

A Comparison of 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians as a Means of Gaining Insight into Church Ministry in a Particular Historical and Spiritual Moment

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The similarity between certain books of the NT is well known, while the resemblance between others receives less attention. For instance, the Gospels provide four independent but corroborating testimonies to the life of Christ. Three of these show such strong correlation in terms of the events recorded, the order of those events, and even some of the exact wording used by the authors that we give them a special name, *Synoptics*, to reflect that relationship. Ephesians and Colossians exhibit sufficient parallelism that unbelieving critics dispute Paul's authorship of one or the other (or both).² The Pastoral Epistles share a focus on the minister's character and conduct in caring for the church. And Jesus' Olivet Discourse overlaps the eschatology sections in the Thessalonian letters and the book of Revelation.

Because doctrinal concerns take precedence over smaller matters of literary form, we might be forgiven for overlooking some of the less obvious parallels and contrasts that exist among other NT books. But where a consideration of literary form helps the reader understand and express doctrine, it has genuine theological value and warrants our attention. Although commentaries have effectively addressed the background, history, and text of the Corinthian and Thessalonian letters independently,³ the literary relationship between 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians remains relatively unexplored.⁴ An examination of geopolitical features, theological overlap, and textual features of these two books provides evidence for several fascinating comparisons that reflect the state of the churches at Corinth and Thessalonica. In a particular historical moment (the period in which Paul wrote 1

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² Several conservative works on NT introduction document the critical attacks and respond effectively to them. See for instance D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 485–86, 520; Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 583.

³ See, for instance, the commentary literature devoted to the short Thessalonian letters. Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 3–8; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1–74; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, NAC (Nashville: B & H, 1995), 21–44; Gary S. Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 17–37; and Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 3–63.

⁴ For example, even the voluminous commentary by Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), does not observe the series of parallels and contrasts with the Corinthian correspondence developed in this paper. Shogren explores the intertextuality of the Olivet Discourse and the Thessalonian letters, but he does not address the comparison/contrast of 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians (30–37).

Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians), the contrasts between the two letters highlight the different character of the churches at Thessalonica and Corinth, and they generate a greater awareness of specific practical applications of the 1 Thessalonians in the church today.⁵ Corinth, of course, would later repent of its partisanship and support of immoral conduct—as 2 Corinthians aptly describes. And Thessalonica would later fail to separate from disobedient members—as 2 Thessalonians indicates.

To test this thesis (that the several contrasts between 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians provide insight into church ministry in a particular historical and spiritual moment), the reader should first identify the similarities between the two cities. A list of similarities accomplishes a key objective. It provides a control in the experiment. *Something* about the cities must remain relatively fixed and similar in order to make any effective contrast between them. The observer should avoid the “comparing-apples-to-oranges fallacy,” which makes any apparent contrasts more *ad hoc* than real. For example, one could obviously contrast an automobile and an amoeba, but such a contrast would offer little useful information since the two are wholly unrelated to each other in any meaningful way.

Moreover, where elements of strong parallelism exist, the contrasts between the two objects being compared stand out more decisively. Because valid comparison is necessary to establish valid contrast, this paper presents both the comparisons and the contrasts side-by-side under topical headings rather than laying out the case for comparison in one location and for contrast in another. The reader should find that this method retains a sense of continuity between the two letters while highlighting their discontinuity.

The Geopolitical Features of Corinth and Thessalonica

Corinth and Thessalonica lie about 190 miles apart as the crow flies and 350 miles by road.⁶ The first point of similarity between the two is that they served respectively as the capital cities of the Roman provinces of Achaea and Macedonia.⁷ Both Corinth and Thessalonica were the seats of government for senatorial provinces, organized as separate districts when Achaea was split from Macedonia under the Augustan Settlement that created the Roman Empire in 27 B.C.⁸ Both cities were essentially Greek, although the Corinthians prided themselves on their superiority to the

⁵ The thesis for this paper stems from research the author has been completing for a forthcoming commentary on the Thessalonian Epistles in the New Testament Exposition Commentary series.

⁶ As a point of historical curiosity, Philippi, from which Paul had recently come to Thessalonica, is about 100 miles from Thessalonica. This detail leads to an estimate that Paul must have spent some months in Thessalonica for the church at Philippi to have sent multiple gifts for Paul’s support. James Moffatt, “The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 4:3.

⁷ One of the best concise works on the historical, cultural, and geographic backgrounds of this area in relation to the NT remains W. J. Coneybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1856). Because of its nearly unparalleled value in terms of a background to Paul, this work has been reprinted many times and remains in print today.

⁸ Estimates of the exact date of Achaea’s separation from Macedonia range from 28–22 B.C., but it is well established that the impetus behind the final separation and reorganization was the Augustan Settlement.

Macedonians in terms of their ethnic purity, wealth, culture, and history.⁹ Macedonia was a frontier region abutting Dacia and Thracia—barbaric by the standards of the ancient city-states of Athens, Sparta, and Corinth. Alexander may have come from Macedonia, but culture came from Achaia. Hodge observes, “The supremacy enjoyed by one Grecian State after another, had at last fallen to the lot of Corinth. It became the chief city of Greece, not only in authority, but in wealth, magnificence, literature, the arts, and in luxury.”¹⁰ Pride and overconfidence appear to have been problems persisting in the Corinthian church stemming from its culture (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18–31; 5:6).¹¹

Paul recognized it would be impossible to evangelize every town and village directly; so he instituted a strategy of proclaiming the gospel in the commercial and cultural centers of each region.¹² From these key cities, the gospel would quickly spread or “sound forth” (1 Thes 1:8) through the smaller towns of each region. Thus, it is not incidental that Paul spent more time in Thessalonica (at least three weeks, more probably 3–6 months, Acts 17:2)¹³ and Corinth (1.5 years, Acts 18:11) than in the smaller nearby cities of Neapolis, Philippi (“some days,” Acts 16:12), Amphipolis and Apollonia (“passed through,” Acts 17:1), Berea (unspecified duration), and even Athens (unspecified duration).

Paul wrote these initial letters to the churches at Thessalonica and Corinth within five or six years of each other.¹⁴ And in an interesting twist of providence, Paul wrote the Thessalonian letters from Corinth (cf. 1 Thes 3:1, 6 with Acts 17:15 and 18:5), and he wrote 2 Corinthians from somewhere in Macedonia (2 Cor 2:13), possibly Philippi or Thessalonica.¹⁵ This fact does not, of course, require that Paul referred to his previous Macedonian correspondence when writing either of the Corinthian Epistles.

⁹ See for instance Sarah A. James, “The Last of the Corinthians? Society and Settlement from 146 to 44 BCE,” in Steven J. Friesen, Sarah James, and Daniel N. Schowalter, eds., *Corinth in Contrast: Studies in Inequality*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 155, ed. M. M. Mitchell and D. P. Moessner (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 17–37.

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, GSC (1857; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), vii.

¹¹ The history of Corinth stretches much further into antiquity. Some pottery discovered in ruins at Corinth pre-date the Bronze Age. Thessalonica was much younger—being founded in 315 B.C. by Cassander of Macedon.

¹² See Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry, eds., *Paul’s Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012). R. C. H. Lenski observes, “First Thessalonians 1:8 shows the wisdom of Paul’s choice of Thessalonica. It was to serve as a strategic center from which the gospel should be spread in all directions. . . . When Paul passed by other cities such as the two named above, this only meant that they, too, would soon be reached.” *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (1937; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 211.

¹³ Leon Morris argues for the shorter duration of approximately one month in *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 3–4. D. Edmond Hiebert offers evidence for a much longer stay including (1) the multiple offerings received from Philippi during Paul’s stay in Thessalonica (Phil 4:16), (2) Paul’s supporting his ministry through physical work (1 Thes 2:9; 2 Thes 3:8), and (3) the clear attention given to Gentile believers at Thessalonica (1 Thes 1:9), which must have happened *after* Paul’s expulsion from the synagogue. *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 16–17.

¹⁴ Commentators generally estimate that the Thessalonian correspondence came in the early 50s (ca. 50–51), and the letters to Corinth came in the mid 50s (ca. 55–57).

¹⁵ See the reconstructions of the relevant Pauline chronology in Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, 441–42, 462–76, and Carson and Moo, 420–25, 542–44.

Thessalonica and Corinth lay along the same north-south secondary road that intersected the Via Egnatia. They also both lay on the sea. According to Acts 17:14–18:1, Paul went from Thessalonica to Berea to Athens before going to Corinth either by boat or land. Many coastal towns in the Roman Empire lacked viable ports either because of the shallowness of the nearby continental shelf or because of the silting up of river deltas,¹⁶ but in the case of Corinth and Thessalonica, both cities had significant ports. Corinth is situated on the four-mile-wide isthmus that connects the mainland with Achaia; so it had two ports. The nearer, western port was Lechaem, and the farther, eastern port was Cenchrea. The tyrant Periander appears to have connected these ports with the *δίολκος*, a paved path that allowed ships to be carried overland to avoid traveling around the southern Peloponnese. This ability to transit goods safely from the Adriatic to the Aegean across the isthmus, avoiding the treacherous waters and storms of the southern coast of Achaia, brought immense wealth to Corinth. The port of Thessalonica lay on the Thermaic Gulf, a deep-water arm of the Aegean Sea that remains one of Greece's largest ports even today. In fact, the harbor at Thessalonica is so important that it is still today one of the largest commercial ports in the entire Aegean basin. Although it was “young” in comparison to the great Greek city states of the past, Thessalonica rose rapidly to prominence through its commercial trade.¹⁷

Corinth and Thessalonica shared a common language, commercial significance, prestige, and political role in the Roman world of the first century. Both rank among the larger cities in the Roman Empire.¹⁸ These cultural similarities cause their theological and ethical distinctives to stand out in higher relief in the letters of Paul.

As senatorial provinces, Corinth and Thessalonica shared a Roman political climate, and in each city the Jews tried to instigate the legal authorities to act against the Christian messengers. But the outcomes in the two cities differed. In Thessalonica, the accusations that the Jews lodged against Paul produced a legal decision that was hostile to the apostles (Acts 17:5–9). The politarchs were sufficiently troubled that they required Jason to post a bond against potential insurrection, and the Christians had to smuggle Paul out of the city under cover of darkness (Acts 17:10). However, similar accusations by the Jews met with a tepid reception in Corinth (Acts 18:12–17). Gallio rejected the Jewish claim that there was any provable criminal intent or conduct on the part of the apostles. He

¹⁶ See the unfortunate situation of Ephesus. The ancient city is now approximately six miles from the sea—the Cayster River having deposited so much silt at its mouth for the past 2,000 years. Harold W. Hoehner, “Ephesians” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008), 16:16.

¹⁷ J. B. Lightfoot observes that Thessalonica was “the key to the whole of Macedonia,” and “it narrowly escaped being made the capital of the world” (although this later comment treats the period after the division of the Roman Empire into East and West. *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 254–55. Lightfoot’s observation pertains to the fact that while other cities fell into cultural and economic decline, Thessalonica continued to grow in importance for hundreds of years.

¹⁸ Information on major Roman cities varies widely from historian to historian, but several put both Corinth and Thessalonica among the top twenty largest cities. Neither city ranked nearly as high as Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus, or Antioch, however. Michael W. Holmes notes that Thessalonica “was the largest and most important city in Macedonia.” *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 18. Robert L. Thomas estimates its population at 200,000 in the first century. “1 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:229.

correctly surmised that pettiness lay at the heart of the Jewish accusations and drove the accusers out of his court. Thus, in Thessalonica, Paul “was ripped away from the church by persecution,” while in Corinth, Paul’s ministry opportunity was preserved and at least temporarily protected by the state.¹⁹ Geopolitical features thus tie Corinth and Thessalonica together as key centers of commerce and government.

The Theological and Practical Overlap of 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians

Almost all of Paul’s letters address eschatology in some fashion. For instance, Romans 2:5 warns, “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed,”²⁰ and 2:16 reiterates this judgment, “On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:18–23 addresses the future restoration of creation when believers receive their glorified bodies. Scattered references urge believers to live in light of the appearing of Christ (1 Tm 6:14; 2 Tm 4:1, 8). But Paul emphasizes eschatology at greatest length and depth in the Corinthian and Thessalonian letters.²¹ Table 1 illustrates the frequency with which these eschatological themes appear.

Table 1. Eschatology in the Corinthian and Thessalonian Letters

	1 Cor	2 Cor	1 Thes	2 Thes
Judgment of human works	3:13–15	5:10		1:6–9
Return of Christ	4:5		1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16	1:7, 10; 2:1, 8
Day of Christ/Day of the Lord	5:5	1:14	5:2–11	2:2
Resurrection of the body	6:14; 15:12–58	5:1–2	4:13–16	
Destruction of the world	7:31			
Expectation of perfect state	13:10			
Reign of Christ	15:24–28			
Defeat of death	15:26, 54–55	5:4		
Transformation of the body	15:46–54			
Deliverance from wrath			1:10; 5:9	
Rapture of living saints			4:15–17	2:1
Tribulation: man of sin, apostasy				2:3–12

¹⁹ Mike Stallard, *The Books of First and Second Thessalonians: Looking for Christ’s Return*, TFCBCS (Chattanooga: AMG, 2009), 4. See also Moffatt, who observes, “From no church did Paul tear himself with such evident reluctance. . . . The Macedonian churches may almost be termed Paul’s favourites. . . . At Thessalonica the exemplary character of the Christians, their rapid growth, their exceptional opportunities, and their widespread reputation moved him to a pardonable pride” (4–5).

²⁰ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture 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.

²¹ Even critical commentaries point to the focused eschatology in these books, though they tend to represent it as an emerging apocalypticism in the early church. David A. Sánchez, “The Apocalyptic Legacy of Early Christianity,” in *The Letters and Legacy of Paul: Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition*, ed. Margaret Aymer, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 68.

Something in the experiences of these two churches made an extensive treatment of eschatology important for them in Paul's eyes.²² While the modern reader cannot confidently recreate the rationale behind this focused treatment of end times, he can observe the similarities between these letters and recognize the literary parallels. These letters also demonstrate that eschatology is not the domain of technical scholars or of mature Christians. There are certain core facts about God's plan for the future that he intends even young believers in a variety of cultural circumstances to understand.

First Corinthians (5:1–13; 6:13–7:11) and 1 Thessalonians (4:1–8) provide the longest Pauline discourses on the sexual conduct within the church. Because the first-century world was as sex-saturated and deviant as the modern era, Paul often listed sexual sins in the middle of vice lists covering numerous other topics (e.g., Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:3–4; Col 3:5), but he did not develop detailed spiritual responses to these sins except in letters to Corinth and Thessalonica. This fact exposes the first crucial point of ethical contrast between 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians. At the particular historical moment in which Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the church at Corinth prided itself on its permissive sexual attitudes to such an extent that Paul had to address the church sternly.²³ He urged, "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Cor 5:6). But he issued merely general sexual instruction and warning to the church at Thessalonica that would be equally relevant to every congregation (past and present) as a reminder of proper conduct. Corinth earned rebuke. Thessalonica needed advice. The members of these churches may have had the same tendencies of the flesh, but they treated those tendencies in entirely different ways. At least in the area of their *attitudes* toward sexual propriety, Corinth and Thessalonica exhibit ethical contrast.

Conflict plagued both of these churches, but their respective responses to friction with others constitutes a second ethical contrast between 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians. Whereas the church at Thessalonica experienced external conflict with its surrounding culture,²⁴ the church at Corinth suffered mostly internal conflict at the hands of other believers.²⁵ The sectarian spirit (1 Cor 1) and lawsuits in the church (ch. 6) stand out as the most obvious instances of division, but their participation in meals involving meat offered to idols (chs. 8–9) and the abuse of poorer members at the Lord's Supper (ch. 11) indicate the practical consequences of the same attitudes of selfishness and division. So while the churches shared some experiences, Paul also differentiated those experiences.²⁶ At the

²² This eschatological focus leads John Byron to conclude, "If these letters could be boiled down to one main theme, it is the ongoing need for the Thessalonians to put their hope in God." *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, SGBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 9.

²³ "As serious as the immorality itself was the church's tolerance of it. Probably because of their philosophical orientation and their love of human wisdom they rationalized the immoral behavior of their fellow believers." John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 122.

²⁴ Todd D. Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and Its Neighbours*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 183 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999). See also Holmes, 21, which focuses on this external pressure as one of the primary occasions for Paul's writing of 1 Thessalonians.

²⁵ Virtually every commentary on the Corinthian epistles documents this conflict simply because the biblical text draws attention to it so frequently. See, e.g., Hodge, xix–xxiv, and MacArthur, ix.

²⁶ John MacArthur believes that the combination of Jewish/Gentile opposition applied to both Thessalonica and Corinth, and he links 1 Thessalonians with 2 Corinthians in this regard. If some of the opposition that Paul experienced

historical moment in which it received the first letter from Paul, Thessalonica's response to conflict was faithfulness; it needed the courage and resolve to endure the opposition of outsiders (1 Thes 2:14–16).²⁷ Corinth's response to conflict was partisanship; it needed to resolve the petty, selfish controversies of its own insiders.

In the Corinthian (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1) and Thessalonian (1 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 1:1) correspondence, Paul links the names of others with his own as participants in sending the letters.²⁸ Since this feature also occurs in Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, and Philemon 1, it cannot be construed as a tight link between Corinth and Thessalonica alone; however, the Thessalonian and Corinthian letters share with only Galatians the address “to the church of the X.” Lightfoot observes that little more can be made of this information than to date these books among Paul's earliest letters.²⁹ The introductory structure may be purely coincidental in this case. A brief look at the theological and practical overlap between the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence has shown that they share certain similarities in topic while also exhibiting key contrasts on those same topics.

The Text and Argument of 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians

Although Paul wrote two personal, pastoral letters to Timothy, Corinth and Thessalonica are the only two *churches* to receive multiple letters from Paul. By itself, this represents merely a historical curiosity. When combined with the evidence of the geographical, theological, and textual similarities apparent in the letters, it seems to indicate that Paul viewed these Roman provincial capitals as having a distinctly important role in the evangelization of the West. Textual analysis provides the strongest contrast between 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians. And that contrast provides insight into church ministry in a particular historical and spiritual moment of a congregation.

Comparative vocabulary studies are notoriously difficult because of the numerous factors that contribute to an author's choice of vocabulary. These factors include genre, topic, purpose, audience, proximity in time to other writings by the same author, and employment of scribes. Critics have often pointed out the significant vocabulary differences between the Pastoral Epistles and Paul's other writings.³⁰ The statistics in relation to these books are uncontestable; however, the conclusions that unbelieving critics draw from these statistics reflect merely their opinions rather than fact. On the other hand, vocabulary comparisons *can* show similarities in theme or emphasis, particularly when an author produced enough extant writings to draw statistically significant conclusions. For the sake of

in 2 Corinthians was truly external to the church, then the similarities among these letters increases. *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 33.

²⁷ See the historical reconstruction and summary by John F. Walvoord and Mark Hitchcock, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, JWPC, ed. Philip E. Rawley (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 13.

²⁸ In fact, Dan Olinger notes that “with its sister epistle, I Thessalonians, [II Thessalonians] is the only epistle with no descriptive information about its senders.” “A Theology of II Thessalonians,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 39/1 (April 2005): 41.

²⁹ See J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, J. B. Lightfoot's Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul, 4-vol. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 7.

³⁰ See Carson and Moo, 555, who cite the critical case and then refute it. For instance, 306 words occur in the Pastorals but not elsewhere in Paul.

clarity in statistical analysis, it is helpful to know that 1 Corinthians has 6830 words, which comprise 4.94% of the total NT, while 1 Thessalonians has 1481 words, which comprise 1.07% of the NT. An analysis of the following words and phrases demonstrates a high degree of similarity between the initial letters to Thessalonica and Corinth while simultaneously exhibiting the striking contrasts between the attitudes, character, and conduct of these two churches at the time period in which each church received its first letter.

“You Know”

The NT uses forms of the word *οἶδα* 318 times. However, the second person plural form, *you know* (*οἴδατε*), occurs only sixty-three times. First Corinthians and the Thessalonian letters utilize this form much more frequently than statistically expected (12x [19%] and 11x [17%] respectively). Ten of the twelve instances of “you know” in 1 Corinthians include the word *not* to form a strong rhetorical question, “Don’t you know?” Why is this fact so important? When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the Corinthian church prided itself on its sophistication, spiritual maturity, and wisdom. But Paul had to remind this church that human wisdom and philosophy are utterly unable to apprehend spiritual truth (1 Cor 2:1–16). This purportedly well-informed and theologically shrewd congregation fell so far short of sound spiritual conduct that Paul needed to say:³¹

Don’t you know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (3:16)

Don’t you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (5:6)

Don’t you know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incapable to discern trivial cases? (6:2)

Don’t you know that we will judge angels? (6:3)

Don’t you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? (6:9)

Don’t you know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? (6:15)

Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, whom you have from God? (6:19)

Don’t you know that those who work in the temple service get their food from the temple? (9:13)

Don’t you know that all the runners run in a race, but only one receives the prize? (9:24)

The Corinthian church boasted of its superiority, but the believers there were acting in a spiritually immature fashion. They *ought* to have known the answer to every issue that Paul raised. And because wisdom always applies information practically to life, their knowledge should have translated into disciplined, ethical conduct. Instead, they needed significant and sometimes stern correction.³²

³¹ In order to emphasize the grammatical parallelism *within* each book and the contrast *between* the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence, the translations provided here are the author’s own.

³² Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt observe, “It’s in the sense of ‘response made’ that the Bible often uses the word *know*. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul asks five times, ‘Do you not know . . .?’ In each case he asks this about concepts they had heard from him and that were familiar. He asks because their lives were out of harmony with the truth

Paul spoke with a different tone to the Thessalonians. His phrasing tends toward words of reminder rather than rebuke:³³

For you yourselves know, brothers, our coming to you has not been in vain. (1 Thes 2:1)

But having suffered before and having been mistreated at Philippi, just as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God. (1 Thes 2:2)

For we never came with a word of flattery, just as you know. (1 Thes 2:5)

For just as you know how, like a father with his own children, exhorting each one of you and encouraging you. (1 Thes 2:11–12)

For you yourselves know that we are set for this. (1 Thes 3:3)

For you know what commands we gave to you through the Lord Jesus. (1 Thes 4:2)

For you yourselves know certainly that the day of the Lord is coming like a thief in the night. (1 Thes 5:2)

And you know what is restraining him now in order that he may be revealed in his own time. (2 Thes 2:6)

For you yourselves know how it is necessary to imitate us, because we were not idle among you. (2 Thes 3:7)

In each case Paul assumed that the Thessalonian believers were either already acting upon spiritual understanding that they possessed or needed minimal course correction to refine their conduct.³⁴ For the most part, Paul simply reminded the Thessalonian church to continue on the path of mature Christian development that it was already taking. The contrast between the two churches is striking. The purportedly mature and wise believers revealed that they were actually immature. The limping and weak believers revealed that they were mature or at least making appropriate progress toward maturity.³⁵ In this specific historical moment in each church's history, Thessalonica appears to have been the opposite of Corinth in terms of practical spiritual application.

they had heard. In the biblical sense they did not know these truths for they were not living them." *Creative Bible Teaching*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 126.

³³ Randy Leedy observes that in 1 Thessalonians 1:5–2:12 alone, Paul "six times uses language such as 'ye know,' 'ye remember,' and 'ye are witnesses,' and twice more he calls upon God as witness. The impression is inescapable that Paul is countering false information by reiterating the truth." "A Window into Paul's Church Planting Heart," *Biblical Viewpoint* 38/1 (April 2004): 5.

³⁴ F. F. Bruce notes, "From these references [in the letters to Rome and Corinth] we gather that his relations with [the Thessalonians] were outstandingly happy. He commends them for their steadfastness in faith and witness even under severe persecution and for their consistently generous giving." *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (1982; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), xxvii.

³⁵ Even Paul's lead-in to the more difficult discussion of sexual purity shows how he "doubles up with his terminology of encouragement to get the attention of his readers." Stephen J. Hankins, "Sexual Purity in Relation to Sanctification," *Biblical Viewpoint* 38/1 (April 2004): 18.

“Now Concerning”

First Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians are the only letters of Paul to use the expression *now concerning* (περὶ δέ; 6x and 2x respectively) to introduce important topics and transitions (1 Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12; 1 Thes 4:9; 5:1). Including the observations that four to six years separated these letters and that Romans was written in between them makes such a similarity highly unusual. “Now concerning” does not appear in Paul’s earlier or later letters in spite of the fact that each of his other letters exhibits transitions between topics. Although an author’s use of distinctive vocabulary changes with topic, an author’s use of particles, conjunctions, and structure tends to be less flexible. So it is unusual that Paul would use περὶ δέ only in these letters. Paul likely had access to his autographal manuscripts; so it seems possible that he reread or remembered his earlier letter to Thessalonica when writing 1 Corinthians. If so, he may have made use of similar phrasing based on his previous writing. This raises a point of valuable comparison. Paul’s use of similar phrasing relates these two churches to each other at least in terms of syntactical expression. Table 2 provides the full list of these transitions in Paul.

Table 2. περὶ δέ in Paul

1 Cor 7:1 Περί δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι.	Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”
1 Cor 7:25 Περί δὲ τῶν παρθένων ἐπιταγὴν κυρίου οὐκ ἔχω.	Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord.
1 Cor 8:1 Περί δὲ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων, οἶδαμεν ὅτι πάντες γινώσκουσιν ἔχομεν.	Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.”
1 Cor 12:1 Περί δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν, ἀδελφοί, οὐ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν.	Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.
1 Cor 16:1 Περί δὲ τῆς λογεῖας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους.	Now concerning the collection for the saints.
1 Cor 16:12 Περί δὲ Ἀπολλῶ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ.	Now concerning our brother Apollos.
1 Thes 4:9 Περί δὲ τῆς φιλαδελφίας οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχετε γράφειν ὑμῖν.	Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you.
1 Thes 5:1 Περί δὲ τῶν χρόνων καὶ τῶν καιρῶν, ἀδελφοί, οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχετε ὑμῖν γράφεσθαι.	Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.

“Faith, Hope, and Love”

Although these core theological virtues appear sprinkled throughout Paul’s writings, only 1 Corinthians (13:13) and 1 Thessalonians (1:3, 5:8) present the full Pauline triad of faith, love, and hope side by side (πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη). Table 3 shows where Paul cites at least two of these virtues together. Two out of the three virtues appear together fairly commonly, but reference to all three occurs only in letters to Corinth and Thessalonica.

Table 3. Combined Citations of Faith, Hope, and Love in Paul

	Faith	Hope	Love
1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thes 1:3; 5:8	●	●	●
Rom 5:2; 2 Cor 10:15; Gal 5:5; Col 1:23	●	●	
Rom 5:5		●	●
1 Cor 13:2; 2 Cor 8:7; Gal 5:6, 22; Eph 1:15; 3:17; Col. 1:4; 1 Thes 3:6; 2 Thes 1:3; 1 Tm 1:5, 14; 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tm 1:13; 2:22; 3:10; Ti 2:2	●		●

In the letter to Corinth, Paul holds up love as something that the Corinthians must aspire to—having exhibited a series of internal church deficiencies in this regard—but in the letter to Thessalonica, Paul represents the believers as proficient in these virtues and merely needing to continue and to strengthen the good that they were already practicing. The church at Corinth was so pervasively full of strife and selfishness that Paul needed to depict love as the principal virtue that must undergird all other Christian conduct. Even the exercise of dramatic spiritual gifts held no value apart from love. Corinth needed rebuke and transformation. Thessalonica needed praise and reinforcement. Thus, at the moment of Paul’s writing of these initial letters, one church is conceptually the antithesis of the other in terms of this practical Christian virtue.

“Brothers”

Paul refers to believers as brothers (ἀδελφοί) frequently throughout his epistles, but several letters stand out in their high rate of usage of this term. Galatians and Philippians join 1 Corinthians and the two Thessalonian Epistles in emphasizing the brotherly status of believers. In Corinth, brothers were at war with each other over their spiritual mascots and rhetoricians (1 Cor 1:10–13). They fought each other through lawsuits (1 Cor 6:1–11), and they selfishly abused each other in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17–22). On the other hand, the Thessalonian brothers exhibited unity in suffering (1 Thes 2:14), in faith (1 Thes 3:7), in conduct (1 Thes 4:1, 10; 5:4), and in knowledge (1 Thes 5:1). Paul says to the Corinthians, “You are brothers. Act like it,” while he says to the Thessalonians, “You are acting like brothers. Good job. Keep it up.” The contrast between the two is striking, and it supports the observation that in this brief “snapshot” in history, Corinth and Thessalonica were opposites in terms of virtue.

“Burden”

In the NT only 2 Corinthians 2:5, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, and 2 Thessalonians 3:8 use the Greek word ἐπιβαρέω for *burdening* or *laying a burden on* in reference to payment for services. As Paul traveled from city to city throughout the Roman world, he often received support from the churches (e.g., Phil 4:16–18). In fact, 1 Timothy insists that spiritual leaders be paid for their ministry (5:17–18). But when Paul established his bases of ministry operation in Corinth and Thessalonica, he explicitly refused payment for ministry activities (1 Cor 9:12, 15; 2 Cor 11:7–9; 12:13–14; 1 Thes 2:7–9; 2 Thes 3:8–9). Instead, he worked with his own hands to pay for his support. At one point Paul defended his *right* to receive payment from the church at Corinth while refusing to accept such a payment (1 Cor 9:6–11, 13–14). At least as far as Paul’s written record indicates, he refused pay for his ministry activities *only*

in these provincial capital cities of Thessalonica and Corinth. This establishes a strong connection between these two cities, which makes the points of contrast between them clearer. This shared characteristic also demonstrates that Paul's insistent contrast of the two churches did not stem from some sort of antipathy toward the Corinthian believers but from their conduct at the time he wrote to the church. He was not exercising partiality or emotional favoritism when he encouraged Thessalonica but rebuked Corinth. For his part, his attitudes and ministry patterns were the same in both cities. Therefore, the difference in tone between these letters derived from the responsiveness of the churches to doctrine and its practical application.

“Imitators”

Out of all of Paul's epistles, only the epistles to Corinth (4:16; 11:1) and Thessalonica (1 Thes 1:6; 2:14) use the noun *imitators* (μιμηταί) more than once. In both of its instances, 1 Corinthians commands the believers to imitate Paul. In both of its instances, 1 Thessalonians indicates the believers are *already* imitating the apostles, the Lord, and fellow believers. This difference reflects the contrasting conduct of the churches at that time. Apparently, the sophisticated Corinthians were less eager to follow the apostle than their Macedonian counterparts were. The Corinthians needed to start following their divinely appointed leaders, while the Thessalonians needed to continue a process they had already begun.

“Endure”

The verb *στέγω* occurs only four times in the NT (1 Cor 9:12; 13:7; 1 Thes 3:1, 5). Paul typically chooses different words (such as *ὑπομονή*) to express his common theme of endurance; however, his letters to Corinth and Thessalonica use *στέγω*. Such small vocabulary selections could be coincidental, but it could indicate that Paul reread his letters to Thessalonica in preparation for writing to Corinth.

“Coworker”

Although Paul uses the concept of coworkers (*συνεργός*) frequently (e.g., Rom 16:3, 9, 21; Phil 2:25; 4:3; Col 4:11; Phlm 1, 24), only 1 Corinthians 3:9 and 1 Thessalonians 3:2 refer to a *human* as “God's coworker.” In every other reference to coworkers, Paul relates Christian leaders to each other as coworkers. Once again, the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence share a precise point of similarity that sharpens the previously noted contrasts between the two.

“Those Who Sleep”

Normally *κοιμάομαι*, a common term for sleep, refers to human physical tiredness and the need to rest; however, Paul uses “sleep” euphemistically to refer to departed believers only in 1 Corinthians (7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51) and 1 Thessalonians (4:13, 14, 15). Had Paul addressed the resurrection only in these two epistles, the force of this argument might be blunted somewhat. But

resurrection (*ἀνάστασις*) plays a role in Romans, Philippians, and 2 Timothy without Paul's resorting to this euphemism of sleep.

“Have Nothing to Do with”

The verb *συναναμίγνυμι* appears exclusively in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11, and 2 Thessalonians 3:14. While the inclusion of 2 Thessalonians in this instance casts a wider net in research than the thesis requires, it provides important historical information that informs our view of these churches. In each instance, Paul requires that the church exhibit a specific attitude toward disobedient brothers. While 1 Corinthians spotlights immorality as the reason for the withdrawal of Christian fellowship, it also lists other sins including greed, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, and theft. Second Thessalonians indicates that general disobedience to any apostolic command is warrant for the church's disciplinary action. Given the pervasive focus of the Pastoral Epistles on a withdrawal from false teachers, the reader might expect Paul to use *συναναμίγνυμι* in at least a few instances, but he reserves its use for Corinth and Thessalonica. Note, however, that by the time Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians he needed to draw attention to the failure of the Thessalonian believers in the area of separation. Thus, the attitudes and conduct of the churches were not static. Corinth could repent, and Thessalonica could fall. A church is never so fixed in its current spiritual state that it cannot later be sanctified or fail.

Additional Connections

A few other terms appear occasionally elsewhere in Paul's writings but are rare enough that the overlap between the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence is possible. For example, *properly* (*εὐσχημόνως*) and its cognates appear in Paul once in Romans, four times in 1 Corinthians (7:35; 12:23–24; 14:40), and once in 1 Thessalonians (4:12). Because it is simply an adverb, this usage is inadequate to establish any conclusion, but it may corroborate the comparison developed in the more evident connections. Paul's expression *we do not want you to be uninformed*—as an introduction to a new doctrine that readers are unfamiliar with or have forgotten—occurs only in Romans (1:13; 11:25), 1 Corinthians (10:1; 12:1), 2 Corinthians (1:8) and 1 Thessalonians (4:13). And the theme of labor, generally, finds emphasis in these letters. For instance, *μόχθος* occurs exclusively in 2 Corinthians 11:27, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, and 2 Thessalonians 3:8. And though *κόπος* occurs eighteen times in the NT, the Corinthian letters have six and the Thessalonian letters have four of these instances. Such a disproportionately high grouping stresses the fact that both the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondence deal extensively with apostolic ministry labor.

The similarities in theme and vocabulary indicate that Corinth and Thessalonica share some important characteristics, while the disparities in tone and the stern rebuke leveled at Corinth—in the very same areas in which Thessalonica excels—highlights the contrast between these cities at the time that they received their initial letters from Paul.

Two final thematic connections complete a comparison and contrast of Corinth and Thessalonica. Because of its inclusion of 2 Corinthians in the contrast, however, it does not advance

the thesis directly. The first thematic connection involves the mechanism by which the apostles took comfort from the coming of a colleague. Table 4 compares the two key texts.

Table 4. Comfort in Corinth and Thessalonica

2 Corinthians 7:6–7	1 Thessalonians 3:6–8
But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the <i>coming</i> of <i>Titus</i> , and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was <i>comforted by you</i> , as he told us of your <i>longing</i> , your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.	But now that <i>Timothy</i> has <i>come</i> to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and <i>long</i> to see us, as we long to see you—for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been <i>comforted about you</i> through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

Note how closely these passages align. Both express the return of an apostolic messenger (Titus/Timothy). Both use the expression *comforted by/about you*, which translates the same words in the Greek text (*παρακαλέω + ἐπί + ὑμεῖς*). Both express the “longing” of the converts using the same Greek root (*ἐπιποθ-*). This root occurs eleven times in Paul’s writings, but these are the only two instances in which the desire is directed back towards Paul from his converts. This phrasing highlights something similar about the two churches.³⁶

Second, Paul describes his manner of coming to both Corinth and Thessalonica as lacking rhetorical manipulation (1 Cor 2:1–3; 1 Thes 2:4–6).³⁷ Rather, his ministry operated through the Spirit and power, which appear side by side in both of these letters (1 Cor 2:4; 1 Thes 1:5).³⁸ This explicit rejection of rhetoric in favor of the Spirit does not recur in Paul’s other letters.

Conclusion

Many physical, political, and commercial ties connect Thessalonica and Corinth; however, at the distinct historical moment in which Paul wrote the first letters to these churches, the Thessalonian

³⁶ Had the exact expression been commonplace in the language so that any attempt to indicate relief at the arrival of a messenger would have utilized these words, the force of the argument would be blunted. But Paul routinely had messengers coming and going between the churches and himself. And the wording of these instances throughout the NT indicates that there was no set pattern of phrasing that required Paul to phrase his statements to Corinth and Thessalonica in exactly this fashion.

This argument thus appeals to the concept of necessity in language. If a writer has only one available expression at his disposal, the reuse of that expression does not indicate a deliberate comparison or contrast. However, if a language admits many similar expressions and a given author demonstrates his own widespread use of those varied expressions, then a close similarity in wording in two instances has a greater probability of being intentional.

³⁷ Although a number of commentators attempt the analysis of both the Corinthian and Thessalonian letters in terms of ancient rhetoric and claim that the identification of rhetorical form is crucial to understanding Paul’s point, G. K. Beale disagrees. “While it is likely true that Paul’s attempts to persuade his readers about what he was writing reflected some very general cultural patterns of oral persuasion, it is unlikely that the apostle utilized the classical Greek or Roman rules of rhetoric. . . . Likewise, the patterns and kinds of ancient epistolography lend some understanding to Paul’s letters but by no means provide the interpretive key to them.” Beale points to 1 Corinthians 1:20–2:16 and 2 Corinthians 10:10–11 as evidence, and he could have added Paul’s claims in 1 Thessalonians as well. *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 23–24.

³⁸ Gregory H. Harris explores this emphasis on the Word of God in contrast to the words of man. “The Word of God or the Word of Man? 1 Thessalonians 2:13,” *MSJ* 26/2 (Fall 2015): 185–95.

church seems to be the practical opposite of Corinth. The record of these two churches of approximately the same age in similar cities is strikingly dissimilar. The first letter to Corinth exhibits the Corinthians' prejudice, carnality, immorality, selfishness, immaturity, and pride. The first letter to Thessalonica shows the Thessalonians' faith, obedience, love, and relative spiritual maturity.

Up to this point, the analysis attempted in this article has proven to be mostly academic. It establishes the scope of Paul's wording that has formed the basis for our comparison/contrast, but it does not offer much of value for spiritual nourishment. But I suggest that exactly this kind of comparison and contrast of the letters to Thessalonica and Corinth allows the Christian reader to grasp the distinctive contribution that 1 Thessalonians makes to doctrine and practice. Grant Osborne observes candidly, "The Letters to the Thessalonians are often considered to be among the less important of Paul's Letters."³⁹ First Thessalonians does not offer the theological "punch" or depth of books like Romans and Galatians. It does not address detailed practical issues like 1 Corinthians or even the latter half of Ephesians. So readers can skip over 1 Thessalonians without understanding its purpose. The reader who understands its distinctive contribution gains greater appreciation for its value, and a recognition of its contrast with 1 Corinthians helps us highlight that distinctive contribution. First Corinthians holds heightened value in times of moral trouble, disobedience, church anarchy, and church conflict, but 1 Thessalonians exhibits its value during times of obedience and devotion.⁴⁰ When believers are walking in the Spirit, the Adversary does everything in his power to make them fret, doubt, and fall. At such times of faithfulness, God's people do not need the stinging rebuke that is appropriate for disobedient servants. They need the encouragement to press on in the faith. They need the comfort that God sees and knows their situation, and they need the hope that Christ is coming again.

It is precisely because these first letters to Corinth and to Thessalonica possess the qualities of similarity and difference, most of which stem simply from the situations that occasioned the respective books, that they convey their distinctive messages so effectively. By recognizing the contours of these two churches, the reader gains a greater appreciation of the work of God in varied human circumstances. Instead of running the Pauline letters together in a fashion that obliterates the uniqueness of each, and instead of relegating small books like the Thessalonian Epistles to the back corner of New Testament studies, we might instead marvel at the wisdom and kindness of a God who addresses His people both when they are carnal, needing censure, and when they are spiritual, needing comfort.

First Corinthians might preach, "In light of the gospel, unlearn and replace worldly conduct," but 1 Thessalonians proclaims, "In light of the coming of Christ, remember and reinforce core truths of the gospel."⁴¹ The spiritual growth and obedience of the Thessalonian believers contrasts with the

³⁹ Grant R. Osborne, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: Verse by Verse*, ONTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), ix.

⁴⁰ Holmes concurs with this claim, arguing that both halves of 1 Thessalonians have encouragement and strengthening as their themes (22). Dan Olinger cites as the theme of 1 Thessalonians, "Building on a godly foundation." "Introduction to I Thessalonians," *Biblical Viewpoint* 38/1 (April 2004): 1.

⁴¹ Proposed themes for Thessalonians differ, of course, by author. For example, "the letter was essentially a reassurance or reconfirmation of believers whose hope had been vanquished," and "the situation underlying 1 Thessalonians was essentially one of distress, fear and insecurity." Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*:

immaturity and disobedience of the Corinthians; the comfort and encouragement for the Thessalonians stand opposite the stern rebuke of the Corinthians; and—though embedded in the same wicked and pagan surrounding culture—the church at Thessalonica proves to be something of an antithesis to Corinth at the particular spiritual-historical moment in which Paul wrote his first letters to each church.

By comparing 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, we gain insight into effective church ministry as applied to the life of the church at a particular point in time. Specifically, Paul shows that an effective minister may preach to the needs of the people without resorting to the type of accommodation that compromises the message—that adapting one’s preaching to the contours of life in the church does not necessarily equal a “seeker-sensitive” approach, which gives people what they *want* to hear rather than what they *need* to hear. The pastor whose church members are struggling to separate from sinful cultural practices needs to preach exactly the kind of warnings that 1 Corinthians provides. And the shepherd whose members are walking with the Lord needs to give exactly the encouragement to persevere and continue growing that 1 Thessalonians offers.

Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 126, ed. Richard Bauckham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 184. Nicholl seems to have overstated the case. While there definitely were serious threats that Paul was addressing, the assumption that the Thessalonians’ “hope had been vanquished” overreaches the evidence. Nicholl claims that these believers were “lacking a resurrection hope for their deceased” (ibid.), but this misconstrues the point of Paul’s argument in chapter 4. Paul commends the hope of these believers in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, and he specifically *contrasts* the Thessalonians with “the rest who have no hope” (4:13). Yes, the church had sorrow, but this sorrow had not risen to the level of despair as Nicholl argues. The church *knew* its dead would rise again in the end of time. What they grieved was the impression that their dead would not enter Christ’s earthly kingdom. Paul corrects this misunderstanding by explaining the process of Christ’s coming to raise the people of God first, before the kingdom.