

The Mission of Paul in Macedonia: The Proclamation of the Gospel as an Anti-imperial Message

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Introduction

During the communist regime in the Soviet Union, Christians were accused of using the Bible as anti-Soviet literature. Christians, however, responded that the Bible was written before the Soviet regime—so how could it be anti-Soviet? Ideologists of the Soviet Communist Party tried to correct the Christian worldview. Politicians forced the publishers of a Christian magazine (*Bratskiy vestnik*, or “Fraternal messenger”) to revise materials to fit the politics of the Communist Party. I remember that often before Sunday morning worship, one of the ministers read this magazine before the congregation, forming the worldview of “the Soviet man.”

How can we Christians understand and explain our mission in the context of our own and foreign cultures when Christianity and the gospel are considered anti-political and antireligious? What did Paul do when he preached the gospel in such circumstances? In answer, I will briefly analyze the mission of Paul in Macedonia on the basis of Acts 16-18 and the Letters to the Thessalonians and the Philippians.

I. The message of Paul in in Macedonia

The historical context of Paul's mission. According to Acts 16-17, Paul's mission in Macedonia was initiated by divine calling (Acts 16:10). After the first success of the proclamation of the gospel in Philippi (16:14 - Lydia's repentance), Paul's team met immediate opposition, initiated by the masters of the slave girl-prophetess from whom Paul had expelled a spirit (Acts 16:19). And though the persecutions were actually due to the financial crisis that the masters of the slave girl experienced, the charge before



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the authorities (στρατηγός [magistrates] and ἄρχων [authorities]) concerned the shockingly *anti-cultural* and *anti-traditional* activities of the Jewish preachers (Acts 16:20-21). With the support of the people, a soldier imposed public penalty on Paul and his team and threw them in jail (Acts 16:23). The next day they were released and turned out from the city by the authorities.

This experience became a model for Paul's mission in other places in Macedonia, including Thessalonica. Luke records (Acts 17:1-9) that after his successful sermon there were several Hellenists and notable women who repented, but the non-believing Jews repeated the same strategy as the slave masters in Philippi: they encouraged the crowd to revolt, gathered the people, and led the brothers from Jason's house to the city authorities (πολιτάρχης) to appear in court. However, in Thessalonica, as opposed to Philippi, the charge presented against the brothers was not that they were anti-cultural or anti-traditional (as in Corinth), but was more harsh—they were *anti-political*. As Luke shows, the charge strongly disturbed the crowd and politarchs (city officials) (17:8).

The essence of the gospel. The evangelical message of Paul was interpreted in Macedonia not just as an alien or foreign activity of the apostle, but as an *anti-traditional*, *anti-religious* and *anti-state* function. The message of Paul in Thessalonica was the same that he preached everywhere. The international mission of Paul was clearly declared by him: to proclaim Jesus as Lord “εἷς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ” (Rom

1:5). The gospel of Paul focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of this world. The message that Paul brought to the synagogue and to the Gentile world implies that the Lord Jesus is the one and only King and, in accordance with the prophets and Psalms, He will own the earth. All kings will serve and worship Him. People will pray to Him and bless Him (Pss 72: 8, 10, 15, 17). He will judge the earth, slay the unrighteous, and provide peace on the earth (Isa 11).

The gospel that Paul proclaimed belonged to the Judean apocalyptic tradition and was understandable to Jews in the messianic-prophetic context. At the same time, such key terminology in Paul's gospel as “lord,” “king,” “savior,” “son of God,” “kingdom,” “coming of the Lord,” “gospel,” “temple,” “citizenship,” “peace and security,” “faith,” “righteousness,” and others were closely associated with the language of the emperor's propaganda. Although these terms were part of Jewish apocalyptic tradition, they could be understood and interpreted in a very different sense—namely in the religious-political sense in the context of Macedonian Thessalonica.

In the Greco-Roman world the titles “lord,”^[1] “king,” and “son of god” directly refer to Caesar. The word εὐαγγελία meant the proclamation of the birth or ascension of the king or emperor (Caesar).^[2] The message of the gospel implied that there is one God, Creator and King and therefore all other gods are idols (including the worship of the emperor). God alone rules over all creation and provides justice and “peace

^[1] Paul only once uses the expression “Lord of peace” (ὁ κύριος τῆς εἰρήνης) in 2 Thess 3:16 instead of his usual collocation “God of peace” (ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης) in Rom 15:13, 33, 16:20; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:9; 1

Thess 5:23. See also Heb. 13:20.

^[2] Wright, “Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire.” www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Paul_Caesar_Empire.pdf, pp. 2-3.

and security.” Paul showed the true picture of the emperor and empire in Phil 3:20, when he stated that his readers’ true citizenship is in heaven (not in the Roman Empire) and the true Emperor is Jesus (not Caesar), who is the true Lord and Savior for the community of Christ (colony) in Philippi.^[3]

Paul uses imperial language in I Thess 4:13-5:3 where he deals with the central part of the book, the fact of the death of those who died in Christ (1 Thess 4:14). The key words in this text (*coming, lord, be caught, peace and safety*), especially when some of them are combined, make up a political language that was common in Hellenistic imperial propaganda. The emperor (κυρίος) comes (παρουσία) into the city, the group of people (*eklesia* as assembly) meet (ἀπάντησις) him and follow him to the subject region.^[4] Howard Tracy notes that “the basic meaning of *parousia* is either presence or arrival. In the Hellenistic world the word came to have particular associations with the arrival of a central figure. It denoted the ceremonial *arrival of a ruler* to a city where he was greeted with *honors* of one kind or another... It also included the attendant ceremonies with which the ruler was honored.»^[5]

Usually this kind of visit of a king was intended to make a city “peaceful and secure.” As Horsley notes, the policy of “peace

and security” often included military action. For instance: “The Roman ‘peace’^[6] that came to Macedonia in 167 B.C.E. arrived by virtue of Paulus’ defeat of Perseus.”^[7]

That makes apostle’s apocalyptic language in I Thess 5:1-11 clear in the context of military action. But it is not the Emperor of Rome who provides salvation, peace and security, but the Lord Jesus, who will appear and gather His people, providing true peace. This policy of the world’s peace^[8] (“peace and security”) was a boasted imperial propaganda, a testimony of the approval of power and control in the occupied territories. Rome and the emperor guarantee peace and stability to people in the empire contingent upon the faithfulness of the people.^[9] In the gospel of Paul it is not the Emperor of Rome who gives salvation, peace, and security; but the Lord Jesus, who will be welcomed by His people and bring judgment to the wicked.

Most probably, the gospel had this implication, but it is not very clear whether the rulers of the city first understood the danger (satire) of the gospel in this way when they told the Jews, Jason, and others about the mission of Paul: there were Jews who re-interpreted Paul’s message in radical form. As a result of this reinterpretation, the message of Paul about Christ proclaimed at Thessalonica became anti-imperial or anti-

[3] Wright, “Paul’s Gospel.” p. 6.

[4] Koester argues that (1) *parousia* was not a pre-Christian eschatological term; (2) *parousia* is a political term with a special accent on the preparedness of those who are waiting, that was related to the Thessalonian community. He notes: “But Paul, in his own language, describes the coming of the Lord like the coming of a king or Caesar for whose arrival the community must be prepared” (italics mine). (Helmut Koester, ‘Imperial Ideology and Paul’s Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians’ in *Paul and Empire*, 158-59).

[5] Howard L. Tracey, “The Literary Unity of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11,” *GTJ* 9.2 (1988): 176-7.

[6] *Pax et secutitas* = εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια (1 Thess 5:3).

[7] Horsley, *Paul*, 63.

[8] Georgi Dieter, (“God Turned Upside Down” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Harrisburg: TPI, 1997, 150) calls it a “peace ideology.”

[9] Faith (*fides*) is used in the sense of faithfulness or loyalty to the emperor that was demonstrated in friendship and trust to Caesar (Dieter, “God Turned,” 149).

political, so Paul and the Thessalonian believers were the subject of persecution from Jewish and city authorities. It was not a long period of time between Paul's departure from Thessalonica and the writing of the letter after Timothy reported to him concerning the situation there. As soon as Timothy came, Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians in which he encouraged them to keep the faith and hope (1 Thess), understanding that as a result of accepting the message of Paul the Thessalonian converts would encounter troubles and persecutions (ἐν πάσιν τοῖς διωγμοῖς υμῶν καὶ ταῖς θλίψεσιν) and, very likely, death (1 Thess. 4:13).

There are several arguments, suggested by Donfried, that the death of new believers in Thessalonica was a result of persecution: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who *fall asleep* (περὶ τῶν κοιμημένων, 1 Thess 4:13): (1) the variations of the verb "asleep" (koima,w) in 1 Thess 4:13-15 are used in relation to Stephen's death (Act 7:60), who died because of persecution. (2) According to Paul's witness, the situation in Thessalonica was similar to the situation in Judea (1 Thess 2:14-16), including not only the persecution but also the death of the saints. (3) The fact that the Thessalonians became imitators of Paul in persecutions implied that, like Paul, the Thessalonians

were near death or met death. Paul was ready to preach the gospel in Thessalonica after great opposition (ἐν πολλῷ ἀγῶνι) in Philippi (1 Thess 2:2) with a readiness to die: "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil 1:20).^[10]

Thus, the mission of Paul and the early Christian community of believers no longer identified with the legitimate religion of Judaism (*religio licita*) and thus was not under the legal protection of Rome (*religio illicita*)^[11]

II. The cult of the emperor in Macedonia

Imperial cult. The Greco-Roman world of the first century was very religious and full of gods with their priests and temples.^[12] Edson points out that at least four priest-hoods were found in Roman Thessalonica: "(a) a priest and agonothete of Augustus, (b) a priest of Rome and the Roman Benefactors, (c) a priest of Zeus Eleutherios and Rome and (d) a priest of the Gods."^[13] Among others there was a cult of the emperor with his priesthood and temples.^[14] The emperor cult combined both religious and political interests for the empire's sake. It helped to establish the power of the empire and loyalty to the emperor.^[15] On the one hand, the cult was initiated from above by the state, but on the other hand,

^[10] Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonians correspondence" in *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 346.

^[11] Identifying Christianity with illegal religion appears only in the 80s under Domitian.

^[12] Edson suggests that it is very likely that the priesthood to the gods was established by Cessander, the founder of Thessalonica, from the very beginning of the city (Charles Edson, "Macedonica" in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 51, [n.d.], 135).

^[13] Edson notes how the cult of the emperor increased during the development of Thessalonica:

316 B.C. (?) Priest of the Gods.

148 B.C. Priest of Zeus Eleutherios and Rome.

42-41 B.C. Priest of Rome and the Benefactor of the Romans.

27 B.C. Priest and Agonothete of Augustus.

138-139 A.D. Priest and Agonothete of the Divine (Aurelius) Fulvus. (Edson, *Macedonica*, 136.)

^[14] For instance, Price points out 199 places in Asia Minor alone where there were imperial temples, priests, and cults (S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial cult in Asia Minor*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], xviii-xxvi).

^[15] James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 101.

it was supported by citizens from below.^[16] Traditionally, worship of the gods was associated with a god's protection and grace to people. In a similar way, the imperial or benefactor's identity with the gods represents the well-being, security, peace, justice, provision, and protection of the Thessalonians. For instance, in order to win a war Rome tried to know to which of the gods their enemies prayed and then appealed to these gods to help their own side.^[17]

The cult of the emperor was not something new. People used to honor their rulers as gods in Egypt—Pharaoh; in Greece—Alexander the Great (and especially one of the Seleucid successors—Antiochus iv Epiphanies) and in the Roman Empire—Augustus and his successors. The religious incorporation or modeling of Rome into traditional religions was very visible through the temples, priesthood, rites, and festivals for the sake of emperor and empire. States tried to integrate the emperor's authority through common religious symbols, leaving a place for other religions.^[18] This is one of the “political phenomena”^[19] that by means of “royal theology”^[20] governed the Mediterranean world. For instance, in the second century when military service became obligatory instead of voluntary, soldiers had to participate in pagan ceremonies. The cult of the emperor, offerings,

and the responsibility of guarding pagan temples were concentrated on the figure of the emperor. The rejection of these practices was sufficient to cast a Christian soldier as apostate, someone who offends the greatness of the empire and emperor. In accordance with the legal-religious concept of the empire, if a religion (Christianity) makes trouble, this religious system becomes illegal.^[21]

Temples. The Thessalonians honored emperors through the temples, games, and coinage. The first way of honoring them was religious—honor through temples and the priesthood. Like other religious systems and temples that presented them, the temple of Caesar fulfilled the same religious-(political) function. There were some public cults in Thessalonica: the cults of Serapis and Isis;^[22] Dionysus and Cabirus^[23] which had their temples and rituals. With the same religious attributes, the temple built in Thessalonica to Caesar became an honored monument to Augustus. Edson tried to restore the original text of one old fragment that was found on a stela in Thessalonica, where it was written that the temple had been built to Caesar and the priesthood and had been established to the gods, to Rome, and to Roman benefactors.^[24]

The sacrifices were not brought to the Emperor directly, but were brought for his

^[16] See S. R. F. Price. *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial cult in Asia Minor*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 324-239.

^[17] N. A. Makshin, “The History of Ancient Rome,” (M.: GIPL, 1947), 96-100.

^[18] See Price, *Rituals*, 324-239.

^[19] Price, *Rituals*, 16.

^[20] Donfried, *Cults*, 347, 353.

^[21] Franko Kardini, “The History of Medieval Knights,” Online http://www.countries.ru/library/middle_ages/kardini/part2-1.htm. Cited 10.07.2006.

^[22] Donfried, “Cults,” 336. Edson points out the temple and songs to Isis (Edson, “Cults,” 181.)

^[23] Charles Edson, «Cults of Thessalonica

[Macedonica III]» in *The Harvard Theological Review* 41.3 (1948), 155ff; Donfried, “Cults,” 336-37.

^[24] proconsul ...

of Latomia buil[t the]

tem[ple] of Caesar.

In time of priest and agon[othete of Im]perator Caesar

Augustus son [of god]...

-os son of Neikopol[eos, priest]

of the gods, Dw[... son of...]

-pos, and (priest) of Roma a[nd Roman]

benefactors, Neik[... son of]

Paramonos. (Donfried, “Cults,” 336). Edson points out the temple and songs to Isis (Edson, “Cults,” 181).

sake and for his continued ruling, for divine protection and security.^[25] Such titles as god (which was applied to Julius Caesar), son of god (Octavian), and savior pointed to the divine honor of the emperor.^[26] The temple to Caesar was dedicated to Julius Caesar and his son, which means that the temple was built when Octavian-Augustus became ruler of the empire. If the inscription on a stela honored Augustus as a son of god, the coinage more clearly communicated his divine honor.

Coins. Coinage was another way of honoring the emperor. Coins that were distributed throughout Roman Macedonia had different images of the emperor. Some of them showed the head or the figure of the emperor within the temple and during dedications.^[27] The central place of the emperor inside the temple on the coin's image communicated a clear message about his deity. Edson clearly describes the ideology of Rome:

Two coins of Thessalonica bear on the obverse the head of Augustus with the legend Καῖσαρ [sebasto]s. ... Another coin of Thessalonica bears on the obverse the head of Julius Caesar with the combination

of a diadem and laurel crown and the legend ΘΕΩΣ; the reverse has the head of Augustus and the legend of the city.^[28]

The Emperor Claudius. When Paul visited Thessalonica for the first time and at the time he wrote to the Thessalonians, Claudius was emperor and the cult of the emperor was strong in the city.^[29] According to Luke and Suetonius, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances that were originated by Jews against Christ.^[30] Claudius is a good example of the imperial cult, because divine honors were rendered to him during his life and post mortem.^[31] Suetonius gave him the honorary title “*divine* Claudius,” in his fifth book *The Twelve Caesars*. Claudius himself appropriated honors that usually belonged to Rome, refocusing from the empire to himself. Moreover, two temples were erected in his name, in Britain and Gaul.

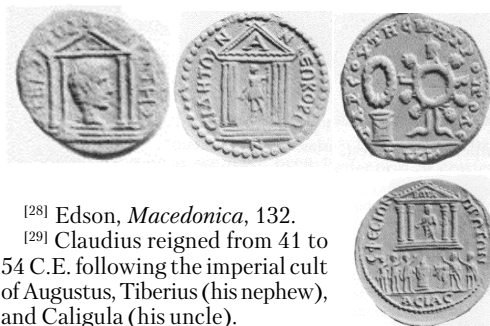
III. The essence of the opposition in Macedonia

According to the descriptions of Luke and Paul, the nature of the opposition was threefold. First, there were Jews who incited authorities to persecute Paul and his

^[25]Holland L. Hendrix, “Thessalonians Honor Romans,” (Th.D. thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 1984), 299. Hendrix argues that it is not clear from the text that “no priest of Julius is cited in the inscription” even if Julius honored as a god.

^[26]The political, religious and economic power of the emperor were maintained by the temple and priesthood (“priest and agonothete of the Emperor Augustus ‘son of god’ [Edson, “Macedonia”]); by the divine title “Augustus”; by the image of his head on the coins that were minted with the name of the city of Thessalonica (Edson, “Macedonica,” 132-33. Hendrix, “Thessalonians,” 294).

^[27] See photos of coins in Price, *Rituals*, 198-99: “Sacrifice before imperial temple, Ephesus. See pp. 214-15, 256-7,” “Head of Augustus in temple, Teos. See pp. 181, 259,” “Imperial temple. Side. See pp. 181-2, 272,” and “Crown of imperial priest with its seven imperial busts; beside it is an altar and wreath. See pp. 171.”



^[28] Edson, *Macedonica*, 132.

^[29] Claudius reigned from 41 to 54 C.E. following the imperial cult of Augustus, Tiberius (his nephew), and Caligula (his uncle).

^[30] Acts 18:2; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 5.25.4. Probably all Jews, both Christian and non-Christian, were banned under Claudius' command of 49 C.E.

^[31] The temple and altar of Claudius were built in Britain after the death of the emperor.

team. Secondly, there were the authorities, the basic tool of persecutions. Thirdly, behind all this stood Satan who interfered with Paul's attempts to distribute and protect the truth of the gospel (1 Thess 2:18; 2 Thess 2:1-12).

Jews. Jews initiated the persecution of the churches in Judea, as well as in Philippi, and then of Paul in Thessalonica (Acts 17). Following their strategy, they "stirred up the Gentiles, and poisoned their minds against the brothers" (Acts 14:2); they stirred up the local authorities against the Christian community and made the life of Thessalonian believers difficult. But Paul recognized that the situation in Thessalonica was similar to the one in Judea: "You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews" (1 Thess 2:14).

The Jews interfered with Paul's spreading of the gospel, provoking the authorities to persecute the apostles and other believers. They initiated persecutions in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-11), Berea (17:13-15), and Corinth (18:12-17). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul does not identify the believers' oppressors. They could have been the same Jews who pursued Paul, or they may have been authorities who directly carried out persecutions themselves. They also could have been pagans, but neither Paul nor Luke mentions this. In 1 Thess 2:15, Paul specifies that the Thessalonian church suffers also from their countrymen, as well as from the Jews (Ἰουδαίων). It is likely that Paul meant Jews in that they killed the Lord, expelled prophets and the apostles, and interfered with the spread of the gospel to pagans. Believers also experienced this in Thessalonica. Jewish adherents pursued Jason and the brothers and Paul. They interfered with preaching the gospel to pagans, and they oppressed con-

verts. However, this does not mean that Paul is anti-Semitic, but simply that Paul spoke against concrete groups of Jews who opposed the gospel.

Rome. The local opposition charged Paul and his team on two connected points: a violation of the laws of Caesar and the proclamation of another king, Jesus: "καὶ οὗτοι πάντες ἀπέναντι τῶν δογμάτων Καίσαρος πράσσουν βασιλέα ἕτερον λέγοντες εἶναι Ἰησοῦν" (Act 17:7). This accusation and its meaning are better understood in light of the imperial cult, and in light of the whole paradigm of imperial propaganda that was spread in Thessalonica.

Satan. According to 1 Thess 2:18, Thessalonica became a place where Paul could not freely stay because of an obstacle from Satan (καὶ ἐνέκοψεν ἡμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς). With the supporting text, it is difficult to identify with sufficient confidence what exactly constituted Satan's obstacle (ἐγκόπτω). Though there is a general consensus among commentators, we cannot know with accuracy what this obstacle was. Some possibilities, nevertheless, have been offered. 1) It is Paul's illness which did not allow him to come, that is, "the thorn in the flesh" from a messenger of Satan (2 Cor 12:7), but the pronoun «we» in 1 Thess 2:18 obviously included Timothy and Silas and this could not have been an obstacle for «us.» Timothy nevertheless had been sent (1 Thess 3:1). 2) It is the bond that Jason and his friends posted as a guarantee to the rulers of the city that Paul and his team would not come back to the city (Acts 17:9). However, we do not have additional confirmation of this idea. 3) It is an attempt to destroy Paul's work, which is expressed in the fact that Satan has prevented him from returning to Thessalonica because of existing opposition. This is the

most convincing variant from the possibilities listed since it corresponds to the data from the literary and historical context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the message that Paul proclaimed in Macedonia was considered anti-imperial, even though Paul used traditional language for the proclamation of the gospel. This leads to two reflections in relation to government and church.

Paul's mission in Macedonia is interpreted as a malevolent, politically dangerous activity. And though the language of the gospel sounds provocative, evangelism is not a danger to Caesar or to the state. Likewise, the modern tension between church and state may be due to rumors and incorrect interpretation of the missionary activity of the church by its ill-wishers. It results in two conclusions in relation to the political/state system and the church.

Church. Accordingly, Paul, Peter and Luke showed that the responsibility of the Christian is to live in accordance with the laws of nations. The church should not provoke the government with wrong motives (note that it is not Paul, but Paul's opponents, who provoked the government against Christians and against Paul's mission). Anti-political language could be understood as a reaction against Paul in Macedonia. Jesus disappointed many ad-

herents of the law who were set against Roman occupation and were ready to perform military operations against Rome. Thomas Wright in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* shows that the true enemy is not Rome, but self-motivated (that is, not called by God) leaders and Satan, and true victory is the victory over sin and death for those who will believe in Jesus.^[32] It seems likely that this was the subject of the preaching of Paul in Macedonia.

Government. The church and its active leaders must understand that political, economic and other levers of pressure used by the state on the church and on its activities are frequently an indirect oppression of evangelical activity. The government does not have to mistake Christianity and mission as being a threat to the political system. The fact of the greater priority of the Kingdom of God does not mean that it replaces the present political system (which is often incomplete and sometimes anti-God).^[33] The government also does not need to compare Christianity's political motives with those of other fanatic religious systems (for example, first century groups such as the Zealots and Pharisees from the Shammai School; or like terrorists in later centuries). The opponents of Christianity could easily reinterpret Christian mission and the gospel in this manner.

^[32] N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 451-54.

^[33] 1 Pet 2:13-16; Rom 13:1-7.

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