

EXEGETICAL BRIEF: 1 THESSALONIANS 2:1 “Our Visit to You Was Not a Failure”

E. Allen Sorum

In the first week of August, I was on the campus of the Lutheran Seminary in Lusaka, sitting in a circle of ten African pastors from sister synods in Malawi and Zambia comprising the Lutheran Church of Central Africa. We were kicking off the Greater African Theological Studies Institute (GRATSI), the new continuing education collaboration between our seminary in Mequon and the Lutheran Seminary in Lusaka, Zambia. Our assignment was to work through an exegetical study of 1 Thessalonians. One of the goals of this study was to assess the vernacular translations these men used in their African ministry settings. This verse produced an interesting discussion:

1 Thessalonians 2:1

¹Αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἶδατε, ἀδελφοί, τὴν εἴσοδον ἡμῶν τὴν πρὸς ὑμᾶς ὅτι οὐ
κενὴ γέγονεν,

(NIV) ¹You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.

The exegetical challenge in this verse is to define οὐ κενὴ. As already noted, the NIV translates this “not a failure.” Other English translations (NASB, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) prefer the closely synonymous “not in vain.” This is also the basic meaning chosen by the translators of *Buku Lopatulika*, the older Chewa version (published in 1923). A very literal English translation of this verse would read (according to Dr. Ernst Wendland of the Lutheran Seminary in Lusaka), “For this reason, brothers, you know yourselves our manner of entering unto you, that it was not worthless.” The newer Chewa translation, *Buku Loyera* (published in 1998), simplifies the translation by removing the litotes.¹ This does not change the meaning as you can see in Dr. Wendland’s translation of the *Buku Loyera*: “Brothers, you yourselves know that [the visit that we visited you there at your place], it was profitable.”

Vernacular translations from different eras and different parts of the planet (including Luther and *Reina-Valera*) translate οὐ κενὴ with

¹The litotes “not worthless” or “not in vain” or if we jump ahead, “not empty or lacking in respect to power” expresses a positive concept by negating its opposite.

“not without success” or “not in vain.” Though what follows will place the Lusakan circle of exegetes into a minority position,² a different translation for οὐ κενὴ is here offered: “Brothers, you yourselves know that our visit to you was not lacking³ (or empty of) power.”

Here is rationale for this slightly different interpretation of οὐ κενὴ:

1. The basic meaning of the adjective κενός is “empty.” This root meaning comes out clearly when the verb κενόω is used in 1 Corinthians 9:15 and in 2 Corinthians 9:3. Paul used κενόω in these verses to say that he did not want his boasting emptied. When the adjective is used, one must rely on the context to determine empty in respect to what. For example:
 - the Evangelist Mark used the adjective to show how the vineyard tenants sent the vineyard owner’s servant home empty in respect to any portion of the harvest from that vineyard (12:3);
 - Mary used the adjective to show how God would send the rich away empty in respect to the good things that the Lord gives to the hungry (Lu 1:53);
 - Paul uses the adjective four times in 1 Corinthians 15 to show that God’s grace was not empty to him (v. 10), that apart from Jesus’ resurrection, Paul’s preaching and the Corinthians’ faith would be empty (v. 14), and that labor in the Lord would not be empty (v. 58), and;
 - In Ephesians 5:6, Paul warns believers not to be deceived by the empty words of idolaters and the sexually immoral.
2. The context of the verses which precede 1 Thessalonians 2:1 speak of power. The gospel preached by Paul during his evangelistic ministry in Thessalonica was not empty or lacking in respect to power. In the first verse of chapter two, Paul advances a point that he had first made in 1 Thessalonians 1:5: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power (ἐν δυνάμει), with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” This powerful gospel, Paul adds, enabled his evangelistic team to live lives that were worthy of imitation. The powerful gospel also enabled the Thessalonians to become examples and models for Christians throughout Macedonia and Achaia. Everywhere Paul went, people were discussing Paul’s evangelistic

²Although J.A. Bengel’s *Gnomon* (1742) on this verse reads, “γὰρ—This refers to ch. i. 5,6; for what was there laid down as the proposition, is now taken up again to be discussed, and that, too, regarding Paul and his companions, vers. 1-12; regarding the Thessalonians, ver. 13-16. -οὐ κενὴ, not vain) but **full of power** (emphasis mine).”

³Technically speaking, there is no equivalent in Chewa for “empty of power.” It would either be “being without/devoid of” or “lacking;” both verbal formations in the language (E. R. Wendland).

visit in Thessalonica. What a display of power! Heathens standing in the shadows of Greek pantheons and giving tribute to Roman emperors were turned to the living God and taught to wait for his Son from heaven! Paul's segue in chapter two goes like this: You yourselves know about the great power of the gospel that we brought to you. Our visit (which featured of course the preaching of the gospel), as you know, was not empty of power.

3. Power is also the subject of 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 in which Paul instructed the Thessalonians about how the gospel cleansed the ministry motives and methods of Paul and his team:

- See the power of the gospel in the fact that Paul and his associates preached the gospel boldly “in our God” even though this preaching resulted in their shameful treatment in Philippi (v. 2).
- See the gospel's power in Paul's motivation for preaching the gospel. Paul's only motive for bringing the gospel to Macedonia was to please and bring glory to the God who entrusted him with this gospel (v. 3-6).
- See the gospel's power in the fact that Paul loved the Thessalonians so much, Jew and Gentile alike, that he shared not just what he knew or had or was able to earn as a tentmaker; he shared himself (v. 7-9).
- See the gospel's power in Paul's blameless life and in the fact that Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to live the same blameless life (v. 10-12).

4. Paul did want to remind the Thessalonians that his visit to them was not a failure, not a waste of time, not in vain, not empty in respect to result. Paul did this, however, in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:10. After Paul described the power of his visit, Paul demonstrated how “successful” his powerful gospel ministry among them was (beginning in 1 Thessalonians 2:13) by pointing out these Spirit-given fruits:

- The Thessalonians were led by the Word at work in them to accept Paul's preaching as the Word of God (v. 13).
- The Thessalonians were made bold to endure persecution from their own countrymen (v. 14-16).
- The Thessalonians—and for this Paul praises and thanks the Lord—remained loyal both to him and to the Lord in spite of persecution (2:17-3:10).

5. In this section where Paul discusses the fruitful results of his visit (1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:10), Paul uses the phrase εἰς κενόν:

⁵For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless [εἰς κενόν] (1 Thessalonians 3:5 NIV).

Paul likes this adverbial phrase. He uses it five times in his letters (2 Corinthians 6:1, Galatians 2:2, twice in Philippians 2:16 and here). In each of these uses, the context wants the reader to translate εἰς κενὸν in terms of effect, results, and fruit. We offer this more as a rhetorical question, but if Paul wanted to speak in 1 Thessalonians 2:1 of an evangelistic visit that was “not useless” or “not in vain” or “not without results,” would he not have used εἰς κενὸν instead of the bare adjective κενῆ?

6. Consider the ἀλλὰ in 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Ἀλλὰ expresses an emphatic contrast between ideas. If the idea in 1 Thessalonians 2:1 is that Paul’s visit to Thessalonica was not in vain or not without success, where is the contrast in “but quite to the contrary we were bold to keep preaching the gospel to you in the face of bitter opposition?” Would it not flow more logically if Paul had said, “Our visit to you was not in vain so we *therefore* (instead of “but”) dared to continue preaching to you in spite of opposition.” But Paul did use ἀλλὰ. The contrast is, “Our visit to you was not lacking in power. Quite to the contrary, since our preaching was full of power and the Holy Spirit, we were bold to continue preaching it to you in spite of the strong opposition we endured in Philippi.”

The importance in this distinction between the translations “not in vain” or “not lacking power” is one of emphasis. The emphasis Paul made in our text is also coupled in this case with a different cultural perspective. Go back to the circle of African pastors. Why was this nuance important to them? Why was our discussion—condensed above—worthy of two hours of our time together? I will try to put you in their circle, in their cities, towns, and villages, and in the varied evangelistic challenges that they face. They are blessed to have access to the amazing and true power of the gospel in their mother tongue. This powerful gospel in them makes them bold to proclaim the gospel where Satan rules and witch doctors still set policy as they have for generations. There are ancient traditions and dark world views that are not easily displaced. For generations, people in their communities have sought the power of darkness through incantations, traditional “medicine,” and smoke when their children are sick. When loved ones die, malevolent ancestral spirits must be assuaged and entire villages must be protected. It is all about power! But in the gospel is a true power. This gospel is not only powerful in their hearts. It is powerful in their mouths. This powerful gospel which Paul and his team proclaimed, that turned men and women to the true God away from dead idols, is the same powerful gospel that these African pastors proclaim to tie up and remove the strong man (Mk 3:27). Satan is bound by the gospel that they preach. That is power. They preach the gospel and people are rescued from the suffering and despair of Satan’s congregation of the dead. That is power! When they turn to God in prayer, and

when they call upon this God in days of trouble, and when they are rescued, there is an awesome power. Dr. Wendland would add that the Chewa word “power” (*mphamvu*) is a culturally significant term. Its reference is not limited to physical strength. Simply stated, access to power is very important in this culture. In the gospel, Africans have the greatest power of all.

Easter comes late in 2011. There will only be nineteen Sundays after Pentecost. Because Series A in the *Christian Worship* lectionary does not use texts from 1 Thessalonians until the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, we will not be preaching from this letter. So you will not find this exegetical brief helpful for this year’s sermon preparation. But maybe you will. Consider the perspective of our brothers and sisters in Africa. Consider, emphasize, highlight, or at least point out the very special power we have in the gospel. As you preach in the coming year from the gospel of Matthew, reflect on the power of that baby born in the manger. Point out the power of the Savior who withstood for us in the desert the devil’s temptations. Express amazement at the power of the sermon preached on a mountain top to people whom Jesus called “Blessed,” though poor and hungry. Proclaim the power of him who healed so many with his word and of him who now calls us to follow him in his Word. And hold out this power to many so many more can be saved by it!