospel ministry. Thus, it may be surmised from this text that ministers of the gospel have every right to be supported by their parishioners.

Second, because of their love for those at Thessalonica, the missionary team members were willing to share not just the gospel, but also their lives (2:8). Given the context, the sharing of their lives could only mean the team's willingness to work night and day⁴¹ in ministry and secular work, to the extent that their very lives were being expended. It is important to note that Paul presents many images of compassion, gentleness, and love in this discourse section. To this end the missionary team endured toil and hardship in order to place no burden upon the church (3:9).⁴² Therefore, it can be clearly seen that although there were those who were willing to place a burden upon the church due to their poor work ethic, Paul would have no such thing in his personal life: he would rather sacrifice sleep, working night and day, in order to present an example to the Thessalonians.

violation of Paul's principle ever to preach the gospel gratis." Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937), 249. Lenski's explanation regarding Paul's unwillingness to receive support for his ministry is inadequate for the following reasons: 1) Paul argued in his correspondence with the Corinthian church that it was the right of a minister of the gospel to be remunerated for his ministry (1 Cor 9:6–12); 2) the Philippian contributions to Paul's ministry aimed at meeting his daily needs (Phil 4:15–18); 3) Paul did not likely distinguish which gifts were motivated by love and which were motivated by pure duty; and 4) Paul had other reasons why he would not receive support from the church at Corinth (cf. 2 Cor 2:17 with 2 Cor 11:5). As to why there was no mention of the gifts from Philippi in the Thessalonian epistles, Bruce explains that perhaps the money given was not sufficient to eliminate work; or, perhaps Paul does not mention in order not to embarrass the Thessalonians. F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 45 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 35. Paul, on the other hand, does not hesitate to directly confront the Corinthian church with its failures (2 Cor 11:8–9).

⁴¹ "Night and day" are in the normal Pauline order. See also 1 Thes 3:10; 2 Thes 3:8; 1 Tm 5:5; and 2 Tm 1:3. Their labors were clearly not sporadic. Ramsay suggests that they began work long before dawn in order to have sufficient time during the day to evangelize and disciple. Cited in D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1992), 103.

⁴² The missionary team was determined not to be burdensome to the Thessalonian church. However, does a "mirror reading" of the text allow us to assume that other teachers were demanding payment for their services, as philosophers of that era did? See Hiebert, *Thessalonians*, 104. The text does not warrant this supposition. Other motivations caused Paul to act in this fashion.

The link between Paul's personal work ethic and that of the Thessalonians is clearest in the second letter. Paul reiterates his Thessalonian work ethic in the extensive discourse on idleness in the church (2 Thes 3:6–14). In this section he argues that the missionary team taught these things in a thorough manner: "Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us" (3:6). Paul affirms that his teaching was directly contrary to the practice of certain Thessalonian believers.

Not only Paul's teaching, but Paul's practice was contrary to their way of life: "For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you" (3:7–8). The missionary team took extreme measures, even to the point of paying for every meal that was offered them, so as to present a consistent pattern of a diligent work ethic.⁴³ Paul summarizes his reasons for living this way in verse 9: "It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate." Thus, once again Paul reiterates the point that he had every right to be remunerated for his ministry work, but he chose rather to be an example of hard work so as to give the Thessalonians no opportunity for misunderstanding.

Therefore, it may be seen that Paul's unwillingness to be remunerated for ministry work is directly linked to the serious problem of laziness among some of the Thessalonians. That the church did not adequately address the problem exacerbated the situation. So Paul, although he was certainly accustomed to "working with his hands" in other places, must adopt this as his only source of income so as to deal with the unusual situation at Thessalonica.

Is Paul's Work Practice at Thessalonica Normative?

There are at least three different ways to approach the significance of Paul's work practice at Thessalonica. The first approach sees in Paul an unqualified pattern for Christian life and ministry. This entails preaching to "the Jews first" and seeking ministry opportunities where Christ is not yet named. Since Paul worked with his hands to support himself, every other minister of the gospel should too.

The second approach does not insist that in every situation one should refuse remuneration for ministry. Rather, the "core principle" of these texts in Thessalonians might lead one to believe that more effective ministry might be accomplished if a pastor would not receive money from his congregation. Or perhaps more generally, if the minister got a job, he might be able to widen his circle of contacts, therefore increasing the breadth of his ministry. Although such ideas do not directly appear in the text of the Thessalonian letters, if one were to draw a "principle" out of the Pauline work texts, it might be that "a secular job could help one's ministry."

⁴³ Contrary to this more literal understanding, Hiebert maintains that to eat food is not simply to take a meal, but rather to receive a "living" from the Thessalonians. *Thessalonians*, 371.

The third view holds that Paul's example may be considered normative unless it is limited by the occasion. For instance, in Paul's defense of his ministry team's model (1 Thes 2:1–12), he lists the following:

- 2:3 their exhortation had no deceit
- 2:4 they sought to please God, and not men
- 2:5 they refused to use flattery
- 2:6 they did not minister out of greed
- 2:6 they did not seek men's glory
- 2:7 they treated their converts gently
- 2:8–9 they supported themselves through their own work

All of these features of the missionary team could be considered normative for those who serve in ministry, but the text evidences limiting factors that demonstrate that some of the activity is occasional. That the last feature is not to be considered normative is supported from the Thessalonian epistles by the following limitations. First, Paul asserts that the ministry team had every right to receive support from the church (1 Thes 2:6; 2 Thes 3:9). In each instance where Paul speaks of his choice not to receive support, he makes it clear that he has the right to be paid by the church. Second, Paul determined that his team would be an example to those who were lazy. Lethargy was such a persistent problem at Thessalonica that the apostle had to take drastic measures to ensure that his message was properly received. Third, Paul determined to avoid being a "burden" to the church there, perhaps because the church already carried the burden of those who would not work.⁴⁴

Taken together, these features clearly indicate that Paul's financial practice was unique at Thessalonica. Therefore, this third approach is the reasonable solution to the question of normativity in relation to Paul's work habits in Thessalonians. In this situation Paul employed measures that would not be normal practice in ministry.

Apostolic Precedent

The normal practice established by the apostles in Acts 6 is that pastors should devote themselves to the ministry of the word and to prayer. Shortly after its founding in Acts 2, the church encountered a problem that posed a dilemma for the apostles: Should they divert their attention away from the ministry of the word and prayer in order to meet physical needs that had arisen in the church (Acts 6:1–2)? Instead, the Holy Spirit guided them to establish a new office in the church that would address these growing physical needs (6:3–4). This resolution preserved the crucial functions of the pastor and established a pattern. Pastors are to guard against the possibility that other activities could encroach upon their primary calling: the ministry of the word and prayer.

The Pastoral Epistles further support this pattern by 1) delineating qualifications for the pastoral office that include teaching;⁴⁵ 2) instructing pastors to focus on the ministry of the word and

⁴⁴ Paul seems to imply this in his exhortation to the lazy members of the church that they should "eat their own bread" (2 Thes 3:12).

⁴⁵ Compare the qualifications of overseers (1 Tm 3:1–7) with the qualifications of deacons (1 Tm 3:8–13; Acts 6:3). Both offices require management skills, but only the overseer requires the ability to teach. One can assume that the

prayer (1 Tm 2:1–4; 4:6, 11–16; 5:17; 2 Tm 2:1–2; 4:1–5); 3) teaching church congregations to financially support their pastors (1 Tm 5:17–18); and 4) warning pastors against entanglement in secular pursuits (1 Tm 6:6–10; 2 Tm 2:4). Neither these nor other texts prohibit secular work; rather, the minister of God is to conduct his personal and ecclesial life with wisdom and faith. If he feels the need to work in a secular job, he should have a *compelling reason* why this action would not compromise the apostolic pattern.

Application

Paul had a compelling reason why he should support himself by making tents in Thessalonica. Though pastors should focus on the ministry of the word and prayer, they may have valid reasons for engaging in secular work. For instance, new church plants or revitalizations often require additional funding during the initial stages of ministry, so the pastor must often work outside of the church to cover the basic needs of his family. One would hope that this arrangement would not be necessary as the church grows so that the pastor can focus on his calling. However, one must acknowledge that a “full-time” pastoral position may not be typical or possible in some cultural contexts.⁴⁶

In some cultural contexts, the pastor may widen his opportunities for evangelism and discipleship by working in the industry of the region. However, one must be wary of becoming so consumed in the secular employment that the ministry of the word and prayer is neglected.

As noted earlier in this paper, eighty-three percent of the world’s population resides in nations that are inaccessible to missionaries apart from “creative” strategies to enter them. Missionaries who seek to secure a visa to these areas of the world must enter as medical professionals, English teachers, travel agents, computer programmers, exporters, linguists, baristas, or one of many other business positions. Of course, some jobs consume so much time and energy that the work of ministry is minimized, motivating many to seek positions that allow for the greatest possible investment in ministry. This author would argue that these needs in the world represent a *compelling reason* for “tentmaking” in these contexts.

Summary

The question of normativity regarding Paul’s refusal to receive funding from the Thessalonians may be answered within the Thessalonian epistles alone. It is true that one could examine Paul’s practice elsewhere and come to similar conclusions, but the question of the original reader’s understanding of the text would have gone unanswered. As it stands, the original reader would have understood that Paul was acting in unusual ways because of the problems that existed within the

first deacons of the church possessed such teaching skills (Stephen, Acts 7; and Philip, Acts 8), but the ability to teach was not required to serve in the office of deacon.

⁴⁶ I am aware of many situations in the world in which the national pastor works for a portion of the day, and then studies, evangelizes, and disciples the rest of the day. This appears to be necessary in situations in which church growth is very slow and where the persecution of the church is prevalent.

reader's church. There would have been no question in the mind of this reader that if circumstances were better, Paul would have received remuneration from his converts.

Conclusion

Paul's work practice at Thessalonica provides a good opportunity to examine the relationship between meaning and significance. In this instance, it can be clearly seen that the meaning of the text limits the manner in which the text may be applied today. Paul worked a "secular" job in Thessalonica so that his example would reinforce his exhortation to the Thessalonian believers that they should engage in gainful employment. As a result, the apostolic pattern for elders is reinforced: pastors are to give themselves to the word and to prayer as their highest priorities in ministry.