

A Study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians (NIV 1984)

“To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
(1 Thess. 1:1b and 2 Thess. 1:1b)

1 THESSALONIANS 5:19-22

1) Note v.19. Do not do what?

“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire” focuses particularly on the Spirit’s role in inspiring the prophet. Paul’s expression is literally, “Do not quench the Spirit,” by implication comparing the Spirit’s work to a fire that could be doused with water. That Paul has the Spirit’s work in prophecy in mind is made clear with next command given in verse 20.

2) Note v.20. Do not treat prophecies with what?

“Do not treat...with contempt” implies disdain or utter rejection. To ignore or disobey God’s inspired instruction would be most perilous for this young congregation.

3) Note v.21. Test what?

“Test” here implies in particular a test to prove genuineness. How prophecies are to be tested is something that Paul does not articulate here. Paul apparently assumes the Thessalonians have already been instructed in this matter. But we can infer that the test would involve at least a comparison of the prophecy’s content to what the readers had already received in the Gospel (cf. Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-27; Mark 13:5-6, 21-23; Luke 17:23; 21:8-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-3, 10; 14:29; 1 John 4:1-3). Paul’s own “test” in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 of a supposed prophecy about the Lord’s return having already occurred is of this kind, based on the affirmation that Christ’s return will mean the end of every manifestation of evil. The results of the test the Thessalonians are to make are expressed in the two commands that follow (v.21b and b.22).

4) Note vv.21-22. Hold on to what? Avoid what?

“hold on” – literally, “hold fast to”

“avoid” – literally, “hold away”

As if to underline the importance of the negative command, Paul adds the phrase “every kind,” subtly suggesting the broad range of threats to the believers’ faith.

The exercises of the gift of prophecy are a distinguishing feature of the early church. Acts identifies prophecy as the consequence of the pouring out of the Spirit promised to Joel (Acts 2:17-18) and draws attention to the exercise of the prophetic gift at critical points in the church’s development (Acts 11:27-30; 13:1-3; 15:32; 21:8-14). Paul indicates that prophecy is the most crucial gift to be exercised for the edification of the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 14:1-4, 39), though the gift is partial and temporary (1 Corinthians 13:8-12). In Ephesians, Paul links prophets to apostles as the “foundation” of the church (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 4:11).

For Paul and other New Testament writers, “prophecy” refers to speech which has been directly inspired by God. Though it could involve prediction of the future, any divinely-inspired message could be called prophecy. The explicit examples of prophecy in Acts all involve specific, practical instructions or warnings to the church at a particular place and time (see references previously cited). Paul’s discussion of prophecy probably includes such “occasional” oracles, but his statements that prophets stand at the church’s foundation and that the mystery of Christ has been revealed to them (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5) indicates that Christian prophets delivered doctrinal as well as practical messages.

At this point controversy arises as to the modern relevance of Christian prophecy. Should Christians expect to prophesy today as did the first-century A.D. prophets? If so, should they expect to receive additional doctrinal revelation? Despite the attempts of some exegetes to limit early Christian prophecy to non-doctrinal, or occasional matters only, the use of “prophet” in Ephesians almost certainly indicates that the gift involved some revelation. But if doctrinal revelation is seen as continuing in every generation of the church, Paul’s statement about the foundations is clearly compromised. The central concept of the Gospel, that in Jesus Christ the purpose of God in history has been uniquely and fully accomplished, carries with it the implication that the message of Christ, revealed to those first “apostles and prophets” closely associated with Christ’s appearance in history, is likewise unique and full.

It appears therefore that Paul’s statement that prophecy would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8-10) has in fact been fulfilled with the close of the apostolic age. Pentacostals and Charismatics may argue the point with “cessationists,” but the foundational, apostolic and prophetic deposit must in no way be obscured by any exercise of modern-day “prophecy,” whether genuine or otherwise.

These verses briefly remind the Thessalonian Christians of the imperatives for the proper exercise of the gift. They stress, on the one hand, that prophecy be exercised fully and accepted readily. Certainly this gift would have been important for a young church still digesting the basics of the Gospel message. But at the same time Paul cautions against merely accepting any utterances claiming to be prophetic as a genuine message of God. Some scholars suggest that the Thessalonian Christians may have easily confused genuine Spirit-inspired utterances with the claims to divine enlightenment in the Dionysian revels. Whether this is the case or not, a credulous church should not easily have been deceived by a false claim to prophetic inspiration. In fact such a thing appears to underlie Paul’s discussion in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12,

In place of naïve acceptance of everything claiming to be prophecy, Paul calls for the testing of prophecy. In this respect his words are no less applicable today, even among Christians who do not believe that gift of prophecy still operates in the church as it did then. The need to test all kinds of ideas from all kinds of sources (including claims to modern-day miraculous gifts of the Spirit) is just as necessary now as it was then, and the stakes are just as serious. And the standard by which the test is made, now as then, can be nothing other than the apostolic Gospel, delivered to us through the New Testament itself.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-28

Paul's letters generally end with a combination of the elements seen in these verses: a benediction or prayer for God's blessing, a request for prayer for himself, a word of greeting, instructions about the reading of the letter, and a pronouncement of blessing. Though such conclusions are loosely structured and contain stock elements, they nevertheless express the close relationship which Paul has with the churches and his confidence in God's protection and blessing for them and him while they are separated.

1) Note v.23. Paul identifies God as the God of what? What does Paul want God to do for them "through and through?"

2) Note v.23. What three does Paul want to be kept blameless? When?

Paul's prayer highlights the connection between God's peace and His work in making His people holy. For Paul this was apparently a significant connection: to be at peace with God and others could come only through holiness. Holiness is, of course, already an attribute of the readers, as they have been made God's people through Christ (1 Thessalonians 3:13). It is also their ongoing responsibility to live in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, 7). Here, then, is the final assurance that God will indeed bring to completion the work which He began at their conversion and continues as they live their lives as Christians. Paul stresses this idea with adverb translated "through and through," a compound word which emphasizes the utter completion of the process.

God's work in both removing the penalty of sin, complete at conversion, and its power in the Christian's life, and ongoing process of growth, will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of His purpose, the elimination of every aspect of sin and its effects from His people. Regardless of the circumstances faced by the Thessalonians, they can be assured that God's love and power will not fail them in this regard.

3) Note v.24. Who is faithful? What will He do?

Reiterating the focus on God's preserving work, Paul points to the nature of God as the final source of assurance. God's faithfulness is a basic assumption of everything that the Gospel teaches; He is true to His promises and utterly able to fulfill them. By focusing on the believers' call from God, Paul reminds them of their ongoing relationship with God and the fact that the relationship is established by His power.

4) Note v.25. What is Paul's request of the Thessalonians?

5) Note v.26. Greet whom? With what?

Brotherhood expressed to God in prayer for others is also to be expressed to one another directly. The significance of the kiss in the Greco-Roman world is not directly clear; it appears to have been practiced more widely and openly in some circles than in others. What is clear is that outside the New Testament, we have no examples of ethical teachers who specifically commanded or encouraged the people of a community to greet one another with a kiss. It may well be, then, this repeated New Testament command (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14) attests to an innovative and striking practice among early Christians, one that expressed a bond that stretches beyond the usual social boundaries. There is evidence to suggest that the kiss was a regular part of Christian worship, incorporated into the observance of the Lord's Supper, at least as early as the second century A.D. and perhaps before. Since "brothers" (generally including

“sisters” also) are particularly those to be greeted, it appears that Paul uses the modifier “holy” to indicate that the kiss expresses the mutual relationship of believers as those who belong to God.

In modern western culture the kiss may not be an appropriate means of expressing Christian fellowship as it is generally confined to family or sexual relationships. One man said, “What is important is that the members of the church should have some way of expressing visibly and concretely the love which they have for one another as fellow members of the body of Christ. The manner of expression may vary in different cultures; but it doubtful whether doing nothing at all, as modern western Christians tend to do, really fulfills the spirit of the injunction.”

6) Note v.27. Paul charges them before Whom? He charges them to have what done?

7) Note v.28. What did Paul want to be with them?

Compare 1 Thessalonians 1:1 with 1 Thessalonians 5:28. Any thoughts on how important “grace” was to Paul?