

THE WEAK IN THESSALONICA: A STUDY IN PAULINE LEXICOGRAPHY

David Alan Black*

Like other expressions important in the anthropological sphere, the concept of weakness is particularly at home in the religious terminology of the apostle Paul. Indeed, one may even speak of Paul as "the apostle of weakness." The title is justified inasmuch as the Pauline identification of weakness and apostleship is the foundation of the Christian concept of weakness. All the essential points of the NT doctrine of weakness are reproduced in the Pauline writings, though Paul takes us a stage further by his explicit identification of Christ and weakness, which gives to the primitive Christian idea a distinct Christological meaning. This development of the theology of weakness, if one can call it that, is characteristically Pauline.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Pauline concept and understanding of weakness is most extensively developed in his three longest doctrinal letters: Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. These epistles from the middle period of Paul's apostolic career have an unquestioned authenticity and chronological relationship firmly established by internal references to the collection for the poor. Within these letters Paul's thinking seems to evolve in direct relationship to historical events. Of the major events in Paul's career, certainly the opposition of his enemies (whoever they may have been) played a sizable role in this evolution. Especially 1 and 2 Corinthians suggest that only when Paul's active career brought him into contact with these opponents did he demonstrate with any specificity what he understood weakness to mean. Thereby the idea moved from the circumference to the center of his thinking, a phenomenon most clearly seen in the "Narrenrede" of 2 Corinthians 10-13, where from a purely lexical view we have the most frequent occurrence of the terms for weakness in the NT.

While it is true, however, that Romans and the Corinthian letters embody the most fertile soil of knowledge concerning the apostle's unique perception of weakness and its implications for Christian living, occurrences of the word-family in his other letters constitute an additional and equally valuable source for our understanding of the motif. It is therefore all the more surprising that the Pauline weakness vocabulary has received virtually no intensive or comprehensive study outside of his *Hauptbriefe*.¹ The purpose of this essay is to examine one of these

*David Black is a doctoral candidate in NT at the University of Basel in Switzerland.

¹Among the more important studies of the meaning of *astheneia*, etc., in Paul are those of M. Rauer, *Die "Schwachen" in Korinth und Rom* (BibS[F] 21; Freiburg: Herder, 1923); G. Theissen, "Die Starken und Schwachen in Korinth," *EvT* 35 (1975) 155-172; E. Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr* (FRLANT 90; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966) 142-170. The most thorough and complete investigations of the words at the height of their development (2 Corinthians 10-13) are by E. Käsemann, *Die Legitimität des Apostels: Eine Untersuchung zu II Korinther 10-13* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956) 37-43; E. Fuchs, "La faiblesse gloire de l'apostolat selon Paul (Etude

The triadic structure of these exhortations suggests that Paul is treating in turn five principal subjects in the span of ten short verses: (1) the church's responsibility to its spiritual leaders (12-13); (2) the church's responsibility to its needy members (14a-c); (3) the church's responsibility to all men (14d-15); (4) the church's spiritual privileges (16-18); (5) the church's spiritual responsibilities (gifts) (19-22).

Out of this extended passage several questions arise that bear on our study of the Pauline weakness terminology. The first question, of course, concerns the exact definition of the word *tōn asthenōn*: What does Paul mean by "the weak"? The Greek words taken by themselves yield little help in answering the question. Therefore we are forced to broaden our investigation to include the context in which the words are found (vv 12-22). One is immediately curious as to why the command to help the weak is included at this point and in what connection it stands in relation to the other formulae that immediately precede and follow. It is obvious that before we can answer the question of the specific meaning of *tōn asthenōn* a beginning at least must be made in ascertaining the position of the words within the context of vv 12-22. Finally there remains the broader question of the position of these verses within the argument of the epistle as a whole. Thus the difficulty of ascertaining the exact identity of "the weak" in 5:14 is compounded by other questions regarding the context, both near and remote, in which the words appear. These are difficult questions, but an answer to each can at least be suggested. It will be helpful if we discuss these questions by working from the general to the specific.

1. *The Place of 5:12-22 Within 1 Thessalonians.* The first question we must raise is that of the relation of the injunctions in 5:12-22 to the rest of the letter. Are these various phrases a cluster of unrelated ethical exhortations, or do these exhortations and commands have immediate relevance to the specific situation in Thessalonica?

In view of their wide applicability, many scholars view these various phrases as simple, general exhortations. Thus these admonitions are described as "general principles of Christian ethics,"³ or "eine Reihe allgemeiner Ermahnungen,"⁴ or simply as "Selbstverständlichkeiten."⁵ One author⁶ gives the division 5:12-22 the heading: "Shotgun Paraenesis (Random Instruction)," while another⁷ emphasizes its "general character." E. Lohse no doubt summarizes the thinking of many when he writes (referring to the exhortations in 1 Thess 4:1-12; 5:13-22; Romans 12-13): "In diesen Abschnitten werden nicht Weisungen erteilt, die durch bestimmte Vorfälle oder Anfragen der Gemeinde ausgelöst sind, sondern es wird traditionelles Gut entfaltet, um der Gemeinde zu zeigen, was ständig gilt und wie sie

³F. F. Bruce, "St. Paul in Macedonia: 2. The Thessalonian Correspondence," *BJRL* 62 (1980) 335.

⁴W. Marxsen, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (3d ed.; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1964) 33.

⁵W. Marxsen, "Auslegung von 1 Thess 4, 13-18," *ZTK* 66 (1969) 25n. Indeed Marxsen maintains that "erst im 2 Thess liegen konkrete Ermahnungen vor."

⁶C. J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 41.

⁷D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979) 580.

sich verhalten hat.”⁸ If this is true, then these verses contain only “general truths” and as such have little or no direct applicability to the Thessalonian community. Support for this view is adduced from both the catechetical nature of the admonitions as well as the similarity between these verses and the broad, comprehensive exhortations found in the paraenetic portion of Romans (esp. chap. 12).

While it may be true, however, that these verses contain only “general exhortations,” perhaps Paul is less arbitrary at this point than most scholars will allow. Paul’s usual concern in his ethical teaching is to be both concrete and specific. V. P. Furnish, referring to such Pauline admonitions as are found in 1 Thess 5:12-22, writes:

There is a sense in which such exhortations may be classified as “basic principles” or described as “general truths,” but this does not mean that the Pauline ethic is devoid of specific content. On the one hand, these “general” exhortations are themselves directed to concrete situations and problems in Christian congregations. And on the other hand, they stand side-by-side with other Pauline admonitions—which are quite specific.⁹

This means that although paraenetic sections in Paul can appear to lack specific relevance, general admonitions may be tailored by Paul to fit particular needs and thus may refer to specific and concrete situations. Admittedly Paul normally deals with the major, pressing needs of a congregation in greater detail. Thus “we cannot . . . draw a full portrait of life in the Thessalonian community”¹⁰ from these phrases in 5:12-22. However, since many of these injunctions can easily be associated with particular situations within the community itself (see below), there is no reason not to seek to define these associations to the greatest degree possible. If this can be accomplished, it follows that their lack of relation to the rest of the letter is only apparent.

At this point we may briefly consider the argument based on the close similarity between this passage and paraenetic sections in Romans, an affinity that is used to advocate that Paul intends in 1 Thess 5:12-22 only to pass on traditional matter. Best,¹¹ for instance, notes the similarities between these verses and Rom 12:9-13 and seeks to draw a parallel between the (apparently) unrelated injunctions of Romans and the exhortations here. Despite the remarkable similarities between these two passages, however, the comparison of these verses to Rom 12:9-13 actually proves nothing, for even if Paul wrote a series of unconnected exhortations in Romans¹² this is no argument that he must have done so here. And

⁸E. Lohse, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments* (3d ed.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1979) 27.

⁹V. P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 72-73. R. Bultmann (“Allgemeine Wahrheiten und christliche Verkündigung,” *ZTK* 54 [1957] 253) writes: “Es ist nach allem verständlich, dass allgemeine Wahrheiten, sofern sie in der konkreten Situation als Anrede begegnen, ihren notwendigen Platz . . . haben.”

¹⁰E. Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Black, 1972) 237.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

¹²That Paul’s exhortations in Romans should be regarded as relating to particular issues in Rome is argued most recently by W. S. Campbell, “Romans III as a Key to the Situation and Thought of the Letter,” *NovT* 23 (1981) 22 ff., esp. 37-40.

even if he did employ traditional material in 1 Thessalonians it can still be maintained that he molds it to the epistolary situation and applies it to the addressees.

We conclude, then, that there are no *a priori* reasons why Paul could not have been addressing specific issues in 5:12-22. But are there any positive indications that the passage in fact is related to the rest of the letter? We suggest that one such indication is the concern of 5:12-13, which resembles the concern of 4:9-10. Another and weightier indication is the subject matter of 5:14. The first two groups mentioned—the idle and the faint-hearted—can be identified with a good degree of certainty as belonging to the Thessalonian community. “Idle” can easily refer to the unemployed brethren who are admonished in 4:11-12, while “faint-hearted” is a fitting description of the grieving saints in 4:13-18. Finally, the injunctions in 5:19-20 clearly refer to those in the church who despise prophecy and seek to regulate or suppress the activity of the Holy Spirit. Thus there is ample material in the letter itself to justify this relationship. Taken together, these considerations suggest that the admonitions in 5:12-22 are to be understood in relation to the whole of the letter and especially in relation to the paraenetic section that begins in 4:1. Therefore in this study our working hypothesis will be that the statement “help the weak” should become understandable when proper attention is paid to the immediate background of the letter, and that the total sense of 5:14 is probably best explained as a resumption of what was discussed *in extenso* earlier in the epistle.

2. *The Relation of 5:14 to Its Context.* Granted that in these verses Paul may be referring to relevant issues within the Thessalonian community, it is now incumbent on us to seek to define that relationship as specifically as possible. This section does not purport to be an exhaustive exegesis of 5:12-22, and we limit our discussion to those issues in these verses that are of crucial import to our understanding of *asthenēs* in 5:14. As mentioned earlier the general flow of thought in 5:12-22 can be divided into five parts, which we now proceed to discuss in order.

(a) 5:12-13: The church’s responsibility to its spiritual leaders. Verses 12-13 refer to the responsible leaders of the congregation who have the position and authority to deal with church life in the Thessalonian community. They are those who labor at a specific duty. Members are requested to fulfill two obligations (*eidenai* and *hēgeisthai*) and are commanded to fulfill a third (*eirēneute*) in relation to these leaders. This is to be carried out in an attitude of love and with the highest good of the church in mind.

One difficulty here is determining what type of ministry is in view. It would seem at this early stage in the development of the church that a semi-structured leadership as it is referred to later in the NT was unknown. However, Leon Morris¹³ aptly notes that the first Christian communities were in all probability organized on the model of the Jewish synagogue. If so, this would imply that the church in Thessalonica had a group of elders who exercised a degree of oversight in the congregation. Furthermore, we know from the Lukan account of Paul’s missionary activity that Paul appointed elders “in every church” (Acts 14:23).

¹³L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 164.

There is no reason to doubt that this practice existed from the very beginning and included the Christian communities in Macedonia.¹⁴ Finally, from a purely practical point of view it is hardly conceivable that a group of Christians who gathered regularly for public worship and service could continue for long without some type of leadership and structure, no matter how rudimentary. It is therefore, we think, incontestable that

there was from the beginning in Paul's churches as well as among his missionary colleagues, a class of persons who by virtue of their work were entitled to esteem, and some at least to financial support. Such a group must have been *ipso facto* visible and distinguishable from the congregation.¹⁵

We may assume, then, that suitable members of the Thessalonian congregation had been appointed by Paul to exercise oversight in the church and to serve as spiritual guides and teachers. In this light the language of vv 12-13 presents itself conveniently as a description of the congregations's responsibility to those who were designated as its leaders.

These newly appointed leaders are described in v 12 as *tous kopiōntas kai proistamenous kai nouthetountas*. The Greek construction plainly indicates that this is one group of leaders that exercises a triple function and not three different groups. These leaders are those who toil (*kopian*) continuously in the service of the church by exercising leadership (*proistenai*) in the practical affairs of the congregation and by admonishing (*nouthetein*) its members in the ways of the Lord.¹⁶

Not without significance for our study is the fact that these three designations are appropriate to the actual situation of the letter's recipients. The leaders are first designated as "the laborers" who have the responsibility of correcting "the idlers," an obvious reference to the discussion in 4:9-12. The fact that they are "leaders in the Lord" emphasizes that they act in the interest of Christ and for the good of the entire community, not for self-gain (against the idlers' accusations to the contrary). That they can "warn" the brethren calls attention to the fact that they have every right to admonish the idlers and that the idlers in turn must heed their warnings.

Therefore Paul beseeches the Thessalonians to respect and to esteem highly their leaders, and he commands them to seek peace among themselves. This must be accompanied by Christian love so that the building up of the church is unhindered by a wrong spirit. Since disobedience to the leaders of the church is in reality disobedience to Christ, the head of the church, the Thessalonians are urged to hold their leaders in high regard. The last injunction, "be at peace," which may be an allusion to Jesus' teaching (cf. Mark 9:50), is shown by *heautois* to be co-binding on the members and leaders of the church since both groups have the responsibility of seeking mutual harmony.

(b) 5:14c: The church's responsibility to its needy members. In this section

¹⁴F. F. Bruce notes that, though often contrary to modern missionary methods, Paul's consciousness of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in his ministry enabled him to appoint as elders men who had been only recently converted to Christianity (*The Acts of the Apostles* [London: Tyndale, 1953] 296).

¹⁵E. E. Ellis, "Paul and His Co-Workers," *NTS* 17 (1970-71) 444. Bruce, "St. Paul" 340, agrees.

¹⁶With Frame (*Thessalonians* 192) and Morris (*Thessalonians* 166) we take the participles *proistamenous* and *nouthetountas* to be further descriptions of the initial participle *kopiōntas*.

we have three brief imperatives that represent the duty of the church in relation to the idle, the faint-hearted and the weak in the community. The precise meaning of these three clauses will be discussed in detail after a look at the admonitions that follow them in 14d-22.

(c) 5:14d-15: The church's responsibility to all men. It is difficult to decide whether the final clause of v 14 belongs to the group of injunctions that precedes it or that follows it. The fact that the clause is included in v 14 in our modern translations is not in itself an argument for the former view. While it is possible that the injunction can be regarded as a general summation of the three preceding commands,¹⁷ in light of the triadic structure in this section the admonition probably belongs with the two following commands concerning (a) the amelioration of the *lex talionis* of the OT, and (b) the expression of Christian love in good behavior. If this division is correct, it is easy to see the more general admonition ("be patient with all men") being defined explicitly by the admonitions that follow: long-suffering involves (negatively) the refusal of paying back evil for evil and (positively) the pursuit of goodness in all areas of life.

It is not hard to see the applicability of these admonitions to the community. With idle, faint-hearted and weak Christians comprising a segment of the membership, it was only too easy for the Thessalonians to become impatient or want to retaliate when wronged. It is especially in such circumstances that love and patience must be expressed, writes Paul, because only by restraint and persistent kindness can the peace of the community and an effective testimony to the world be maintained.

(d, e) 5:16-22: The church's spiritual privileges and responsibilities. In 5:16 Paul turns without any formal transition from the specific needs of the church to the needs of the community as a whole, first in reference to the Christian life in general (vv 16-18) and then in reference to manifestations of the Spirit-filled life within the church (vv 19-22). In every circumstance of life, including the troubling experiences within the church and the difficulties of persecution from non-Christians, the Thessalonians are enjoined to constant joy, prayer and thanksgiving (vv 16-18a). This proper inner attitude is fully in keeping with God's desire for the Christian as it is revealed in Christ (v 18b).

In vv 19-22 the reference shifts to the special *charismata* in the church—the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The first two imperatives are directed toward those who may have tended to de-emphasize the use of certain gifts in the church, especially prophetic revelations or other particularly ecstatic gifts. The Spirit is conceived here metaphorically as a fire in danger of being put out by those who suppress the gifts. The church, says Paul, must stop trying to extinguish this flame, nor must it any longer despise or suppress activities of Christian prophets who bring the word of God.

The final three imperatives are given to counterbalance what Paul had just commanded. Because mere enthusiasm cannot necessarily be equated with genuine Spirit-worked activity, the Thessalonians are to test all the *charismata*, holding fast to what is good while rejecting every kind of evil manifestation. With these injunctions Paul has completed his paraenesis and moves on to conclude

¹⁷So e.g. Best, *Thessalonians* 233.

the letter with a prayer (vv 23-24), three requests (vv 25-27) and a benediction (v 28).

Three conclusions follow from the examination of the text of 1 Thess 5:12-22. First, the overall structure of the passage reveals that these seventeen brief exhortations are not as unrelated to each other or to the rest of the letter as a casual reading of the text might suggest. It is not difficult to regard vv 12-22 as a resumption of the paraenesis that began in 4:1, nor is it difficult to envisage a development from the first series of injunctions in vv 12-15, where Paul's concern is with Christian behavior, to the last series (vv 16-22), where the inner life of the Christian is in view.

Second, if our subdivision of these verses is correct the clauses in 14a-c (of which *antechesthe tōn asthenōn* is one) can be understood as a bridge between the injunctions to the community concerning its leaders in vv 12-13 and those regarding all men in vv 14d-15. Thus the church is admonished first about its responsibilities as a Christian community, both to its leaders and to its needy members, before Paul brings up its responsibilities to those outside of the congregation. In this way we can account for not only the statement "help the weak" but also the two preceding admonitions to warn the idle and encourage the faint-hearted.

Finally, it is evident that Paul's concern in these verses is not merely to list traditional paraenetic material but to discuss (though briefly) serious matters that have come to his attention and that are directly relevant to the situation in Thessalonica. Though Paul's tone in this passage is one of gentle appeal rather than forceful command, we should not conclude from this that the apostle had nothing of a serious nature to impress on his hearers. Paul's tone is brotherly, but it is also "big-brotherly," to borrow Morris' expression.¹⁸ In light of the above discussion it is better to conclude that Paul considered a proper relationship to the idle, faint-hearted and weak in the church of paramount importance for the overall health of the Thessalonian community. Consequently the exhortations given here can be considered decisive reminders of central concerns that Paul occasionally alludes to or develops elsewhere in the letter and as such have specific applicability.

3. *The Meaning of the Adjective asthenēs Within the Context of 5:14.* No evaluation of *tōn asthenōn* in this passage would be adequate without a consideration of two preliminary matters. The first question concerns the identity of the *adelphoi* to whom these admonitions are being directed. Does Paul at this juncture "vertit suum sermonem ad doctores" (Theod. Mops.), or does he address the entire congregation?

Some commentators (notably G. Friedrich and Masson) see Paul addressing only the leaders in v. 14. According to this interpretation the verb *nouthetein*, which is found in vv 12, 14, is considered to be the sole responsibility of the leaders who are described in v 12 as *hoi nouthetountes*. Masson¹⁹ says further that it hardly makes sense that the apostle, after calling the church to respect its leaders

¹⁸Morris, *Thessalonians* 166.

¹⁹C. Masson, *Les Deux Epîtres de Saint Paul aux Thessaloniens* (CNT 11a; Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1957) 73.

and their duties, should now turn to the entire congregation and tell them: "You do the work of the ministry." These scholars also point out that the entire passage seems to have a ring of authority to it such as only the church leaders are assumed to possess.

While it is true, however, that the leaders of the church are described as "admonishers," in Pauline thought this fact in no way exempts the community as a whole from participating in mutual exhortation and admonition (cf. 5:11). Furthermore the *adelphoi* who fulfill the duties of v 14 can easily be said to include the leaders of the community. Perhaps the most forceful objection, though, is the repetition of *adelphoi* in v 14. In the paraenetic section of 1 Thessalonians (4:1-5:22), each time the term *adelphoi* is expressed (4:1, 10, 13; 5:1, 12, 25) the entire congregation is being addressed. The occurrence of *adelphoi* in 5:14 would be the only exception to this usage. In all probability, it is precisely because it appears that these injunctions were the responsibility of the leaders alone that *adelphoi* is repeated. The word serves to clarify that the following injunctions, like the preceding ones, are given to all and not only to the church elders. Their responsibilities include admonition, but not to the exclusion of lay participation. The verdict therefore must be given with most commentators that these injunctions are being directed to all church members and not only to their leaders.

The second question concerns the identification of the phrases "the idle" and "the faint-hearted," which precede the phrase "the weak." These three ascriptions can be considered as particular references to three sections in the Thessalonian church. The first two groups, as suggested earlier, can easily be identified with the unemployed and the disheartened who are addressed in 4:9-12 and 4:13-18 respectively. These groups are not to be considered "parties," and Paul makes no conscious attempt to distinguish them in his paraenesis from the *adelphoi*. However, since all the members of the church could hardly have been the type of people involved in idleness and disorderly conduct or could have been inordinately anxious about the death of Christians, it is likely that we have to do with sections of the community, all three of which may have been sizable.

The first group, *hoi ataktoi*,²⁰ is the subject of Paul's admonitions in 4:9-12, where the theme is brotherly love. Waiting for the end, these Christians live in idleness and have abandoned their normal responsibilities. Ironically, it appears that the presumption of an imminent return of Christ, which Paul himself believed and taught,²¹ led to an un-Pauline eschatological "super-enthusiasm" resulting in a neglect of worldly duties.

Paul's reproof of these Christians is as interesting as it is instructive. Begin-

²⁰The adjective *ataktoi* means not only "idle" but also "disorderly" and thus designates "den Menschen als den, der sich ausserhalb der notwendigen und gegebenen Ordnung stellt" (G. Dellling, "*tassō*, etc.," *TWNT* 8 [1969] 49). C. Spicq (*Notes de Lexicographie Néo-Testamentaire* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978], 1. 159) agrees: "Les Thessaloniens *ataktoi* s'émancipent à l'égard d'une règle de la vie communautaire."

²¹C. L. Mearns ("Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of I and II Thessalonians," *NTS* 27 [1981] 137-157, esp. 146-148), however, has recently argued that the Thessalonians did not expect the second coming at the time of Paul's writing of 1 Thessalonians and thus that this could not have been their motive for giving up their work. According to Mearns it was not until Paul had instructed them of the imminent return of Christ in 1 Thessalonians that he could accuse them of more than laziness (cf. 2 Thess 3:6-15). Mearns' suggestion is not plausible and is made less so by the fact that the nearness of the *parousia* is already implicit throughout the first letter (cf. esp. 1:10; 3:13; 5:1-11, 23).

ning with a word of praise for the brotherly love (*hē philadelphia*) of the Thessalonians, he moves almost imperceptibly from this general statement on love (vv 9-10a) to its application in a particular situation (vv 10b-12). True brotherly love, writes Paul, is seen on the one hand when a man works in order to support himself and his dependents. On the other hand, for a brother to be guilty of idleness and to sponge off his fellow Christians is an appalling denial of the *philadelphia* that should be mutually enjoyed in the community. Furthermore a Christian who is dependent on the support of others, yet who could support himself, is a poor testimony of the gospel and brings dishonor on the church. Therefore since a parasitic life only takes advantage of a brother's love and is a scandal to Christianity, the *ataktōi* must return to their occupations.

In the prolonged homily on the second advent in 4:13-18 the second group of Thessalonians, who may be described as *oligopsychoi*,²² comes to the fore. In this passage Paul speaks of the events of the end time, when Jesus Christ will return, the dead will rise, and the living will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. It is obvious that Paul's primary concern in these verses is not theological but to deal with the anxiety of those Thessalonian Christians who have recently lost friends or loved ones. The theological content found here has the sole purpose of supporting the one end in view: "that you no longer grieve" (v 13). Paul writes that those who are anxious over the question as to whether the Christian dead would experience the *parousia* can be comforted by the knowledge that the first thing to occur is the resurrection of those who sleep in Jesus.

No one can say with certainty why these Thessalonians believed the Christian dead were going to miss the *parousia*. Evidently Paul had not been able to instruct them earlier that the resurrection of the Christian would coincide with the return of Jesus. Perhaps too the dead were considered unworthy to participate in the *parousia*.²³ The Thessalonians may have regarded death as unnatural and due only to sin and disobedience. The severe punishment of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) may have reinforced this view. Apparently the early Christians at first neither expected death for themselves nor accepted it as normal when it did occur among their number. So Paul states that the departed loved ones of those who sorrow are, in Christ, still worthy of the blessings of the end. In fact they will even be allowed to precede the survivors to meet the Lord in the air. Then all Christians will participate in the eschatological life with Christ. Paul therefore closes this section by stating that this certainty is cause for mutual encouragement: Those who through sorrow and doubting have become faint-hearted can now find consolation at the thought of the resurrection of the dead at the *parousia*.

Having suggested plausible interpretations for "the idle" and "the faint-hearted," we are now in a position to attempt an explanation of the significance of the words *tōn asthenōn*. From a purely linguistic point of view the translation "the sick" is possible, but the meaning of physical weakness is rendered unlikely in a context that emphasizes only spiritual matters. Many scholars have sought to interpret the terms in light of Paul's usage of *asthenēs* and cognate words in other letters. The most widely held view is that *tōn asthenōn* refers to either those who

²²See A. Dihle, "psychē, etc.," TWNT 9 (1973) 666-667.

²³A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (NovTSup 13; Leiden: Brill, 1966) 108-110.

are hesitant about matters concerning the eating of food offered to idols (cf. 1 Corinthians 8) or to Christians who adhere to vegetarianism and the strict observance of a religious calendar (cf. Rom 14:1-15:6).²⁴ However, not only does this interpretation overlook the fact that 1 Thessalonians itself can provide the clue that makes the definition of *asthenēs* possible, but also the text itself speaks against this identification. Nothing in the letter suggests that the Thessalonians had such difficulties with diet or holy days as the "weak in faith" in Corinth and Rome faced. Therefore we have to reject outright any interpretation that ignores the background and setting of 1 Thessalonians by jumping to (supposedly) parallel texts of Pauline letters.

Frame²⁵ suggests a completely different solution to the problem. He advocates that the weak are "those who are tempted to impurity" and that Paul treats this issue in detail in 4:3-8. While this view has the advantage of relating the designation in 5:14 to the broader context of the letter, its force is weakened by several difficulties. First, Frame's arrangement places Paul's discussion on "the weak" (4:3-8) before his treatment of "the idlers" (4:9-12) and "faint-hearted" (4:13-18). This would suggest the order: weak/idlers/faint-hearted. In 5:14, however, the appellation "the weak" is given the final position. If Paul were treating these subjects in order, it is more likely that he would have reiterated the terms in the same sequence. Another difficulty with the moral interpretation is that nowhere in Paul's discussion of 4:3-8 are the sexual offenders described, either explicitly or implicitly, as "weak." On the contrary they are portrayed as intentionally wrongdoing and taking advantage of others (v 6), burning with passionate, uncontrollable lust like the heathen (v 5), and willfully rejecting divine counsel (v 8). But perhaps the most forceful objection to Frame's position that may be offered is the word *antechesthai* itself, which means essentially to "devote oneself to," to "cleave to," and thus comes to mean "help," "assist."²⁶ We would normally expect Paul's language to be stronger toward this group than the verb *antechesthai*

²⁴Thus Best, *Thessalonians* 231; G. Stählin, "asthenēs, etc.," *TWNT* 1 (1933) 490. G. Wohlenberg (*Der erste und zweite Thessalonicherbrief* [Leipzig: Deichert, 1903] 113) compares the expression with Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, concluding that the weak are those "deren Glaube noch schwach war und deren Gewissen sich in die christliche Freiheit nur schwer zu finden wusste." He quotes with approval Grotius: "qui libertatem christianam nondum plane intelligunt." G. Friedrich (*Die Briefe an die Thessalonicher, in Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser, Philipper, Kolosser, Thessalonicher und Philemon* [NTD 8; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976] 248) takes basically the same position: "Wer die Schwachen sind, ist aus dem Text nicht zu entnehmen. Wahrscheinlich sind damit ganz allgemein die im Glauben Schwachen gemeint, die Paulus auch der Gemeinde in Rom ans Herz legt, damit sie sie in ihrer Gemeinschaft aufnimmt (Röm. 14,1.)." E. von Dobschütz (*Die Thessalonicher Briefe* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1974] 221) is less specific: "sittliche Schwache," as is also B. Rigaux (*Saint Paul: Les Epîtres aux Thessaloniens* [Paris: Lecoffre, 1956] 584): "faible dans la foi." Masson (*Thessaloniens* 74) alone is hesitant to go beyond what is known of the believers in Thessalonica, designating the weak as "des membres de l'Eglise qui ne sont pas capables de marcher seuls et ont toujours besoin d'appui."

²⁵Frame, *Thessalonians* 198.

²⁶H. Hanse, "echō, etc.," *TWNT* 2 (1935) 827; J. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955) 49. The verb (composed of *anti* "against" and *echesthai* "to hold oneself") is found only in the middle voice in the NT and means literally "to keep oneself directly opposite to anyone, hold firmly to him, cleave to him." The primary sense here is that of "keeping one's self directly opposite to another so as to sustain him" (M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 4. 49).

allows. Paul's command to "abstain from immorality" (4:3) clearly implies anti-nomian conduct among this company of Thessalonians. The apostle makes it plain that Christian liberty does not permit a man to defraud his brother.²⁷ If, as we can easily infer from the text, these Christians were actually engaged in various forms of sexual sins, it hardly seems likely that Paul would sound so lenient in 5:14. Those who are disobedient to God in sexual matters are always strongly reprobated by Paul, as in 4:6-8, and in other contexts the apostle can command the church to excommunicate the offender (e.g. 1 Cor 5:1-5). Therefore though one cannot be dogmatic on the point, it is nonetheless difficult to see Paul using a term like *antechesthai* to designate the attitude and action of the community toward the morally rebellious.

In our view it seems more natural in terms of the context of 4:1-5:22 to interpret the words *tōn asthenōn* as referring to those Thessalonians who were worried about the delay of the *parousia* and who consequently were in danger of giving up hope. Paul deals with the question of these anxious Christians in the second half of his discussion of eschatological topics (4:13-5:11)—that is, in 5:1-11. Whereas the problem in 4:13-18 concerned the fate of the dead, the topic of 5:1-11 is the concern of the Thessalonian Christians about the definite time of the promised arrival of Jesus. These believers are "weak" in that they have grown weary of waiting for the end and thus face the danger of being overcome by spiritual sleep.

This view commends itself for a number of reasons. First of all it relieves us of the difficulty of trying to interpret the words *tōn asthenōn* apart from what is known of the local situation in Thessalonica. Second, it has the advantage of fitting in nicely with the general structure of the paraenesis running through 4:9-5:11, which is comprised of three sections, each of which deals with a particular subject: (a) 4:9-12, the necessity of work as an expression of brotherly love; (b) 4:13-18, the fate of the Christian dead at the time of Jesus' coming; and (c) 5:1-11, the necessity of watchfulness in view of the uncertainty of the *parousia*. Third, it is in keeping with the movement of thought that is marked by the use of *peri de* ("now, about the subject of . . ."), found only at the beginning of each of these three sections. Thus in 4:9-5:11 Paul may well have had in mind three groups in the community who were in need of special attention and admonition, to whom he refers successively in 4:9-12, 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. Those who are idle Paul exhorts to go back to work and stop depending on the charity of fellow Christians. Those who are disheartened at the passing of loved ones Paul encourages with the news that the dead in Christ will precede the living into the heavenly kingdom. And those who are about to give up Paul admonishes to persevere in the faith and to prepare themselves for the imminent day of the Lord.

A number of exegetical and contextual points lends additional support to this interpretation, of which the following are the most important. First, the view is in keeping with the strongly eschatological tone of the letter: The community in Thessalonica was a church longing for the coming of the Lord. Perhaps this intense expectation of the *parousia* had led not only to idleness but also to a weakened, threatened faith. These newly converted Christians, who had expected an immediate *parousia* issuing in sudden glory, were now faced with its delay, and even the most alert members were in danger of compromising their vigilance.

²⁷Cf. H. Baltensweiler, "Erwägungen zu 1 Thess. 4, 3-8," *TZ* 19 (1963) 12.

Thus the expectation that the kingdom would soon break into the world may have left some unprepared to endure the severe adversity of the present life.

Second, the broader context of the letter itself lends to the words *tōn asthenōn* the sense of "weary" or "defeated." From what we know in the preceding chapters Paul had every reason to be anxious about the spiritual fortitude of the church in Thessalonica. Their faith was constantly undergoing great duress. They had given themselves without compromise to Christ, and immediately severe testing had come into their lives. It is even possible that some of the deceased for whom the Thessalonians were so anxious had fallen to persecution at the hands of nonbelievers.²⁸ The stress of life in the midst of such suffering must have been tremendous. Little wonder then that there were "weak" Christians among the members of the community.

Throughout the letter Paul is anxious to point out that the persecution of the Thessalonians was not abnormal but rather was to be expected as the credential that authenticated their reception of the word of God (2:13-16). They had turned to God from idols and had consequently suffered for their faith (1:3, 9). Suffering is not an exception but the rule of Christian living (3:1-5). Paul had sent Timothy to strengthen their faith lest they become unsettled by undergoing severe trials (3:2). He acknowledges that their steadfastness is being tested by the Tempter who would thwart all of Paul's previous efforts on their behalf (3:5). For this reason Paul wants to return to Thessalonica to supply what is lacking in their faith (3:10). But since he cannot go, he prays for their inner strength (3:13) and exhorts them to a posture of alertness, like a soldier who dons defensive armor in preparation to receive an assault (5:8).

Thus it is not improbable that the weak in the community are singled out in 5:14 for mention (along with the idle and faint-hearted) because the majority of the congregation (the strong), themselves able to withstand the battering to their faith, had refused to come to the aid of those who were growing weary. It was only too easy to lose patience with the infirm brothers and to give up on them. Paul, however, insists that the stronger in the community are to prove their strength by aiding and supporting the weaker members. In spite of their failings and weaknesses, they must be accepted, borne up, held fast and nurtured (*antechesthai*).

Finally, it is not difficult to envisage Paul addressing these demoralized and distressed Christians in 5:1-11. These Thessalonians are overwhelmed by the prolonged persecution and the uncertainty caused by the delay of the *parousia*. The danger is very real of being overcome by spiritual sleep. Therefore Paul must enjoin the church to watchfulness, emphasizing that the *parousia* will come suddenly and that all must therefore be alert. Believers can be ready for the day of the Lord, not by knowing when it will occur but because they live "in the light" and stay awake. Thus it is possible that these verses have reference primarily (though not exclusively) to the weaker members of the church. Because they have relevance to all members, they are addressed to the community as a whole (5:1, *adelphoi*).

Paul concerns himself with two major topics in this passage: the time of the *parousia* (vv 1-3) and watchfulness (vv 4-11). Paul's basic point is to remind these Christians of both the certainty and unexpectedness of the *parousia*. Though the

²⁸Friedrich, *Thessalonicher* 205.

Thessalonians were fully aware of the unpredictability of the end, they had in the meantime been reminded of their own *Sterblichkeit* and feared for their own position. Paul therefore writes that the day of the Lord is certainly coming, but when it will come no one can know, for it will arrive like "a thief in the night," unexpectedly and suddenly. Though the time of the *parousia* cannot be determined, however, it is as certain as giving birth is for a pregnant woman (v 3).

In the next section (5:4-11) Paul warns the church that ignorance of the date of the *parousia* is no excuse for unrighteous behavior. He first reassures the Thessalonians that the day will not overtake them, and as a result they have nothing to fear in the coming destruction of which Paul now writes (v 4). This is because they are of a different character than the unbelievers as "sons of light" and "sons of day." This fact, however, entails the outworking of their character as believers in a life that conducts itself in accordance with the light and day (v 6). Paul therefore enjoins them to wakefulness and sobriety.

That these Christians were weak and in need of strength and hope underlies the whole passage, but it comes to the surface most clearly in v 8: "But since we belong to the day let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet." The Thessalonians, writes Paul, now must arm themselves with faith, love and hope. Believers can be prepared for the arrival of the Lord by bearing the armor of God, which strengthens their inner man and focuses their hope on the salvation to be revealed in Jesus Christ (v 9), who died in their place (v 10a). In the final analysis it is not of importance whether they presently are living or asleep, as it is the privilege of every believer to share in the life of the risen and returning Christ (v 10b). Paul thus can close the section with an exhortation to mutual edification and encouragement (v 11).

II. CONCLUSION

Any interpretation of 1 Thess 5:14 faces certain difficulties that make it impossible to do more than offer a hypothesis as to what Paul means by *tous ataktous*, *tous oligopsychous* and *tôn asthenôn*. If, however, the contextual arguments presented above are valid, the words are seen to fit neatly into a pattern. A good number of exegetical points lends support to the interpretation that these three designations refer to three specific sections in the church that are dealt with at length earlier in the letter. The idle and the faint-hearted are relatively easy to identify with the unemployed and mourning within the community who are addressed in 4:9-12 and 4:13-18 respectively. The identification of the weak is more difficult, but we can suggest with a measure of plausibility that *tôn asthenôn* refers to those Thessalonians who were in need of steadfastness and perseverance in the midst of severe trials and who are exhorted to watchfulness in 5:1-11.

To many this will seem like reading a good deal into an otherwise simple expression. They have a point. All that can be said with certainty is there were apparently in the Thessalonian church some members whom Paul could describe as "weak" and who were in need of support and help by the other members. If we are to conjecture, however, it seems to us to be more in accordance with what we know of the community in Thessalonica to associate the weak with those who have become weary of waiting for the *parousia*. We can be certain that the delay of the end was a matter of concern within this early Christian community. We can also

assume that as these Christians sought to live in accordance with what Paul had taught them, trials had entered their lives that incessantly wore on their endurance. It is certain too that some of the members, worried and anxious that the delay of the *parousia* meant perhaps their own death, were in immediate danger of giving up all hope. Therefore, it is altogether possible—if not probable—that Paul had these Christians in mind when he wrote 5:1-11 and when he later commanded the church to “help the weak.”