The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 126–The Early Christian View of God in 1 Thessalonians
"The podcast that aims to start conversations about the oneness and unity of God and about the humanity of Jesus."

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Introduction

In what ways did early Christians portray Jesus alongside the God of Israel? How did the resurrection and exaltation of the man Jesus Christ interact with the unitary monotheism of Judaism? The late Larry Hurtado has argued in his writings that early Christianity, especially in the writings of Paul, was basically binitarian in theology and practice. Richard Baukham, on the other hand, has argued that Jesus was absorbed into the identity of God. Both Hurtado and Baukham have, rightly, been responded to by many scholars such as James Dunn and James McGrath, whose books I cannot recommend highly enough for BUs. What are we to make of the scholarly disagreement regarding how early Christianity understood the risen Jesus in relation to the one true God of Israel? This episode will begin a series looking at early Christian writings in order to judge for ourselves how Jesus featured in this Jewish messianic movement, especially as Jesus relates to the monotheistic God of Judaism. In this episode, we will look at what is likely the earliest Christian document contained in the NT--1 Thessalonians. We can date 1 Thes pretty closely within a two-year range, sometime between 50-52 AD, with most scholars settling on the year 50.

Does 1 Thessalonians portray God and Jesus in binitrian terms? Has Jesus been absorbed into the identity of Israel's God? Or is Jewish unitary monotheism maintained in light of Jesus' resurrection?

Let's find out on this week's episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast!

1 – The Christian Portrayal of God in 1 Thessalonians

- *how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come*. (1:9-10)
    - τὸν θεὸν (1:9)
    - This would have been a life-changing shift in priorities, daily life, and eating habits.
        - Imperial cult, involving oaths of loyalty to Caesar
        - The Cabirus mystery cult - the most distinctive feature in Thessaloniki religious life,
            - known for a martyred hero
            - Murdered by his brothers
            - Buried with symbols of royal power
            - Promised to return to give aid to the lowly, thus the worshipers of Cabirus included women and slaves
        - Serapis
        - Dionysus
        - Isis, Egypt

"God" shows up 34 times in 5 chapters, roughly ⅓ of the verses mention God.

- When God is qualified, he is always qualified as the Father (1:1, 3; 3:11; 13)
- Now may the God of peace <u>Himself</u> sanctify you entirely (5:23)
- Prayers are directed to God as the Father 1:2--We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers (1:2)

2 – The Christian Portrayal of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians

The risen Jesus Christ is addressed with the title kurios, Lord, which would have been heard in Thessalonica as attributing a Caesar title to Jesus.

    - 24x kurios (cf Claudius)
    - 16x Jesus
    - 10x Christ
        - Our Lord Jesus Christ (not our Yahweh)- 1:3; 2:19; 3:11 (Jesus our Lord); 3:13; 5:9, 23, 28.
- Jesus is the son of the one God, and is thus distinct from him - 1:9-10
- Jesus is the object of imitation, and Paul considers himself as someone, like Jesus, who could be imitated. Cf Phil 2
    - You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, (1:6)
- Believers are to wait for Jesus to return, specifically for his parousia. The parousia is only used to describe Jesus, not the Father and not the HS
    - For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? (2:19)
    - so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His holy ones. (3:13)
    - For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. (4:15)
    - Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (5:23)
    - 1:9-10
- Jesus is the one who died, not God, not the Father. Just Jesus:
        - the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus (2:14-15)
        - The living and true God... raised Jesus from the dead (1:9-10)
        - we believe that Jesus died and rose again (4:14)

3 – God and Jesus Working Together in 1 Thessalonians

It is clear that God has raised Jesus from the dead and highly exalted him to God's right hand. It is interesting to see how God includes Jesus in some of God's activities, while at the same time remaining distinct as the only God from the risen man Jesus.

- The congregation in Thessaloniki is described as "the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1)
    - When Paul refers to the churches in Judea--congregations of Jewish Christians--they are "the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea" (2:14)

- The Christian hope is said to be in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father (1:3)
- The gospel message is described as the word of the Lord and the word of God, but these are synonymous ways of referring to the Christian message, as is seen in 1:9-10
- Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ (3:2)
- Paul prays for the involvement of both God and Jesus--Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you (3:11)
- For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:9)
- in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (5:18)

In conclusion, we have observed that:

1 Thessalonians is very likely to be the earliest Christian document contained within the New Testament. As an early source, 1 Thessalonians allows us a unique look into early Christian beliefs and theology regarding God and Christ. Since the Chrisitan movement emerged from Judaism's unitary monotheism, it is an important historical question to trace how the risen Jesus functions alongside the one true God of Israel. We first noted that the contents of 1 Thessalonians demonstrated that the God inherited from Judaism was unaltered. God was only defined as the Father. This God was the true God and he was always distinguished from the risen and exalted Jesus. God remained a single person, as Paul spoke of "God himself". The converts to Christianity from Thessalonica would have to abandon all of their gods and lords as a requirement of entering the body of Christ. Their new devotion was directed to the true God, defined as the Father, and the son of the true God as the risen lord.

Second, we observed that Jesus Christ was a prominent feature in the theology and religious life of the Thessalonian believers. Jesus is described in various ways--as Jesus, Jesus Christ, but most frequently with the title Lord. This reflects Paul's understanding that Jesus is the risen Lord, as portrayed in Psalm 110:1, where Yahweh summons the human Lord to sit at Yahweh's right hand. By emphasizing that the crucified and risen Jesus is the true Lord and our Lord, Paul highlights the exalted status of the man Jesus while also attempting to subvert claims that Caesar was the true Lord for those living in Thessalonica. The repeated emphasis on Jesus' death indicates that Paul regarded Jesus as a mortal who truly died, but has now come back to life. Paul regarded Jesus' earthly life as something that tangible could be imitated, and he expected his converts to have the attitude that was also in Christ Jesus. The Christian hope was largely based around Jesus physically returning from heaven at the second coming.

Lastly, we noted that, while the Jewish God and the risen Jesus are consistently differentiated and distinguished in the contents of 1 Thessalonians, Paul does indicate that Jesus is actively involved in God's salvific and redemptive activities. In other words, God has and is actively working through Jesus Christ, so both are mentioned together in many activities. Interestingly enough, the collaboration between God and Jesus does not mention the Holy Spirit as if three were working together. The gospel message is described as both the gospel of God and the word of the Lord, due to the fact that God raised King Jesus, exalted him as Lord of the world, and is sending Jesus back to rule as king. Churches are described as belonging to God and Jesus. In light of this, Paul actively prays that both God and Jesus direct his steps, seeking the involvement of both of them in his daily life. God offers salvation through Jesus Christ, indicating that God is still undisputed in rank, while still working through the anointed and risen king Jesus. There is no indication that Christianity has included Jesus in the godhead or expanded the definition of monotheism to include Jesus. Furthermore, there is no indication that the unitary monotheism of Judaism was developed into binitarianism or trinitarianism according to 1 Thessalonians. The crucified and risen Jesus is not portrayed as preexisting his birth. In sum, the presentation of God and Christ in 1 Thessalonians is best described in terms of biblical unitarianism.

Join us next week as we continue to look at early Chrisitan documents to see how the risen Jesus is portrayed alongside the only true God of Jewish monotheism.

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