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Labor of Love: The Theology of Work in First and Second Thessalonians¹

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Introduction

Given the importance of work to human life, finding a biblical approach to work is of vital importance. But Miroslav Volf argues in his 1995 book *Work in the Spirit* that it is a mistake to try to formulate a theology of work by starting with the biblical data that discusses work. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, simply does not contain enough material directly on work to successfully undergird a theology of work.² It is true that a fully-orbed systematic theology of work cannot only be based on the explicit biblical data concerning work, but must set work in the wider context of biblical Christian theology. We should be grateful for the careful and theologically rich way in which Volf has addressed the topic, but we should not underestimate the extent, value, and significance of the biblical data, which is not, of course limited to that discovered by a concordance search or a word study.³ It is rare that biblical scholars concern themselves with elucidating a biblical view of work, but there is far more relevant material than is sometimes recognized, and we are helped by the increased volume of research being produced on the social, archeological and economic setting of biblical literature. Our limited goal here is to look at the evidence of two of Paul's letters that are most concerned with the work: First and Second Thessalonians. These letters, particularly the first, focus on work more than any other letters in the Pauline corpus, and in a far-from-incidental manner. There is evidence that Paul intended to make work one of the key threads in his argument.

¹This article is a version of a chapter forthcoming in R. Keith Loftin and Trey Dimsdale, eds., *Work in Christian Perspective: Theological Foundations and Practical Implications* (London: SCM, 2018)."

²Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 77.

³For example, Volf only mentions two verses in Ecclesiastes (4:4, *Ibid.*, 121; 6:19 *Idem*, 159), a biblical book which reflects substantially on work, but he ignores, for example, Ecclesiastes chapter two, which focuses almost entirely on work, and which includes 2:24: "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink, and cause his soul to see good in his labor," surely a reflection on human work in relation to God's creative work in Genesis 1. He also ignores most of the discussion of work in 1 Thessalonians.

Until recently, there has been something of a consensus that the problem of work—or the lack of it—in the church at Thessalonica, was due to eschatological enthusiasm, a misguided expectation of the immediate return of Christ, which led to people abandoning their proper work, there being no need to prepare for the future.⁴ Both Thessalonian letters display a lively expectation of the return of the Messiah. The traditional scenario, however, is implausible for several reasons. First, it is highly doubtful, at least in regard to 1 Thessalonians, that there was a serious problem with an overly-enthusiastic eschatology in Thessalonica. It is true that they were alive to the possibility that Jesus would return in their own lifetime. But Paul does not correct this as a mistaken belief. Instead, the first letter to the Thessalonians seems to reveal a loss, for some at least, of eschatological hope, especially in regard to the situation of those believers who have died. Hope is the last element in the triad of faith, love, and hope in 1:3, and therefore likely the one with most significance for the recipients of the letter. This is much like First Corinthians 13:13, where love as the last element in the triad is the most significant in the argument. The Thessalonians began with faith, love, *and* hope (1 Thess 1:3), but they are commended later only for their continuing faith and love (3:6). Though they are exhorted repeatedly to grow further in both faith (3:10, 5:8) and love (3:12, 4:10, 5:8), the loss of hope is even more significant. Paul does not want them to be distressed like outsiders who have no hope (4:13). They are to comfort one another in view of the coming resurrection (4:18). They are told to put on hope, the hope of salvation as a helmet, because they were appointed not for wrath but for salvation through Christ, at his return (5:9–11). There is also the distinct possibility that an eschatological carelessness has crept in. Calls to holiness in the letter are based on the expectation of the Parousia, and the judgment that awaits (3:13, 4:6, 5:23). Paul insists: “Let us not sleep, like others do, but let us watch and be sober” (5:6). The warning in Second Thessalonians not to believe reports that the Lord had already returned is based on the possibility of a false teaching coming in, through pseudonymous letter, or false prophecy, claiming that the Lord had already returned (2 Thess 2:1–2). Paul makes the point that other apocalyptic events had to take place first (2:3–8), but he also tells them (2:2) not to be shaken (σαλευθῆναι) or alarmed (θροεῖσθαι). Both these terms

⁴See for example Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: A&C Black, 1972), 175–78: “Work is neglected for the future can be ignored” (175). Frame has a psychologizing approach with the same frame of reference: “Paul recognizes that the source of meddlesomeness and idleness is inward, the excitement created in the minds of some by the expectation that the day of the Lord is at hand,” James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912, 161–62). Some have challenged this perspective, arguing that the idleness or disorder in Thessalonica was simply an ethical issue, and that when Paul brought eschatology and ethics together it was to show that the expectation of the Parousia should in fact motivate holiness. See B.N. Kaye, “Eschatology and Ethics in 1 and 2 Thessalonians,” *Novum Testamentum XVII* (1975).

indicate not excitement but distress and alarm, and so even here Paul is not addressing eschatological enthusiasm.⁵

Second, the traditional scenario envisages people *leaving* work; therefore they would be those who were already working, who had to work for their living. They would not be the rich, who had property and passive income, nor clients, who did not have to work, but were provided for in daily distributions by rich patrons, nor slaves, who had no choice but to work. But given the vulnerable and tenuous economic conditions for most people in the cities of the early empire, the practice of paying laborers daily, and the difficulty of storing food, anyone who needed to work, who then gave it up expecting to survive until the Lord returned, would be quickly disabused of his or her presumption, and would be unlikely to have kept the enthusiasm going for long—certainly not for the months it took for Paul to write his second letter to the church, addressing the same practice of idleness. Paul in a later letter singles out the Macedonian churches, which would include the Thessalonians, as experiencing real poverty (2 Cor 8:2), especially by comparison to Corinth, where we are informed that at least some people in the gathering are wise humanly speaking, powerful or well-born, implying wealth. Few people in the Thessalonian church would have food reserves sufficient to enable survival for months without doing any work, or the financial reserves repeatedly to buy food other people produced.

Third, Paul nowhere makes any particular connection between imminentist belief and the problem of idleness.⁶ Rather, his argument against idleness is largely made on moral and missional grounds, as we shall see below. If anything, it is more likely that eschatological carelessness contributes to the problem of idleness in Thessalonica than does eschatological enthusiasm. It is possible that the older imminentist scenario was over-influenced by the spectacle of nineteenth-century millenarian movements where people abandoned work and possessions anticipating the Lord's return on a particular date.

Fourth, there are other possible explanations for the problem that Paul is addressing, which shall be discussed below. A better overall approach, however, is to place the warnings against idleness within the broader discussion of work which inhabits the Thessalonian letters. The approach here is to examine briefly in turn the main passages that concern work in order to find out whether there are common threads that allow the reader to the start to develop a coherent theology of work. It will be argued that Paul's main thrust is to picture work as an act of love. In so doing he is adopting the kind of

⁵For σαλεύω see e.g. (LXX) Isa 7:2, Zech 12:2, 1 Macc 6:44, and Acts. 2:25; for θροέω see Matt 24:6 and Mark 13:7. Paul also describes the return of Christ in startling terms as both as a day of judgment and vengeance for the persecutors of the church (1:7–9), and as a day of glory, as the saints are gathered to meet him (1:10–2:1). That is, that day will be dramatic in its finality; there will be no secret return of Christ.

⁶See e.g. Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 341; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 253.

approach he also takes in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12–14, and Galatians 5, which places love at the center of ethical reflection; love which has the key place in the world-in-waiting, both in Christ and through the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 1:1–3

The main body of the first letter to the Thessalonians is bracketed by the triad of faith, love and hope (1:3, 5:8). At the beginning of the letter, Paul recalls and celebrates the Thessalonians' early experience in Christ in terms of this triad. At the close of the body of the letter Paul defines the response he expects from his readers in terms of the same triad: putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation (5:8). It has been suggested that the triad provides an outline for the entire letter,⁷ but even if this is unlikely, faith, love and hope are prominent throughout.⁸ The same triad is also found elsewhere in a number of passages, most of them in the Pauline corpus,⁹ and many commentators see the triad as a summary of the essence of Christian life or existence.¹⁰ For Collins, "eschatological existence . . . is an existence in faith, love and hope."¹¹ Such a claim could be more strongly made on the basis of 1 Corinthians 13:13, but it is likely that the Thessalonians would also have read Paul in this way. Concerning the origin of the triad, all the non-Pauline references "are clearly later than Paul," making it "possible that Paul himself is its creator,"¹² despite the common suggestion that it reflects pre-Pauline tradition.¹³ Given that this is likely the

⁷Robert W. Thurston, "The Relationship between the Thessalonian Epistles," *Expository Times* 85.2 (1973), suggests as an outline: faith, 1:1–3:11; love, 3:12–4:12; hope, 4:13–5:22. The division he advocates between 3:11 and 3:12, in the middle of a prayer, seems an attempt to force the threefold structure onto the letter.

⁸ἀγάπη: 1:3; 3:6, 12; 5:8, 13. ἀγαπάω: 4:9. φιλαδελφία: 4:9. ἐλπίς: 1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8.

⁹Rom 5:1–5; 1 Cor 13:6–7, 13; Gal 5:5–6; Col 1:4–5; Heb 6:10–12, 10:22–24; 1 Pet 1:3–9, possibly 1:21–22; Barn. 1:4, 9:8; Pol. Phil. 3:2f.

¹⁰Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, translated by D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 219; Willi Marxsen, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare: NT 11.1. (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979), 35; Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 126 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85; Béda Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniciens*, Études Bibliques (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1956), 368; Thomas Söding, *Die Trias Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe bei Paulus*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 150 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992), 216.

¹¹Raymond F. Collins, "The Faith of the Thessalonians," *Louvain Studies* 7 (1978): 253, 67.

¹²Best, *Thessalonians*, 67.

¹³See Traugott Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zurich: Benziger, 1986); Franz Laub, *1. und 2. Thessalonicherbrief*, Die Neue Echter Bibel (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1985), 16; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1959), 43; Karl Friedrich Ulrichs, *Christusglaube: Studien zum Syntagma πίστις Χριστοῦ und zum paulinischen Verständnis von Glaube und Rechtfertigung*, WUNT 2. Reihe, 227 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 71. It is not possible to say for certain that the triad began with Paul, but it is most probable, especially given Paul's demonstrated linguistic and theological creativity.

earliest of Paul's letter that we have access to, we may be seeing the triad in its first formulation, much as we see the early and unelaborated use of the Pauline greeting formula, "Grace to you and peace," in 1:1.

But it is the other triad in verse three which has received comparatively little attention, even though the work, labor, and endurance of the Thessalonian believers are the actual objects of Paul's thankful remembrance. We may ask why Paul is interested in these aspects of the Thessalonians' experience? Why is it these things that Paul celebrates? If faith, love, and hope are constitutive of eschatological existence in Christ, then work, labor, and endurance seem for Paul to be intrinsic to Christian experience. But unlike his use of the language of faith, love, and hope, which he repeats in varying forms in other letters, Paul nowhere else repeats the triad of work, labor, and endurance—it has particular relevance for the Thessalonians. In other words, verse three is far from a generic pre-formulation mildly adjusted for the Thessalonians, even though the unwarranted tendency to dwell on the possibility of "faith, love, and hope" being a pre-Pauline expression has led to the disregarding of the true significance of this verse. The point is that work, labor, and endurance are just as much Paul's focus in this document as the more lofty-sounding faith, love, and hope, which is confirmed later in the letter where Paul repeatedly returns to the topic of work in various ways.

How do the two triads relate together? How do work, labor, and endurance relate to faith, love, and hope? Most commentators, and rightly so, see the genitive relationships (τοῦ ἔργου τῆς πίστεως καὶ τοῦ κόπου τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ τῆς ὑπομονῆς τῆς ἐλπίδος) as indicating source or origin: work, labor, and endurance derive from faith, love, and hope.¹⁴ But to what does the triad of work, labor, and endurance, with its modifiers, refer? Commentators vary at this point, especially on the first two elements. Most discussion concerns the first element, the "work of faith" (τοῦ ἔργου τῆς πίστεως), because of abiding interest in the relationship of faith to works, particularly in Romans, Galatians, and Philippians. Here (and in the similar expression in 2 Thess 1:11) nothing in the context suggests that Paul is addressing the issue of the law and faith, or comparing "works of the law" with faith in Christ, as, say in Galatians 2:16. The use of the singular ἔργον makes it unlikely that simply "deeds" of any kind are in view.

Malherbe thinks that the triad points to the Thessalonians' strenuous preaching of the gospel, in light of 1:5–10, where the "preaching and reception of the word" is discussed, and especially verse 8, where the word of the Lord and faith of the Thessalonian believers are described as going out into the surrounding region.¹⁵ Paul in this letter (2:9, 5:12–13) and elsewhere (1 Cor 3:13, 15; 16:16; 2 Cor 11:23, Eph 4:12; Col 1:29) emphasizes the nature

¹⁴The other main possibility is that they are genitives of description: "Faithful work, and loving labor, and hopeful endurance," but the meaning does not change significantly, and in view of the letter's later interest in the ongoing faith of the Thessalonian church, faith rather than faithfulness should be preferred here for πίστις.

¹⁵Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 108.

of Christian ministry and proclamation as work and labor, which the expression in 1:3 certainly includes. In view of the frequent references to working for a living in the letter, however, more than gospel ministry is included here. It is unlikely in any case that Paul would distinguish starkly between his work as a tentmaker and his work as an apostle. The kind of sacred-secular or “bi-vocational” division that is presently common does not make an appearance in Paul.

Fee takes “work of faith” as “probably Christian service,” work directed towards Christ, and “labor of love” as “probably manual labor,” work done in love for others.¹⁶ Green takes “work of faith” as equivalent to “good works” towards all, whereas “labor of love” signifies strenuous action on behalf of other believers.¹⁷ Wanamaker sees “work of faith” as the “Christian lifestyle that distinguished [the Thessalonians] from the pagans,” while their labor of love was possibly their acts of love towards other believers in Macedonia.¹⁸ But these explanations neglect the fact that the difference, if any, between the “work of faith” and the “labor of love” is not so much in the outcome but the source. In addition, the stylized nature of the overlaying of the two triads, along with the juxtaposition of work and labor (ἔργον and κόπος), suggests that the expressions “work of faith,” “labor of love,” and “endurance of hope” are not to be strongly contrasted but treated as near-synonymous, with the contribution of κόπος emphasizing the nature of work as toil, and ὑπομονή its duration.

Κόπος can mean “trouble,” as well as labor or toil, and the use of ὑπομονή, “endurance,” following may suggest that sense as appropriate. Although the Thessalonians have undoubtedly had their troubles (1:6, 2:14–15), Paul uses θλίψις for their sufferings under persecution, as well as his own (3:3, 7). We must ask why Paul would be so eager to express thanks for trouble visited upon them, in a list which otherwise thanks God for their own actions of work and perseverance. Elsewhere, including several instances in Paul, ἔργον and κόπος, or their cognates, are brought together in in synonymous fashion in discussion of work (Wis 3:11; Sir 6:19, 1 Cor 4:12, 15:58, 16:16; Eph 4:28). In 1 Thessalonians 2:9 (and 2 Thess 3:8; 2 Cor 11:27), κόπος and the similar term μόχθος are brought together as a pair to emphasize the laborious nature of the work Paul was doing to support himself.¹⁹ In the thanksgiving section in 2 Thessalonians Paul boasts of the “endurance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you are undergoing” (2 Thess 1:4). We do find works, labor, and endurance listed together in Revelation 2:2, and “works and love and faith and service

¹⁶Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 26.

¹⁷Green, *Thessalonians*, 90.

¹⁸Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster, 1990), 75.

¹⁹When κόπος and πόνος are brought together as a syntagm, the emphasis is on trouble and strife (Job 5:6; Ps 10:7 (9:298 LXX), 90:10 (89:10 LXX)).

and endurance” in Revelation 2:19, though in those verses ἔργον is in the plural. There seems to be a common field of terms appropriate for describing the work performed in faithful endurance, the hopeful waiting of God’s people who are looking for final salvation.²⁰

Thus the thanks given for the triad ἔργον, κόπος, and ὑπομονή implies that Paul is reflecting on a difficult period which the church has endured. Malherbe claims that the sufferings described in 1 Thessalonians (1:6, 2:2, 3:3–5) leading up to Timothy’s mission, whether for Paul or the church, were not the result of persecution or outward trouble, but are inner struggles, whether because of “Paul’s own ‘internal distress’, the knowledge of which may upset the young believers,”²¹ or, for the Thessalonians, “the distress and anguish of heart experienced by persons who broke with their past as they received the gospel.”²² We may acknowledge the likelihood that social dislocation and distress might add to the pressure on the young church, but the account in Acts 17 describes persecution in the early days of the church in Thessalonica, and this letter was not written all that long after the church was begun. Marcus Bockmuehl has highlighted the sixth-century account of Malalas of Antioch, who describes a persecution taking place in Judea in the year 48/49,²³ which, although a late testimony, may help also to reinforce the historical accuracy of the Thessalonian persecution, mentioned alongside the Judean persecution in 2:14–15. Further evidence of the reality of persecution taking place in Thessalonica comes from 2 Thessalonians 1:4: “Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.”

²⁰See 4 Macc 17:4: τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς ὑπομονῆς γενναίως ἔχουσα πρὸς τὸν θεόν (“bravely maintaining with God the hope of endurance”); Rom 5:3–5, 8:24–25, 15:4–5; Gal. 5:5–6; Jas 1:3–4.

²¹Malherbe, “Conversion to Paul’s Gospel,” 236, Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 193. This view is found in St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Thessalonians*, 3.3.3, where he claims that “the temptations of the teachers trouble their disciples,” and “they are not so much troubled at their own temptations, as at those of their teachers,” and in von Dobschütz, though he saw θλίψις in Paul as always referring to tribulations, not so much internal anguish. Ernst von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, 1974 ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909), 134; see also Traugott Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Zurich: Benziger, 1986), 127. Best thinks that the sufferings of both Paul and the Thessalonians are in view on the basis of the first person plurals of 3:3–4, Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972), 135. Likewise Lightfoot interprets, “in the midst of these afflictions which befall us and you alike,” J.B. Lightfoot, *Notes on Epistles of St Paul* (London: MacMillan, 1895) 42. Neil thinks that these troubles are “in this case not Paul’s troubles—the new converts needed someone to strengthen them.” William Neil, *The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), 63.

²²Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 48.

²³Bockmuehl is assiduous in not giving the account too much historical certitude, but he suggests that there is little reason for such a tale to be manufactured. Marcus Bockmuehl, “1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 and the Church in Jerusalem,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001): 23.

I suggest, then, that Paul's thanksgiving, functioning as so often to introduce themes which will appear later in the letter, is written to a church which has suffered, and is in need of encouragement that the path it began was no mistake, despite the early departure of the apostle. Their life as believers has consisted of work, labor, and endurance, and Paul encourages them that this is consistent with, and derives from the eschatological nature of their life in Christ, a life of faith, love, and hope as they wait for the Son of God from heaven. There is no contradiction between the faith, love, and hope that constitute and define their existence in Christ, and their experience of work, labor and endurance. On the contrary, work, labor, and endurance are the necessary outcome and demonstration of their faith, love, and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. In a letter filled with reminders of what the Thessalonian church experienced and learned since their conversion, it is of particular interest in interpreting later portions of the letter, that not only does Paul remind them of the work that derives from faith, and the endurance which derives from hope in the Lord Jesus, but also the labor and toil that derives from love.

1 Thessalonians 2:8–9

Discussion of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 has focused on genre. By describing his virtuous behavior in Thessalonica was Paul defending himself against already-voiced accusations? He may be responding to charges of being a false prophet,²⁴ or of being a money-grubbing glory-seeking philosopher, such as in the similar defense he mounts for working to support himself in 2 Corinthians 11:7–15. He may have been making an ethos appeal (of the kind described in Acts 20:33–35, where he recounts his working practices in Ephesus) perhaps to contrast himself to disreputable travelling sophists, without having any particular accusations made against him.²⁵ Or he may have been reminding them of his way of life, as a model to imitate, as he mentions explicitly in the similar passage in the second letter (2 Thess 3:7–9; cf. 1 Thess 1:6; 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1). The confidence that the Thessalonians retain in Paul, as reported by Timothy (1 Thess 3:6) and the tone of the letter, suggests that he was not under sustained attack, but he feels the

²⁴William Horbury, "1 Thessalonians 2:3 as Rebutting Charges of False Prophecy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982), and William Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 14–16, and cf. Jeffrey A.D. Weima, "An Apology for the Apologetic Function of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68 (1997).

²⁵The language Paul uses is similar to that found in defending charges made against Graeco-Roman philosophers. For the idea that Paul is not defending against accusation but deliberately distancing himself from comparison to the Sophists, see Abraham J. Malherbe, "Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thess ii," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 205, who writes that Paul is presenting himself as an example: "It is understandable that the genuine philosophic missionary would want to distinguish himself from other types without his having explicitly been accused of acting like a particular type;" and Bruce W. Winter, "The Entries and Ethics of Orators and Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:1–12)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993).

need to explain his absence as well as to remind the church of the way of life he practiced among them. So, perhaps, some combination of the above is to be preferred. Paul's overall paraenetic purpose in 2:1–12 is to affirm the validity of his readers' faith in the gospel by establishing the integrity of the messenger. Paul is emphasizing his integrity as an apostle whose word was received and believed.

Much of the letter is filled with reminders of what the Thessalonians ought to have kept in mind. In 2:6 he says that his lifestyle among them was not a cover for greed. In 2:9 he reminds them of the labor and toil of Paul and his companions. They worked for their own living while in Thessalonica, so as not to be a burden to anyone. The participle ἐργαζόμενοι is a temporal modifier of the aorist ἐκηρύξαμεν, so that Paul's "labor and toil" was not simply his hard work in supporting himself, but in particular *preaching the gospel* while working night and day not to be a burden to anyone. Paul wants the Thessalonians to remember his preaching in the context in which it was given. Communication of the gospel is mentioned four times in the passage (vv. 2, 4, 8, 9). The issue is the financial and ethical credibility of Paul and his companions as apostles of Christ in the preaching of the gospel of God.

Just how does his preaching while working to support himself establish his integrity? Further, how might that reveal aspects of his theology of work? First, self-support is opposed to flattery, greed, and seeking financial rewards through gaining honor (2:5–6). In a world trammled by self-seeking teachers of philosophy,²⁶ and clients sponging off patrons, in which love of money was pervasive (1 Tim 3:3, 6:10; Heb 13:5), work was for Paul the arena to live out and demonstrate his genuineness. Second, Paul saw no contradiction between his self-supporting labor and the preaching of the gospel. The phrase "working night and day" may be somewhat hyperbolic, but the genitive nouns indicate the kind of time when Paul was working, not the length of time.²⁷ The language of 2:9 means that his preaching was contemporaneous with his work; it was the arena for his proclamation of the good news. His customers, suppliers, market neighbors, and even perhaps fellow guild members, would have provided a steady stream of potential converts—some at least of the recipients of the letter were the "you" whom Paul evangelized while working.

Third, Paul explains that the motive of his self-support was to avoid being a financial burden to anyone. The term used here, ἐπιβαρέω, is one of a group of terms that Paul uses on the several occasions when he insists that he will not become a burden to others.²⁸ Elsewhere also it can be used

²⁶See Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 91–94, 166–69.

²⁷See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 124.

²⁸Ἐπιβαρέω: 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thes 3:8 (though the range of the word is not limited to financial burdens. E.g. 2 Cor. 1:8; Josephus, *Ant.* 15:55); its cognates βαρέω (2 Cor 5:4; 1 Tim 5:16) and καταβαρέω (2 Cor 12:16); καταναρκάω (2 Cor 11:9, 12:13, 12:14).

in regard to financial burdens.²⁹ The prefixed ἐπι- seems to be an intensifier, indicating *overburdening* someone. The passage here accepts that there was an obligation on the Thessalonians, or some of them, to provide for Paul if necessary, though we are not told explicitly why such an obligation would exist.³⁰ It may simply have been a function of the common practice of providing hospitality, even to strangers,³¹ though that obligation did not usually require the provision of hospitality for extended periods. The obligation could derive from Jesus' instructions, as understood by Paul, that "those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor 9:14), which is the basis of the "right not to work" that Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 9:9–18, a right which he claims not to use (cf. also Acts 20:34–35), though he did accept support from believers *outside* the cities where he was working (2 Cor 11:7–9; Phil 4:16–18).

The obligation to provide hospitality could be a significant burden, especially to those who were poor.³² Paul sometimes stayed with wealthier believers, as with Gaius in Corinth (Rom 16:23), but here he shows awareness of the cost that housing a guest could impose. Paul explains his decision to work for his living as motivated by love. The γάρ in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 is illustrative. The work of Paul and his companions exemplified or demonstrated the truth of the claim made in verse 8, where he says, "Having in this manner [i.e. the affection of a nursing mother for her children, v. 7] such an affection for you, we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you were beloved to us." "Beloved," here translates ἀγαπητοί. Work, especially work as self-support, was for Paul an act of love. As unlikely as it may sound to modern ears, he was a church leader who wanted his people to give less. His working for money did not derive from selfishness—quite the opposite. It ensured that he was not a burden on others. It was the practice of love.

1 Thessalonians 4:9–12

Paul recognizes the Thessalonians' love in 1:3 and again in 3:6. In 3:12 he prays for their love to increase, both for each other, and for all. In 4:9 he exalts their love in lofty terms, using the figure of speech known as *paralipsis*. He says that their love is something which need not be written about, directly before writing about it:³³ "You yourselves are taught by God to love one another, for indeed you are doing so towards all the brothers in the whole of Macedonia." In 4:10 he urges them to abound all the more in that love for

²⁹Josephus, *War*. 2.273; Appian, *Civil Wars* 3.2.17, 4.5.31; Ꞥ.Bad. 1.39.3.

³⁰Verse 6 may hint at the possibility that apostles could demand financial support.

³¹See Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 94–97.

³²That is why later Christians legislated limits to the provision of hospitality for extended periods. See *Didache* 11.3–6.

³³The περί δέ of 4:9 makes it possible that Paul is responding to a question the Thessalonians have communicated.

one another and for all. Thus he is saying to them, “You do love; love more.” In the same sentence he urges them to follow what he had previously commanded them—that is, to aspire to live quietly, look after their own affairs, and to work with their own hands. Once again then, contextually Paul is associating love with work. Grammatically the connection between love and work here is not absolute; the *καί* (“and”) at the start of 4:11 followed by the infinitive verb may simply indicate a second characteristic that Paul is urging upon his readers. But the way the sentence starts with the thematic subject of love, the alliterative use of *φιλαδελφία* and *φιλοτιμείσθαι*, and the goal of walking properly before outsiders (4:12), tie this long sentence together. In 3:12 they are to love one another as well as those those outside; here they are to do so through the way they work.

In the light of what was already said in chapter two, the exhortation to work as an act of love, for one another and for all, should be seen as instruction to the church to work so as to be self-supporting, in the manner of Paul who was not to a burden on others. This is confirmed by the last clause in in verse 12: “that you should have no need of anyone” (taking *μηδενός* as masculine not neuter). Love for all meant maintaining the credible witness of their lifestyle. Through self-supporting work believers will live in a seemingly manner before outsiders. There is evidence of public disdain for those who begged,³⁴ or those clients who relied on rich patrons for their food, visiting them every morning for a formal greeting, and to receive handouts of food or money.³⁵

The three ambitions or aspirations of verse 11 have presented challenges to interpreters. The commands to live quietly and tend to one’s own affairs have frequently been interpreted as the requirement to withdraw from political life, not in the sense of abandoning civic life altogether, but to maintain a low profile, especially where persecution is a reality.³⁶ However, the verb *ἡσυχάζω*, which usually means to “stay quiet,” can sometimes signify “resting,” as in Luke 23:56, which says that the women who had come to prepare the body of Jesus “rested on the Sabbath, according to the commandment.”³⁷ It is intriguing to speculate whether Paul is telling his readers both to rest and to work. In the light of the warning against disorderliness or idleness in

³⁴Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 32.9) excoriates “these Cynics, posting themselves at street-corners, in alley-ways, and at temple-gates, pass round the hat and play upon the credulity of lads and sailors and crowds of that sort, stringing together rough jokes and much tittle-tattle and that low badinage that smacks of the market-place. Accordingly they achieve no good at all, but rather the worst possible harm, for they accustom thoughtless people to deride philosophers in general, just as one might accustom lads to scorn their teachers, and, when they ought to knock the insolence out of their hearers, these Cynics merely increase it.”

³⁵Juvenal, *Satires* III. 126–170.

³⁶Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 163; Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*, First Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 48.

³⁷*καὶ τὸ μὲν σάββατον ἡσύχασαν κατὰ τὴν ἐντολήν.* See also Philo, *Quod deus sit immutabilis*, 1:38; *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, 1:13.

5:14, and the similar warning in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, along with the strictures there against being busybodies, it seems that there were some who were causing trouble in the city, having the leisure to do so, either because they were supported by wealthy patrons, or perhaps because the church was supporting them. Paul told them to look after their own affairs. Πράσσειν τὰ ἴδια likely means to take care of one's own financial affairs or occupation.³⁸

Paul also insisted that they work with their hands. There is evidence of disdain among the elite of Graeco-Roman society, including some philosophers, for manual labor. Aristotle, envisaging an ideal city, considered manual labor to be necessary for the maintenance of the state but a hindrance to virtue. Only those who did not work with their hands had the leisure to study and attain virtue, and so only these should be citizens involved in government:

The citizens must not live a mechanic or a mercantile life for such a life is ignoble and inimical to virtue, nor yet must those who are to be citizens in the best state be tillers of the soil, for leisure is needed both for the development of virtue and for active participation in politics.³⁹

Cicero says,

The callings of hired laborers, and of all who are paid for their mere work and not for skill, are ungentle and vulgar; for their wages are given for menial service. . . . Those who buy to sell again as soon as they can are to be accounted as vulgar. . . . Least of all can we speak well of the trades that minister to sensual pleasures; "Fishmongers, butchers, cooks, poulterers, and fishermen," as Terence says. Add, if you please, to this list perfumers, ballet-dancers, and the whole tribe of dice-players. . . . Commerce, if on a small scale, is to be regarded as vulgar; but if large and rich, importing much from all quarters, and making extensive sales without fraud, it is not so very discreditable . . . nothing is better than agriculture, nothing more productive, nothing more pleasant, nothing more worthy of a man of liberal mind.⁴⁰

Plutarch comments:

When we are pleased with the work, we slight and set little by the workman or artist himself, as for instance, in perfumes and purple

³⁸In Prov 11:24, and Luke 18:28, τὰ ἴδια indicates finances or occupation. In Luke 19:28, πρᾶσσω is used in the context of handling money.

³⁹Aristotle, *Politics*, 1328b.

⁴⁰Cicero, *On Duties*, 1.42 (44 B.C.). The exception of farming from the list of disreputable manual occupations exempts wealthy Romans whose incomes derived from agriculture from Cicero's criticism.

dyes, we are taken with the things themselves well enough, but do not think dyers and perfumers otherwise than low and sordid people. It was not said amiss by Antisthenes, when people told him that one Ismenias was an excellent piper. "It may be so," said he, "but he is but a wretched human being, otherwise he would not have been an excellent piper."⁴¹

This is often contrasted with a less delicate Jewish attitude to manual work. Some rabbis at least approved of artisan occupations, as in the Mishnah we read, from a fourth Generation tannaim (c. A.D. 140–165):

Rabbi Meir said: Let a man always teach his son a clean and a light trade; and let him pray to Him whose are wealth and riches; for there is no trade which has not both poverty and riches, and neither does poverty come from the trade nor yet riches, but everything according to one's deserving (*Quiddušin* 4:14).

Philo exalts labor, which, although it exists because of sin in the world (*Leg. Alleg.* 1.25), is not only necessary for survival (*De opificio mundi* 1.167), but is the occasion of moral improvement:

But labor is the enemy of laziness, as it is in reality the first and greatest of good things, and wages an irreconcilable war against pleasure; for, if we must declare the truth, God has made labor the foundation of all good and of all virtue to man, and without labor you will not find a single good thing in existence among the race of men (*De sacrificiis* 1.35).

This apparent Jewish/Gentile distinction, however, is by no means universal. The Hellenistic Jewish writer Ben Sirach, though he like the Greeks and Romans acknowledged the need for manual occupations (at least those which were not inherently bad), thought that manual workers are too concerned with their occupations to have the understanding of the law and of the world necessary to be able to govern: "Without them [i.e. manual workers] no city can be inhabited, and wherever they live, they will not go hungry. Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people" (Sir 38:32). Wisdom only comes with a life of leisure, "How can one become wise who handles the plow?" (Sir 38:25).

On the other side, the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom saw manual work as fitting for free men who wished to escape poverty:

Now so much for the life of the farmer, the hunter, and the shepherd. Perhaps I have spent more time on this theme than I should have done, but I desired to show in some way or other

⁴¹Plutarch, *Lives*, Pericles 1.1.4–5.

that poverty is no hopeless impediment to a life and existence befitting free men who are willing to work with their hands, but leads them on to deeds and actions that are far better and more useful and more in accordance with nature than those to which riches are wont to attract most men.⁴²

The majority of the people the church was connected to were not the wealthy but the poor or middle income. For Paul manual work was enabling not demeaning.

We are not told why some were not working. As we have seen, it is unlikely to be eschatological enthusiasm. Bruce Winter suggests that suffering due to famine may have lain behind some of the issues in the Thessalonian letters.⁴³ Hunger pushed believers into seeking a patron to feed them, whether a wealthy church member or a non-believer, and the client could repay this provision by offering political support in the polis. There is some uncertainty that personal patronage, on the scale Winter envisages, was as significant a factor in a largely Greek city like Thessalonica, as it was in Rome, or Roman colonies like Corinth or Philippi. There certainly was a developed system of patronage in the first century Roman world. Personal patronage involving the daily distribution of money was largely a phenomenon of the educated Romans.⁴⁴ Wealthy and influential people would act as patrons to their clients, or followers, dispensing favors and financial benefactions in return for loyalty and service. Though Thessalonica was a free city Roman influence in it was strong. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, where Roman governors and some other officials lived. The head of the city council “served as the high priest in the cult of Augustus.”⁴⁵

The gospel was counter to the hierarchical distinctions prevalent in the culture. In Paul’s vision, this hierarchical and stratified community is transformed into a community of love living with mutual obligation and care. It is possible that the practice of giving and care for the poor, including regular common meals (as is seen in Acts 2–6, 1 Cor 10–11, and 2 Cor 8–9), made it possible for believers who were in need to find help in their church community. Perhaps it also allowed them to become continually dependent on that help. Paul expected believers to work hard to provide for themselves rather than to seek the indulgence of wealthy patrons, or even the patronage of the church, in a way that brought the church into disrepute. The point was not to meet outsiders’ expectations in every possible way, but to act in a manner

⁴²Dio Chrysostom, 7.103.

⁴³Bruce W. Winter, “‘If a Man Does Not Wish to Work...’ A Cultural and Historical Setting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6–16,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989): 309–12.

⁴⁴Erlend D. MacGillivray, “Re-evaluating Patronage and Reciprocity in Antiquity and New Testament Studies,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*, no. 6 (2009): 43; despite Peter Garnsey and Greg Woolf, “Patronage of the Rural Poor in the Roman World,” in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁴⁵Green, *Thessalonians*, 24.

appropriate to the gospel and its credibility, and consistent with their God-taught love for one another.

1 Thessalonians 5:12–14

The double use of “brothers” (ἀδελφοί, 5:12, 14) along with the two first person plural requests with synonymous verbs (“Now we ask you,” ἐρωτῶμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς; “Now we urge you,” παρακαλοῦμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς) signals not only a change of subject matter but also the transition to the final set of exhortations in the letter. The two requests (5:12–13, 5:14) are united also by the repetition of νουθετέω (“admonish”), and by the contrast made between hardworking leaders, and some people who are idle. Verse 11, beginning with διό παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους, concludes the section on the resurrection of believers at the Parousia which started in 5:1, much as the ὥστε παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους in 4:18 concludes the section on preparedness for the Parousia which started in 4:13. The effect of this context, along with the concluding prayer in 5:23, which mentions the Parousia, is that the exhortations of 5:12–22 have an eschatological focus. That is, in view of the return of Christ, this is how the Thessalonians are to live. Thus again we can see that the working habits of the church are meant to be motivated by the second coming of Christ; quite the opposite of the view of some that enthusiastic eschatological expectation led to idleness.

A single Greek article governing three participles is used in 5:12 to let the readers know that “those who labor among you, are over you in the Lord, and admonish you,” are largely same group. All three participles are present tense, the imperfective aspect indicating the ongoing nature of the activities. The significance of work is again addressed: the church is urged to acknowledge their spiritual leaders because of their labor (κοπιᾶω) and work (ἔργον). Indeed the church is to “regard them very highly in love (ἠγεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ) because of their work.⁴⁶ Paul is not condemning church leaders to a life of mere busyness or constant activity. Rather, as some in the community are avoiding work, as is briefly indicated in 5:14, he is setting forth those who work hard as examples to the community. These are the leaders who are worthy of honor,⁴⁷ and by calling for this

⁴⁶Ascough notes, “It is likely that the leaders at Thessalonica continued with both kinds of activity, manual labor alongside community members and the labor of community formation” (Richard S. Ascough, “The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000): 318). Ascough’s larger point, that the Thessalonian church was a voluntary association of workers in the same trade as Paul, is however a stretch too far. It is based on what Ascough himself notes is a presumption: “Presumably Paul and the Thessalonians worked at the same trade, or at least trades within the same general area, thus facilitating contact between Paul and the Thessalonians. And it was while at work that Paul preached the gospel and presumably made his initial converts. Thus, the core of the Thessalonian community comprised handworkers who shared Paul’s trade” (Ascough, “Voluntary Association,” 315). But while this is interesting speculation, there is nothing in the letters or the account in Acts 17 that lends it support.

⁴⁷See Green, *Thessalonians*, 248–51.

honor Paul reiterates his emphasis on the right view—the right value—of work and labor, in light of the return of Christ.

Honor is given to leaders who admonish the church (5:12), but the whole church is called to join in admonishment for those who are idle, while encouraging the fainthearted. As is well known, ἄτακτος (5:14) can be translated as “unruly” particularly in regard to soldiers who did not maintain order in battle,⁴⁸ or disordered,⁴⁹ but the context, with its commendation of leaders’ work, and indeed the interest in work displayed in the entire letter, selects the meaning “idle.”⁵⁰ Far from being eschatologically over-eager, some have become careless about the return of Christ. Paul has just reminded them “So then, let us not sleep, like others do, but let us watch and be sober” (5:6). Perhaps some wanted to continue the life of a client, or are taking advantage of the church’s practice of generosity. Nevertheless, despite this apparent abuse, Paul instructs the church to continue doing good “to one another and to all” (5:15).

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

This letter, written about six months after the first,⁵¹ repeats several of the same points about work, in even stronger fashion. Idle believers are not simply to be admonished but to be avoided (2 Thess 3:6). If they are not willing to work they should not eat (3:10). This means at least that the offenders would be excluded from the church’s gatherings, including gatherings for common meals. This would also mean exclusion from the Lord’s Supper, as-

⁴⁸Josephus, *Ant.* 15.150, 152; *War* 1.101, 1.382.

⁴⁹Philo, *De Agr.* 74; *De Abr.* 151.

⁵⁰BDAG, sv. ἄτακτος. The cognate verb ἀτακτέω, though it most often is used to describe disorder on the battlefield, is also used for those who refused to fight. Demosthenes (*Olynthiacs* 3.11) complains of laws that grant impunity to those who will not line up alongside (οἱ δὲ τοὺς ἀτακτοῦντας ἀθώους καθιστᾶσιν) their fellows to serve in the war. Demosthenes, *Olynthiacs I–III*, edited by H. Sharpley (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), 67. Likewise Lysias (*Against Alcibiades* 1.17–18) criticizes those who avoided military service (τοὺς οὕτως ἀτακτοῦντας) because of cowardice (οὐκ ἐτόλμα μεθ’ ὑμῶν μάχεσθαι: “he did not dare not fight alongside you”). Demetrius (*On Style*, 53) uses the adverbial comparative form ἀτακτοτέρως to mean “negligently”, suggesting that good style allows, even prefers, negligence in not always matching every μεν with a contrasting δέ. The cognates in 2 Thess 3:6, 7, 11 refer to idleness or shirking of work, as is evident from the context (See the discussion below). There is enough evidence to allow that ἄτακτος and its cognates can refer to someone who refuses to undertake difficult tasks, or is negligent in the performance of duties.

⁵¹Despite a minor academic tradition going back to Hugo Grotius, and including Charles Wanamaker (Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 37–45), we can assume that this work was written subsequent to the first. Amongst other reasons, especially the second letter’s mention of a prior epistle (2 Thess 2:15), the discussion of idleness, in expanded and more vehement form, suits a situation where the first letter failed to elicit a satisfactory response. The “tradition which you received from us” (2 Thess 3:6) may include the discussions of work in 1 Thess. I am assuming the Pauline authorship of 2 Thess. See the discussion in Fee, *Thessalonians*, 237–40, and Paul Foster, “Who Wrote 2 Thessalonians? A Fresh Look at an Old Problem,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (2012).

suming that the Thessalonian church had a similar practice to that evident in Corinth (1 Cor 11:20–34). It is a safe assumption that the Thessalonian church had a regular common meal, given the evidence of 3:10,⁵² and the discussion of meal practices in letters to several of the Pauline churches (Rom 14:1–15:13; 1 Cor 5:11, 10:16–21, 11:20–34; Gal 2:11–14). Similar regulations for discipline are found at Qumran. The Community Rule prescribes punishment for lying about property (“If one of them has lied deliberately in matters of property, he shall be excluded from the pure meal of the congregation for one year and shall do penance with respect to one quarter of his food” 1QS 6.24–25). Likewise, for “speaking in anger” against a priest, “he shall do penance for one year and shall be excluded for his soul’s sake from the pure meal of the congregation” (1QS 7.2–3). A similar kind of discipline is seen in 1 Corinthians 5:11 for immoral believers,⁵³ which also included a ban on association, where the church was commanded “not even to eat with such a one.” The avoidance would presumably be wider than the context of the assembly of the church. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 the ban on association is extended to “anyone who does not obey” the message of the letter. In both 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians the intent of the punishment is restorative (1 Cor 5:5; 2 Thess 3:12, 15), but for Paul to command this kind of action on account of someone’s unwillingness to work shows how seriously he took the problem.

There also are clues in the text itself as to the theological approach Paul took to work. First, immediately before our passage Paul has prayed for the Lord to direct the Thessalonians’ hearts “to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ” (2 Thess 3:5). As we have seen already, notions of love and endurance have been key in Paul’s discussion of work (E.g. 1 Thess 1:3). It was love that led Paul to earn his own living while preaching in Thessalonica, love that labored and endured that would not be a burden to the community: “With labor and toil working night and day so as not to burden any of you” (2 Thess 3:8). This way of life was intended to set an example for all believers (2 Thess 3:9). In other words, the Thessalonian believers were commanded to work, enduring long and hard toil, so as to be self-supporting, and this enduring labor was an act of love. To live this way required the heart’s focus on the love of God and the endurance of Christ. Even if some in the church have been taking advantage of others’ generosity, and made themselves burdens to the community, Paul tells the church, “Do not be weary in doing good.” The prohibitive subjunctive command raises the possibility that the believers had already grown weary of well-doing. Paul

⁵²Jewett says that “The creation of the regulation required a community that was eating its meals together, for whom the willingness or unwillingness to work was a factor of sufficient importance to require regulation, and in which the power to deprive members of food was in fact present.” Robert Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10,” *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 38. While it be pressing too hard to require that the community was eating all its meals together, certainly the text makes sense where common meals were frequent.

⁵³The punishment also covers greed, idolatry, abuse, drunkenness and robbery.

wanted them to renew their love for those with needs at the same time as they disciplined idle brothers and sisters.

Second, the commands to dissociate from the idle, and to work, are made “in the Lord Jesus Christ,” “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” (2 Thess 3:6); “And such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ, that working quietly they should eat their own bread” (2 Thess 3:12). The point is that the instructions regarding work are not simply Paul’s own admonishments. The attaching of the name of Jesus to the instructions not only gives them significance but Christological weight. Everything the church does, including work, is to be done in and for the Lord Jesus Christ as an act of faith. Paul prays that Jesus would lead the church into good work: “For this reason we are always praying for you, that our God may make you worthy of the calling and may fulfill every desire for good and every work of faith by power” (2 Thess 1:11). “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thess 2:16–17). The working lives of believers are not somehow separate from their religious experience but are the place of faith and obedience to Jesus Christ, the place of response to the love of God the Father, and the place where prayer makes work a response to the grace of God.

Conclusion

We have seen that the problem of idleness in the Thessalonian church cannot simply be resolved by pointing to an extreme imminentist enthusiasm, largely because Paul himself does not point in that direction. Instead he sets his comments on idleness in the context of a broader discussion of work. The working lives of the believers are the proper place for the expression of love and faith. Work is meant to be an act of love. Paul celebrates the work, labor, and endurance of the Thessalonians as the proper products, and therefore evidence, of their faith, love, and hope in Jesus. Working to support themselves, and refusing to burden others, as Paul had set an example, is an act of love and faith as well as an expression of eschatological hope. Thus believers should, where possible, avoid dependence on a patron, particularly if that meant they were avoiding labor themselves, and they should refuse to abuse the generosity of the church. Rather, through humbly working with their own hands they would establish a credible witness to the surrounding community. Conversely, those who refuse to support themselves are acting counter to love, and should be disciplined, even to the point of being unable to eat the church’s common meal, with the hope of course of transformation and restoration.