

The purpose of 1 Thessalonians¹

Elma M Cornelius

School for Biblical Studies and Bible Languages
Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education

Abstract

The purpose of a text is related to its rhetorical genre, but it is important to realise that genre is more than the form and function of discourse. Genre derives from and is related to the author's motive in responding to a recurrent social situation. These situations and responses are seen as resulting from shared social interpretations and are part of a socially constructed reality. Not only do genres respond to particular social contexts, they also shape them. The aim of this article is to interpret the purpose of 1 Thessalonians. It is concluded that the stated purpose of 1 Thessalonians is found in 3:11 and 12 and 5:23: to persuade the readers to live according to God's will. The author teaches the readers how to live as Christians and encourages them to accept new roles in society, to change their lives according to God's will and to remain faithful to Christ and the author, regardless of the hardships and opposition that they encounter.

1. INTRODUCTION

When asking about the purpose of 1 Thessalonians, I mean to interpret the genre of the letter. I do not, however, intend to define the genre by similarities in strategies or forms, by similarities in readers, by similarities in modes of thinking, or by similarities in rhetorical situations (see Miller 1984:151). I mean to discover what the letter would like to do – or, to use Miller's words, to determine the "action it (the text) is used to accomplish" (Miller 1984:151).

Kraftchick (1991:55-79) says that genres are seen less as "the formal categories of ancient classical rhetoric" and more as "the functionally oriented categories of modern

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rhetoric” (see also Smith 1995:42). Smith says that to determine the genre of a text is determining the “fluid set of expectations or shared pre-understandings between authors and auditors” (Smith 1995:43). Rhetorical genres are determined by the social functions exercised by the readers and the assumed or real location of their social and institutional setting (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:21). Genre derives from and is related to the author’s motive in responding to and shaping of a recurrent social situation. These situations and responses are seen as resulting from shared social interpretations and are part of a socially constructed reality.

By discussing the genre and the purpose of 1 Thessalonians, I move on to the social and cultural and the psychological textures of the letter (for a discussion of the texture of texts, see Robbins 1996a, 1996b). In dealing with genre, I will not merely indicate formal resemblances between 1 Thessalonians and other classical literature and then conclude the genre of 1 Thessalonians. Malherbe (1990:382), for example, identifies typical consolatory topoi and takes this as a basis for determining the genre of 1 Thessalonians. Determining genre, Smith (1995:123) says, should be considering the exigence and the overall goal of the letter. Although such comparisons with other genres are useful, it will not be the basis for my determination of the genre of 1 Thessalonians.

It is, however, important at this point, to differentiate between the implied purpose of the act and the stated purpose as found in the letter. Let us first consider the stated purpose of 1 Thessalonians.

2. THE STATED PURPOSE

The author of 1 Thessalonians does not make it easy to determine the purpose of his writing. Nowhere in this letter is a purpose clearly stated. The author’s wishes in 3:11 and 12 and 5:23, however, seem important. In the pericope of 2:17-3:13, the author is giving background for the writing of the letter. And then in 3:11-13 he says “may God clear our way to you and may he increase your love for one another” (Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ ἡμῶν καὶ ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς κατευθῆναι τὴν ὁδὸν ἡμῶν πρὸς ὑμᾶς· ὑμᾶς δὲ ὁ κύριος πλεονάσαι καὶ περισσεύσαι τῇ ἀγάπῃ εἰς ἀλλήλους) “with the purpose to strengthen your hearts so that you are blameless before God with the coming of Jesus” (εἰς τὸ στηρίξαι ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας ἀμέμπτους ἐν ἀγίωσυνῇ

ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ π α τ ρ ὸ ς ἡ μ ὶ ῶ ν ἐ ν τ ῆ πα ρ ο υ σί ᾱ τοῦ κυρίου ἡ μ ὶ ῶ ν Ἰ η σ οῦ). We find this wish almost repeated in 5:23 when he says “may God sanctify you and may your spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of Jesus” (Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἀγιασάτω ὑμᾶς ὀλοτελεῖς, καὶ ὀλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέμπτως ἐν τῆ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθεῖν). In the light of what is said in the rest of the letter, this seems to be the stated purpose of the letter: to persuade the readers to live according to God’s will.

3. THE IMPLIED PURPOSE

There are those who identify the purpose of 1 Thessalonians as “to express to the congregation his joy about them and his satisfaction with them” (see Jewett 1986) – and furthermore “to spur them on to a way of life pleasing to God” (Boers 1975-76:158). Some, like Donfried (1989:243-260), discuss the genre of 1 Thessalonians in epistolographical categories and indicate the letter type. Others, like Wuellner (1990:117-136), use Aristotle’s three rhetorical genres to indicate the purpose of the letter. Wuellner (1990:126) uses these classical categories to identify 1 Thessalonians as an epideictic genre, within the sub-genre of *paradoxon encomion*. Olbricht (1990:226) adds a new genre, namely “church rhetoric”.

3.1 Implied purpose within the psychological texture

Determining the purpose of the letter within the psychological texture, I mean to determine what the letter would like to do with regard to the psychological conditions of the readers. In recent years one attempt has been made to interpret parts of 1 Thessalonians as consolation and two attempts have been made to interpret the whole of 1 Thessalonians as a letter of consolation.

Malherbe (1983:254-256) discusses the consolatory character of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. He is of the opinion that 4:13-18 is not providing eschatological instruction to inform the readers, but to console those who are grieving. In 4:13-18 Paul offers comfort to the Thessalonians who are grieving. He begins with their grief for those who have fallen asleep (4:13), then uses various traditions to provide the reason (γὰρ in 4:14) why they should not grieve, and on that basis (ὥστε in 4:18) directs them to comfort one

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another. Donfried (1989:243-260) identifies the first letter to the Thessalonians as a λόγος παραμυθητικός – to console the Thessalonian Christians who were suffering the effects of persecution. Donfried uses 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 and Acts 17:1-9 and compares it to explicit and implicit persecution terminologies in 1 Thessalonians (see Donfried 1989:244-256). He thus depends, to a very high degree, on external sources for a determination of the exigence prompting Paul to write 1 Thessalonians (see also Smith 1995:123). It is not as such a problem to use external sources, the problem is, however, whether the external sources were written as history.

Smith (1995:51-60, 123) is of the opinion that the exigence of 1 Thessalonians is that of Paul's abrupt separation. The overall strategy, he proceeds, is to neutralize the grief caused by that separation. 1 Thessalonians includes many of the structural features and typical arguments found in the consolatory letter, he says, though the principal hermeneutical context reflected in the letter is an apocalyptic one (see Smith 1995:59). What is always present in popular consolation, and the same might be said of all consolation, is the exhortation to accept bravely the misfortune which is connatural to the human condition, not to be overcome excessively by grief and, in consequence, to neglect one's duties (see Chapa 1994:151). Thus we find it generally accepted that an excess of sorrow and grief is useless, harmful and unworthy of the educated man. One should grieve but with moderation and not for a long time. Although this opinion was not shared by all philosophical schools, it certainly became the most common and popular in the Graeco-Roman world. To make a generalisation in full awareness of the dangers of simplification, consolation meant exhortation, too (Chapa 1994:152).

With the diffusion of rhetoric through all aspects of life, letter-writing technique developed the most intimate form of consolation, the letter of condolence. According to Chapa (1994:152) the structure of a rhetorical letter of consolation includes these three elements: συμπάθεια, παραμυθία, and παραίνεσις:

- συμπάθεια: mention you have heard about death, show how much you suffer because of the news
- παραμυθία: bring a consolatory argument: "this is part of human condition" or "what has happened is common and unavoidable"

- *παράνεσις*: exhortation to overcome grief, control it, and not to prolong it unnecessarily.

According to Chapa (1994:156), the circumstances underlying the Thessalonian correspondence, would ordinarily call forth a consolatory speech. Members of the community at Thessalonika had to face contradictions and afflictions. When Paul writes to them it seems that they are still experiencing suffering and sorrow, caused at least by the death of some of their members (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) and perhaps by the consequences of a persecution (1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:1-4; 2:13-16). He acknowledges, however, that 1 Thessalonians differs in a certain sense from ancient consolatory literature. There is for example a lack of reference to a sad event at the beginning of the letter. Then 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8 centres upon the role of hope. And I think this is the difference in the author's view on suffering – to hope for eternal life with God. Wanamaker (1990:76) says that “from Paul's perspective it was their firmly fixed hope in Jesus Christ that gave them strength to persevere in their new Christian beliefs and behaviour in spite of considerable adversity from their non-Christian citizens”.

Chapa (1994:159) also indicates that the relation between consoler and consoled is different. Paul's exhortation comes from a position that seems to be closer to the role of the prophets of the Old Testament than to the moral authority of philosophers and moralists who wrote works of consolation. Although Chapa (1994:160) is not willing to classify 1 Thessalonians formally as a letter of consolation, he at least indicates that one of the purposes of this letter could be consolation. And I agree. There definitely are enough traces of consolation in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-13. There is, however, more than only consolation.

I myself am intrigued by the relationship between exhortation and consolation. Chapa (1994:156-160) says “consolation requires exhortation”. In ancient consolatory letters, the consoler would always finish his consolation with an exhortation to overcome grief and, often, to take care of the daily duties which were neglected as a consequence of the various manifestations of grief and mourning. Thus, says Chapa, Paul's continuous exhortation, especially in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, might be seen as a response to circumstances of sorrow and affliction, which could have put at risk the fulfilment of

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Christian obligations. It is then not unlikely that verbs like παρακαλοῦμεν ("encourage" in 3:2; 3:7; 4:1,10,18; 5:11,14) and παραμυθεῖσθε ("encourage" in 5:14) had, besides their clear exhortatory intention, an inseparable consolatory purpose. The proximity of παράκλησις (2:3) and ἀγῶνι (2:2) suggests the same.

But from my analysis of the different main arguments in the letter-body of 1 Thessalonians, it became clear to me that the consolation in 4:13-18 does not play such an important role as some (Chapa 1994:150-160; Donfried 1989:243-260) would like to ascribe to it. Although the argument on the situation of the dead in 4:13-18 is much more lengthy than the arguments on brotherly love (4:9-10) and Christian labour (4:11-12), I do not consider it enough reason to let it dominate the letter when considering the genre. The ethics of brotherly love and social order is presented first in the letter-body and is even repeated in the final exhortations in 5:12-22. It rather seems to me that the exhortation requires consolation in this case. The author wants social stability in their society, and in order to accomplish that, he needs to console the readers with regard to the dead so that they can focus on living according to God's will.

What then is the place and function of the exhortation in the letter?

3.2 Implied purpose within the social and cultural texture

Dahl (1976:540) already indicated that 1 Thessalonians is a paraenetic letter of exhortation, but unfortunately, without really discussing it. Boers (1975-76:158) agrees and says that 1 Thessalonians is a paraenetic letter with two main parts: *philophronesis* and *paraenesis*. The philophronetic part finds expression in the closely connected thanksgiving (1:2-10), the apostolic apology (2:1-12) and the parousia (2:17-3:13) sections. Malherbe (1983:241) shows that this philophronetic element sought to overcome the separation of writer and recipient and provided the framework for exhortation. The paraenetic part, on the other hand, finds expression in the καθὼς οἴδατε (4:1-5:22). Malherbe (1983:238) explains that the point of the entire letter is found in 4:1-2 and 4:10b-12 – the paraenetic parts. Even the thanksgivings, he says, have either explicitly or implicitly a paraenetic function. Malherbe (1983:241) refers to a wide range of hortatory terms in 1 Thessalonians: παράκλησις ("encouragement" in 2:3); παρακαλοῦντες

("encourage" in 2:12; 3:2; 3:7; 4:1; 4:10, 18; 5:11,14); παραμυθούμενοι ("encourage" in 2:12; 5:14); μαρτυρούμενοι ("urge" in 2:12; 4:6); στηρίξαι ("strengthen" in 3:2); παραγγελίας ("instruction" in 4:2); ἐρωτώμεν ("ask" in 5:12); παρηγγείλαμεν ("instruct" in 4:11); νουθετοῦντας ("admonish" in 5:12,14); ἀντέχεσθε ("help" in 5:14); and μακροθυμεῖτε ("being patient" in 5:14). He also refers in this regard to a major part of ancient paraenesis that also occurs in 1 Thessalonians: the offering of a model to be imitated (see 1:6; 5:7; 2:14). The *paraenesis*, Malherbe (2000:81) says, constitutes Paul's attempt to complete what was lacking in the Thessalonians' faith.

Boers (1975-76:155) states that the main purpose is the call to fulfilment (περισσεύητε) in 4:1 and 10b. He admits that the teaching concerning the resurrection (4:13-18) and the *parousia* (5:1-11) probably did come up as a result of the situation in the church at Thessalonika, and that it should be recognized as important (Boers 1975-76:156). Nevertheless, he says, Paul does not see the church in the first place as subject to over-strained *parousia* expectations, but as one which finds itself on the right way, and which should be encouraged to make further progress. The question is whether Boers and Malherbe mean the same thing. It seems as if Malherbe sees the point of the letter in the paraenesis in Chapter 4 of the letter as well as in the thanksgivings. He states that Chapters 4 and 5 of 1 Thessalonians are clearly paraenetic, while chapters 1-3 function paraenetically by laying the foundation for the specific advice that would follow in the second half of the letter (Malherbe 1983:240; Malherbe 2000:80-81). Boers, on the other hand, speaks about the encouragement in the thanksgivings. Could he possibly mean the "paraenesis" is the thanksgivings? The only difference between these two views seems to be the contents of the paraenesis.

Dowling (1991:38) says that all Pauline letters were designed to "summon into existence an alternative community". Smith (1995:62-63) agrees that Paul wants to create an "alternative community" independent of its pre-conversion alliances for a sense of power, prestige and security. For Paul it is within one's new *philia* that one's power, prestige and security are determined. Smith (1995:63) refers to the theories of Kloppenborg (1993:277) and Perkins (1989:328) when saying that within the context of conversion, the members of a new cult would naturally feel the anguish of a lost identity and the

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loss of former deference-entitlements, as designed by a larger society or a previous cultic association or philosophy.

The main purpose of 1 Thessalonians is to socialize the readers. In other words, to teach values and to motivate. Gundry (1987:161), for example, says that the eschatological teachings in 1 Thessalonians have the purpose of correction. This kind of action is an attempt to bring the readers to changes in their orientations, skills, feelings, values – the process by which one learns to perform his or her various roles adequately. This may not encompass the whole of socialization, but role acquisition is an extremely important, if not the most important, component of socialization (see Brim 1968:186). In each instance of socialization, Brim says, a key element is the role prescription or expectation that someone else has for the person in question, which involves a change in, or addition to, that person's beliefs, attitudes, behaviour, motives or values, with reference to some social situation. The demands the socialization agent makes can be that of an alteration of a role associated with a continuing status or social position and the assumption of a new status and the learning of a new role related to that status – in other words new and different demands in the old relationships. On the other hand, it can be demands of new and different persons and new types of social relationships. The new roles the author can demand from his readers are their roles in marriage (new roles in an already known relationship), sexual behaviour, parenthood, and parent and child relations.

In the case of 1 Thessalonians a move is demanded. I don't consider it, however, to be a geographical move, it is more a social and religious move the author expects. I think this is exactly the challenge for the readers (Christian): they have to accept new roles but in the old world. And that is a difficult task. From the standpoint of the larger society, one of the objectives of the socialization process is to produce individuals who will not only conform to the socially prescribed rules of conduct but will, as members of the society, accept these as their own values (see Maccoby 1968:232).

Is it the author's purpose to bring about a change of attitudes or rather the acquisition of new information? It is clear from the above discussion that he certainly wants a change of attitude or life, but it cannot happen without giving the relevant information. Within Olbricht's new genre of "church rhetoric", he discusses the sub-genre of 1 Thessalonians as "reconfirmational" (Olbricht 1990:226-227). And in this sense the

purpose of the letter is to encourage, comfort, and urge them to lead lives worthy of God. This is to say, Olbricht (1990:227) proceeds, that the power of God, Christ, and the Spirit, and of the discourse that announces their power, through reconfirmation brings the community to deeper commitment. The information given is, however, not always totally new.

Chapa (1994:153) tries to fit the letter of consolation into the categories of the classical rhetoric and says that since the funerary speech is one of the traditional categories of epideictic rhetoric, it may be debated whether consolation should be considered part of an epideictic speech or, taking into account what has been said above about its exhortative nature, be included within a deliberative one. I think, however, that one should clearly differentiate between these two rhetorical genres. Aristotle (*Ars Rhetorica* I:iii, 1-5) and Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* III:vii-ix) explain that in the epideictic genre the audience is informed about current affairs, while in the deliberative genre, the audience is persuaded of something in the future. Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* III:vii, 1, 6, 10, 15, 28) is, however, dissatisfied with Aristotle's treatment of the epideictic genre. He is of the opinion that the epideictic genre is much more than the entertainment of an audience only. It can include speeches like a character sketch in court. It thus seems possible to conclude that the epideictic genre concerns things that the audience most probably already knows – a reinforcement of good behaviour. This also fits when one considers Malherbe's discussion of the *topoi* on the moral life (Malherbe 1983:240). These *topoi*, he says, are not new at all. In 1 Thessalonians there are a lot of indications that these *topoi* were known to all: 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:2; 2:5; 3:4 καθὼς οἴδατε (as you know); 2:11 καθάπερ οἴδατε (as you know); 2:1; 3:3; 4:2; 5:2 οἴδατε (you know); 4:9; 5:1 οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχετε γράφειν ὑμῖν (you don't have a need that we write to you); 4:1 καθὼς καὶ περιπατεῖτε (as you also are living); 4:10 καὶ γὰρ ποιεῖτε (for you do); 5:11 καθὼς καὶ ποιεῖτε (as you also do); 4:1 ἵνα περισσεύητε μᾶλλον (that you do this more and more).

This issue could, however, also have a different side. One has to determine whether the author of 1 Thessalonians wants to reinforce certain behaviour, or whether he wants to persuade the readers to a new kind of behaviour. I have already mentioned that there is enough proof in the letter that the readers already know the contents of the

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author's paraenesis. Johanson (1987:55) mentions that the repeated references to the good (3:6) and even the exemplary character of the Thessalonian believers' Christian life (1:6-7) make it unlikely that the reminder of Paul's previous instructions in 4:1-12 were aimed at correcting any concrete, current ethical breaches in the life of the community. But the frequent references to the fact that the readers already know what he is trying to reinforce could also be a strategy of persuasion. In stead of saying "you should do this or that", one could rather say "you already do this or that" or "you know what to do". In this way, the readers are almost forced to accept the exhortation. Therefore I would rather go for the deliberative genre in the case of 1 Thessalonians. I think this is indeed a case of paraenesis. The author wants his readers to change their lives according to God's will, and his way of putting the exhortations will persuade both the believer as well as the non-believer. To the believers he says "you're on the way – keep it up" (he thus urges them to remain faithful to Christ) and to the non-believers he says "you should know how to live" (he thus urges them to change their lives according to God's will).

To conclude, it seems as if the author mainly wants to socialise the readers – in other words to teach them and encourage them to accept new roles in society, to change their lives according to God's will and to remain faithful to Christ (and in effect also to the author), regardless of the hardships and opposition that they encounter.

4. CONCLUSION

The stated purpose of 1 Thessalonians is found in 3:11 and 12 and 5:23: to persuade the readers to live according to God's will.

The implied purpose within the psychological texture is that, because the author wants social stability in the readers' society, and in order to accomplish that, he consoles them with regard to the dead so that they can focus on living according to God's will.

The implied purpose within the social and cultural texture is to socialise the readers. This is also considered to be the main purpose of the letter. The author teaches the readers how to live as Christians and encourages them to accept new roles in society, to change their lives according to God's will and to remain faithful to Christ and the author, regardless of the hardships and opposition that they encounter.

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