The Press of the Text
Biblical Studies in Honor of James W. Voelz

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Body, Self, and Spirit

The Meaning of Paul’s Anthropological Terminology in 1 Thessalonians 5:23

—Charles A. Gieschen

Besides Paul’s proclamation of resurrection in 1 Cor 15:1–58, 1 Thessalonians contains his most significant teaching about eschatology, especially Jesus’ triumphal coming (παρουσία) on the last day and the resurrection of “those who are asleep” (1 Thess 4:14). Paul introduces eschatology prominently already at the close of the letter’s thanksgiving: “and also to await his Son from the heavens, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath that is to come” (1:10). He punctuates this letter several times with short proclamations of eschatology (2:13–16; 2:17–19; 3:11–13). His more extensive discussion of Jesus’ triumphal coming in 4:13–18 is probably his response to one of the primary situations that prompted Paul to write this letter: confusion among these new Christians about whether their brothers and sisters in Christ who died before Jesus’

1. This study results from my current work on the 1–2 Thessalonians volume in the Concordia Commentary series. It is offered here in honor of James W. Voelz, my esteemed mentor and friend, with sincere appreciation for the profound manner in which his teaching during my studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (1980–1984), has shaped my own study and teaching of the New Testament in the subsequent decades.

See especially Luckenmeyer, The Eschatology of First Thessalonians. For a terse introduction, see Gieschen, “Christ’s Coming and the Church’s Mission in 1 Thessalonians.”

2. All English translations of biblical texts are my own.
return would miss out on the blessings of that day. Finally, Paul concludes this letter with a blessing in 5:23–24 that contains this very intriguing eschatological summary:

"Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεός τῆς εἰρήνης ἀγιάσαι υἱὸς ὀλοκληρον υἱῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέτακτος ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθείη. πιστὸς ὁ καλῶν υἱὸς, δε καὶ πνεῦμα.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your spirit, self, and body as a whole be kept blameless at the triumphal coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

This blessing, limited though it is, provides important evidence of Paul's understanding of anthropology (i.e., what makes up anthropos). Here Paul testifies that each Christian is, in some sense, τὸ σῶμα, ἡ ψυχή, and τὸ πνεῦμα. But what exactly is Paul signifying with these terms? Does he use σῶμα here as a more inclusive term instead of σάρξ (flesh), a term he uses frequently when speaking of the flesh and Spirit dichotomy in Christian anthropology? What is the nature of the σῶμα that Paul states will be sanctified completely and kept until the triumphal coming of Jesus at the last day: physical, spiritual, or ethereally material? It is especially difficult to determine the meaning of ἡ ψυχή, which is translated typically as “soul” in English. But that translation raises its own challenges of what exactly is being signified in English by “soul.” “Soul” is popularly understood to be a Christian's “spiritual nature” that separates from the body after death, but how does one then understand “soul” in relation to “spirit”? It is also difficult to determine the meaning of τὸ πνεῦμα here, which is usually translated “spirit” but could be understood as “the [Holy] Spirit” in light of the change in anthropology that happens through baptism. First Thess 5:23, in fact, has prompted debate about so-called bipartite (body and spirit) versus tripartite (body, soul, and spirit) anthropology in Paul and the rest of the Scriptures.

3. See esp. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man,* and Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms.* Jewett's work is somewhat flawed by his tendency to postulate a conflict on every page of Paul's epistles, including early manifestations of Gnosticism.


5. For a brief discussion of this debate that favors a bipartite understanding, see Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics,* 1:476–77. For a brief history of research on the understanding of these three anthropological terms, see Weima, 1–2 *Thessalonians,* 421n10.
Recognizing that "Paul's use of anthropological terms is neither original, systematic, nor consistent," Abraham Malherbe states:

This is the only place in Paul's letters where the tripartite division of human nature into spirit, soul, and body appears, and this particular division appears nowhere before him. Plato speaks of mind or intelligence (nous) in the soul, and of the soul in the body (Timaeus 30B), and the Stoic Marcus Aurelius a century after Paul has the division body, soul, and mind (Meditation 3.16), but Paul's trichotomy in 1 Thessalonians is the earliest occurrence of that precise formulation. Scholars have been divided since antiquity over whether this trichotomy represented Paul's view of human nature or whether he held to the more traditional dichotomist view of body and soul.\(^6\)

Most commentators argue that Paul is not defining parts of anthropology here, but primarily emphasizing that the complete person will be sanctified and kept unto the triumphal coming of Christ. M. Eugene Boring offers what can be seen as a representative example of this position: "'Spirit, soul, and body' is a rhetorical expression for 'completely,' not a tripartite analysis of human being, as though Paul were here presenting doctrinal teaching on the nature of human selfhood. Nor is he consistent in his ways of speaking about the nature of human being; note the variety of ways in which he used kardia (heart), psyche (soul, life, self), nous (mind), soma (body), sark (flesh), pneuma (spirit), as aspects of human being (e.g., Rom 13:1; 16:4; 1 Cor 16:18; 2 Cor 2:13; 7:1, 5, 13; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 1 Thess 2:4, 8; 5:28; Phlm 25)."\(^7\) Although Paul uses a variety of language to express anthropology, the three terms in 1 Thess 5:23 are more than rhetorical flourish; they are teaching anthropology in some manner. It is important to attempt to understand how they should be understood in light of Paul's broader expression of anthropology in his various letters.

An examination of the Pauline corpus leads to the conclusion that Paul understands man—whether one believes in Christ or not—primarily as a dichotomy, rather than a trichotomy, made up of the inner anthropos and the outer anthropos: "Although our outer man [ὁ ἐξω ημῶν ἄνθρωπος] is wasting away, yet our inner man [ὁ ἐσω ημῶν] is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16). A. T. Robertson offers the following explanation of this basic understanding of Paul's anthropology that includes the distinguishing feature of the anthropology of one who has been united with Christ by faith through the Holy Spirit: "Both believers and unbelievers have an inner man

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(soul psuchē, mind nous, heart kardia, the inward man ho esō anthrōpos) and the outer man (sōma, ho exō anthrōpos). But the believer has the Holy Spirit of God, the renewed spirit of man (I Cor. 2:11; Rom. 8:9–11).

What does Paul mean by “the inner man”? Robert Gundry speaks of “the inner man” as “the human spirit, the center of psychical feelings,” but this explanation seems to fall far short of Paul’s understanding. For Paul, the “inner man” of the person who has been united with Christ can no longer be understood apart from the person of Christ: Christ enlivens and defines the “inner man” of all who are “in Christ” (Rom 7:22; 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 3:16; Col 3:9–10), whom Paul also identifies as the “new man” (Eph 4:22–23). To express it pointedly: “I [Paul] have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). After conversion, Paul does not understand his “inner man” or “new man” as the “new Paul,” but as Christ in Paul through the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9–11). Thomas Winger draws a similar conclusion when he argues that the “new man” discussed in Eph 4:23 is “not simply the old one renovated,” but “Christ himself,” who is also identified as “the inner man” (Eph 3:16) and “the complete man” (Eph 4:13).

Given Paul’s broader understanding of the anthropology of one who is in Christ expressed over the course of his thirteen letters, it is reasonable to postulate how the three anthropological terms expressed in his first letter (1 Thessalonians) function within his basic dichotomy of the inner and outer man. Although this remains to be supported in what follows below, Paul’s understanding of the outer man is expressed in 1 Thessalonians with τὸ σῶμα, and his understanding of the inner man is expressed with the terms ἡ ψυχή and τὸ πνεῦμα. From the perspective of this triad, the distinctive

10. The manner in which Christ is identified with and defines the “inner man” and “new man” after conversion is not made clear in Middendorf, The “I” in the Storm, 106, and Middendorf, Romans 1:1—8:39, 569–70. I have argued for a more christological understanding of the “inner man” and “new man” previously; see Gieschen, “Paul and the Law,” 137n83, and Gieschen, “The Son as Creator and Source,” 136–37. It is worthy to note that the ESV translations of these terms are not helpful. For example, Eph 4:22–24 has the translations “old self” for παλαιὸν ἐνθρωπόν and “new self” for καινὸν ἐνθρωπόν. The δ’ ἐστ’ ἡμᾶς ἐνθρωπός of 2 Cor 4:16 is translated in the ESV as “our inner self.” Such translations make the christological identification of the “new man” and the “inner man” even more difficult for the reader.
12. There is some debate about Galatians possibly having been written earlier, but 1 Thessalonians is widely recognized to have been written in early AD 50 from Corinth; see Malherbe, Letters to the Thessalonians, 71–74.
aspect of anthropology for one who is in Christ is τὸ πνεῦμα. Because of τὸ πνεῦμα, the inner man is both alive and new while the outer man (τὸ σῶμα), after decay and death, will be raised in glory at the triumphal coming of Christ.

The questions posed above demonstrate that this simple triad of anthropological terms is filled with complexities. This study will argue that the meaning of this terminology is best expressed in English with the terms “body,” “self,” and “spirit,” while also demonstrating that Paul’s primary purpose in using this triad is to emphasize the totality of the human and prevent confusion that some part of the human will not be sanctified completely and participate in resurrected glory upon the triumphal coming of Jesus. Furthermore, a unique contribution of examining this triad in its first-century Greco-Roman context will be to demonstrate that if Paul did not mention ψυχή (self) in his understanding of eschatological anthropology, then most of the listeners to his letter in Thessalonica would have naturally wondered, “What will happen to my ψυχή in the afterlife?”

σῶμα in Paul’s Epistles and the Thessalonian Context

Paul’s understanding of σῶμα (body) is grounded in the foundational testimony in Israel’s Scriptures to YHWH’s creation of all that is visible and invisible (Gen 1:1), especially the creation of man and woman followed by the pronouncement that it was “very good” (Gen 1:26–31). It is this big-picture understanding of creation that shaped Paul’s understanding of “body,” not one particular term in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is clear from the fact that the Hebrew term for body, הָמה, occurs only fourteen times. In the Septuagint, however, σῶμα is used to translate a number of Hebrew terms, especially ἄρσε (flesh), when the terms signify the physical body alone. Against the tendency of twentieth-century scholarship, especially Rudolf Bultmann, to argue that Paul used σῶμα to signify the whole or total person, Robert Gundry has demonstrated that Paul continued to understand the term in line with its use in the Septuagint to signify the outer, material, or physical aspect of man that is distinct from the spirit or inner man. “Paul fully personalizes σῶμα as a necessary part of the human constitution and of authentic existence. However, he neither dematerializes σῶμα in theological usage nor makes it comprehend the total person. To do either would lay upon the term a burden heavier than it can bear. Rather, without having

to do double duty for the spirit, sōma gains theological significance as the physical body, man’s means of concrete service for God.”

A significant problem that Paul faced in his first-century context was the denigration of the “outer man” or “body” in wider Greco-Roman thinking, including that of a first-century Roman city like Thessalonica. Unlike Homer’s appreciation for the physical life, the elevation of the value of the soul and the denigration of the body as the prison for the soul began to be seen in the Orphic mysteries of the sixth century BC, then in the Pythagorean school, and continued to be strong in later Hellenistic philosophy such as that of Plato. One of the features of Orphism was the conception of “disincarnate immortality” as the ultimate destiny of the soul. Within some expressions of Hellenistic philosophy, evil and irrationality were part of the outer man or body. In such thinking, the stated desire is for the individual soul to escape the body and, after migrating to various bodies in order to be purified, eventually to ascend to be part of the collective spirit. Such thinking was even embraced by some Jews as they were influenced by Hellenization. For example, Wisdom of Solomon (c. first-century BC in Alexandria) states, “For a perishable body [σῶμα] weighs down the soul [ψυχή], and this earthly tent burdens the thoughtful mind” (Wis 9:15) and “A good soul [ψυχής] fell to my lot; or rather, being good, I entered a defiled body [σῶμα]” (Wis 8:19–20).

As with Israel’s Scriptures that were the foundation for his understanding, Paul has no such negative understanding of the outer man or body. For Paul, the “old man” or “flesh” signifies the sinful condition that dominates both the outer and inner man before conversion, and continues to have an impact after conversion. The body itself, however, is a creation of God, an essential aspect of what makes up human life, and “very good” apart from its corruption by sin. This understanding of the body is the theological


16. See the extensive discussion of the variety of Hellenistic ideas about the body in Stacey, Pauline View of Man, 59–81. Because it was thoroughly impacted by first-century Roman religion and thought, it is reasonable to conclude that these ideas would be present in Thessalonica.

17. Ibid., Pauline View of Man, 64–65.

18. Ibid., 64.

19. Ibid., 73.

20. An example of this idea in Vergil is quoted and discussed below.

21. “Sin” is still present “in” man as well as still causing the outer man to age and decay, even though Christ is the dominant reality of the inner man and new man (Rom 7:7–25). See Gieschen, “Original Sin,” 359–75, esp. 365–72.
foundation for Paul's confession of the incarnation and birth of the Son in a body as well as the body of Jesus being raised by the Father. It is also the foundation for his abundant testimony to the resurrection of the body unto glory for all who believe in Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1-58; 1 Thess 4:13-18). Gundry provides this very substantive summary of the theological significance of Paul's understanding and use of σῶμα.

In sum, the consistently substantival meaning of the term σῶμα protects the functional element proper to the term. That element consists in the instrumental function of the physical body, a function necessary to human existence. Consequently, σῶμα bars asceticism and mysticism, withdrawal from history and society. Spiritualizing idealism, romanticism, introvertive existentialism—somatic anthropology excludes them. Positively, the physicalness of σῶμα affirms life in a material world and our responsibility for it. . . . By assuring the importance of materiality in the future through physical resurrection, σῶμα insures the importance of materiality in the present. Thus theology retains its this-worldly relevance along with its other-worldly hope.22

What about the σῶμα of a Christian after resurrection? Although it has been argued above that Paul understood σῶμα in a material/physical manner, is it possible that Paul understood that there would be a substantive change in the resurrected body of those in Christ so it would no longer be a material/physical body?23 Some scholars have argued that Paul taught such a substantive change in the resurrected body based upon his use of the adjectives ψυχικός and πνευματικός in 1 Cor 15:44. James Ware's recent study has carefully and convincingly countered those holding this position.24 He notes that "the σῶμα ψυχικόν describes the present body as given life by the soul, the life given by the very breath of God (1 Cor 15:45a, ἐγένετο δὲ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος Ἀδάμ εἰς ψυχὴν ζωσαν, 'the first man, Adam, became a soul that is living' [echoing Gen 2:7]), but in Adam subject to mortality and decay (1 Cor 15:21-22)."25 He then states that the σῶμα πνευματικός describes "the resurrected body as given life by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15:45b, δ ἐσχάτος Αδάμ

24. Ware, "Paul's Understanding of Resurrection," 809–35. For a brief history of interpretation concerning 1 Cor 15 that reviews the positions he counters, see 810–17.
25. Ware, "Paul's Understanding of Resurrection," 835 (underlining and italics original). Although I would differ from Ware on translating forms of ψυχή as "soul" due to confusion about what this term signifies in English (see below), I agree with his argument here.
eis pneuma zω̂p̄oteuson, 'the last Adam became a Spirit who is life-giving').

Based upon this understanding, a possible paraphrase of 1 Cor 15:44a is: "It is sown a soul-given-life body; it is raised a Spirit-given-life body." Finally, Ware draws the conclusion that Paul understood resurrection "as the miraculous reconstitution of the mortal body of flesh and bones and its transformation so as to be imperishable." As Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica who had previously held negative understandings of the body, he affirms the value of the physical body as God's creation that is essential to what man is, he encourages living sanctified lives in the body, and he confirms the sure hope that the body will be raised in glory at the triumphal coming of the risen and living Jesus.

ψυχή in Paul's Epistles and Thessalonian Context

Considering the widespread Hellenistic conceptions about ψυχή being the immortal and immaterial soul or inner being that is found in each person, it is striking that ψυχή appears only thirteen times in the Pauline corpus. What it signifies in these few occurrences has to do with individual life or self and is quite distinct from the typical Hellenistic conceptions. Stacey observes that "it is patent that the Greek view of soul cannot be found in Paul." Paul's limited use of this term appears to be related to the use of ψυχή in the Septuagint to translate ἰό̂ς (vitality, life, self), a term that appears with great frequency in the Hebrew Scriptures. Robert Jewett explains the three basic connotations of ψυχή in Pauline usage as well as what it does not connote:

It can bear the sense of one's earthly life as it is publically observable in behavior; the sense of the individual's earthly life which can be lost in death; or the sense of the individual person. The particular sense of the word depends upon the context in which it is used rather than upon a development within Paul's

26. Ware, "Paul's Understanding of Resurrection," 835 (underlining and italics original).

27. Ibid., 835.

28. See Rom 2:9; 11:3; 13:1; 16:4; 1 Cor 15:45; 2 Cor 1:23; 12:15; Eph 6:6; Phil 1:27; 2:30; Col 3:23; 1 Thess 2:8; 5:23. For a history of research, see Jewett, Paul's Anthropological Terms, 334–40.

29. The definitions listed in BDAG, 1098–100, all have to do with "life" or "individual life/person," yet the English term "soul" is also glossed unhelpfully as another word for "inner human life."

30. Stacey, Pauline View of Man, 125.

31. It occurs 756 times according to ibid., 121.
thought. From the first to the last letter, Paul remains basically within the Judaic tradition in his use at this point. There are, however, several connotations of ψυχή within popular Judaic usage which Paul appears to avoid. He never uses it in the strict sense of the "soul," i.e. the God-related portion of man which survives after death. Furthermore, Paul avoids the interchangeability between πνεῦμα and ψυχή which was the mark of the Rabbinic usage, related as it was to the question of the fate of the soul after death.\footnote{Jewell, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, 448-49 (emphasis added).}

Because of what the English term "soul" has come to signify (e.g., "our immaterial spiritual being that exists beyond death," as well as the problematic conceptions about the soul from Hellenistic philosophy that impacted Christianity in different ways), "soul" is not a helpful English term to use in translating the Pauline uses of ψυχή. "Life," "individual person," or "self" are translations that communicate more clearly and prevent the confusion that arises from what is being signified with the English term "soul." Because Paul is writing about the ψυχή being kept blameless until the last day in 1 Thess 5:23, "life" is not a viable translation here. Because he is clearly distinguishing ψυχή from πνεῦμα, the translation "self" may communicate this distinction in the best manner. One of the most important texts in the Pauline corpus for understanding Paul's usage of ψυχή in 1 Thess 5:23 is his earlier usage of the term in 1 Thess 2:8, "We desired to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own individual selves [τὰς εαυτῶν ψυχὰς]." For Paul, each human has a unique, individual self, or personhood, created by God, which will be sanctified and kept unto the resurrection of the body on the day of the triumphal coming of Jesus.

In contrast to Paul's usage, ψυχή was widely understood within Hellenistic philosophy after the sixth century BC to be a godlike, immaterial, immortal reality that had been imprisoned in the body and soiled by contact with the flesh.\footnote{See esp. Stacey, *Pauline View of Man*, 59-81.} The teaching of the immortality of the soul led to the prominent teaching of the transmigration of souls after death in order to accomplish purification. An example from Vergil's *Aeneid*, written in the first century BC, explains that the soul is part of the universal spirit, with the so-called immortal soul seeking escape from the physical body and then purging corruption through a thousand-year cycle of punishment:

In the first place a spirit within sustains the sky, the earth, the waters, and the shining globe of the moon, and the Titan sun and stars; this spirit moves the whole mass of the universe, a
mind, as it were, infusing its limbs and mingled with its huge body. From this arises all of life, the race of men, animals and birds, and the monsters that the sea bears under its marble surface. The seeds of this mind and spirit have a fiery power and celestial origin, insofar as the limbs and joints of the body, which is of earth, harmful, and subject to death, do not make them full and slow them down. Thus the souls, shut up in the gloomy darkness of the prison of their bodies, experience fear, desire, joy, and sorrow, and do not see clearly the essence of their celestial nature. Moreover, when the last glimmer of life has gone, all the evils and all the diseases of the body do not yet completely depart from these poor souls and it is inevitable that many ills, for a long time encrusted, become deeply engrained in an amazing way. Therefore they are piled with punishments and they pay the penalties of their former wickedness. Some spirits are hung suspended to the winds; for others the infection of crime is washed by a vast whirlpool or burned out by fire. Each of us suffers his own shade. Then we are sent to Elysium and we few occupy these happy fields, until a long period of the circle of time has been completed and has removed the ingrown corruption and has left a pure ethereal spirit and the fire of the original essence. When they have completed the cycle of one thousand years, the god calls all these in a great throng to the river Lethe, where, of course, they are made to forget so that they might begin to wish to return to bodies and see again the vault of heaven.  

Given the fact that most of the members of the church in Thessalonica would have been familiar with such teaching about the soul, is it any wonder that Paul writes a comforting message of peaceful falling asleep and then embodied resurrection to them (1 Thess 4:13-18)? Given the focus on ψυχή in Hellenistic understandings of man, is it any wonder that Paul specifically includes this term, with a meaning of “individual self” distinct from Hellenistic understandings of the soul, in his description of the whole person who will be sanctified and kept to the triumphal coming of Christ? If Paul would not have included this term, the Christians at Thessalonica would have posed the question: “But what will happen to my ψυχή in the afterlife?”

Certainly ψυχή is present in the Pauline corpus, but why was it not used more frequently? Paul gives very limited attention to ψυχή largely because of the dominant attention he gives to πνεῦμα in his anthropology of the believer in Christ. Stacey explains this shift as resulting from Paul’s own

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34. Vergil, Aeneid, 700–751. This translation is from Morford and Lenardon, Classical Mythology, 246.
religious experience of the Spirit. “In [Paul’s] Christian experience, ψυχή, the term for purely human vitality, became unimportant. πνεῦμα, the term that began with God but proceeded into man, became central. The infrequency of the use of ψυχή in Paul is the key to the understanding of it. This fact points us away from Jewish and Greek ideas to the third factor, Paul’s religious experience. Paul’s knowledge of the Holy Spirit set the basis of his anthropology and πνεῦμα took the leading role.”

πνεῦμα in Paul’s Epistles and Thessalonian Context

It is clear that τὸ πνεῦμα plays the leading role in Paul’s anthropology: it is used some 146 times in his letters. As a first-century Jew, Paul’s understanding of πνεῦμα is grounded in the rich testimony in the Hebrew Scriptures to the divine πνεῦμα (breath, spirit), as expressed here by W. David Stacey: “Between Paul and the Old Testament there are no striking differences, only development and a variation of emphasis. The framework of Paul’s belief about the Spirit is exactly the Old Testament framework. It begins with the Divine Nature, passes on to divine activity, to the power that invades men, to the element in regenerated man that receives it, and to the results in belief and practice that ensue from the spirit invasion. This common pattern is too clear, too complete, to be accidental.”

While the background for Paul’s usage may be clear, Paul’s actual use of πνεῦμα is complex and varied. Stacey notes six different uses of πνεῦμα in Paul: Holy Spirit, the Spirit at work in the believer in Christ, evil spirits, evils spirits at work in unbelievers, the Christian spirit as a result of the Holy Spirit, and the individual spirit of each human. This brief discussion will not attempt to analyze this broad testimony to πνεῦμα, but will simply address three important questions. Does Paul teach that all individuals, apart from being in Christ, have πνεῦμα as an aspect of their anthropology? If so, what is the relationship between this πνεῦμα and the πνεῦμα of a Christian? Finally, what can be said about Paul’s understanding of the relationship between “the spirit” of a Christian and “the Holy Spirit”?

The fact is that Paul wrote very little about πνεῦμα as constituting the inner man of every human being. First Corinthians 2:10–12 implies that

35. Stacey, Pauline View of Man, 126–27.
36. Ibid., 121.
37. Ibid., 138.
38. To confirm this conclusion, one only needs to examine the section on Paul in Eduard Schweizer, “πνεῦμα, πνευματικός.”
each human has a πνεῦμα who knows the inner thoughts of his or her own person. Paul also states there that Christians have not received “the spirit of the world” (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου) but “the Spirit from God” (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) so that Christians can understand the thoughts of God. The implication of this is that one's individual spirit has received and is impacted by either “the spirit of the world” or “the Spirit from God.” Stacey notes that in Paul’s letters the Spirit is “the key to the understanding of man's spirit . . . but one does not shade off into the other.”

Paul understands that man’s spirit is re-created, transformed, and made new by the Holy Spirit so that the Christian possesses a spirit different from an unbeliever because of indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This understanding is reflected when Paul writes about “my spirit” or “our spirit” as distinct but not separated from the Holy Spirit. An example of this is Rom 8:16, “The Spirit himself (αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα) bears witness with our spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα ἡμῶν) that we are children of God.” Paul is telling each of the Roman Christians that the Spirit and their spirit (e.g., because their spirit had been enlivened and defined by the indwelling of the Spirit) both testify to their status as children of God. Another example is when Paul writes about praying and praising with “my spirit” (1 Cor 14:14–15); his spirit here is distinguished from the Spirit who indwells Paul even though it is not separate from the Spirit. Such an understanding is also reflected in Paul’s statement that when the Corinthians would assemble for church discipline, “my spirit is present” (1 Cor 5:3–5).

What is the relationship between the spirit of the Christian and the Holy Spirit? While some distinction remains, the very close relationship between the two has led James Frame to conclude about the texts discussed immediately above: “it is evident that ‘my spirit’ is that portion of the divine Spirit which is resident in the individual.” Robert Jewett states that “Paul thought of the human spirit simply as the apportioned divine spirit . . . thought to so enter human possession that it could be referred to as ‘mine’ and yet at the same time retaining its character as divine.” In spite of the objections of some scholars, Paul’s understanding of the Christian’s spirit cannot be easily distinguished from the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian. It is precisely the Spirit’s close union with the Christian’s spirit that is the “firstfruits” of the redemption of the body (Rom 8:23).

40. Stacey, Pauline View of Man, 132.
41. Frame, Critical and Exegetical Commentary, 212.
42. Jewell, Paul’s Anthropological Terms, 451; see also 175–83.
43. For example, Fee states that “this suggestion will simply not hold up”; see First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 228.
Because of the close relationship, even union, between “spirit” and “Spirit” in Paul’s anthropology, it must be emphasized that “spirit” in the triad of 1 Thess 5:23 should always be understood in light of the presence of “the Spirit.” Even as Christ has redefined Paul’s understanding of the “inner man” and “new man” so that Christ dominates his understanding of the anthropos in the Christian, so the Spirit profoundly dominates the individual spirit in Paul’s anthropology of the Christian. There can be little doubt that Paul spent time teaching the Thessalonians about τὸ πνεῦμα, probably in part to correct their Hellenistic misunderstandings of ψυχή, but especially to fill out their understanding of πνεῦμα, especially the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Thess 1:5, 6; 4:8; 5:19). In fact, such teaching is assumed by the imperatival exhortation that comes shortly before this triad: “Do not quench τὸ πνεῦμα” (5:19).

Conclusion: The Meaning and Function of 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Drawing on the understanding of the three anthropological terms proposed above, a terse interpretation of 1 Thess 5:23 will now be set forth, beginning with a brief overview of the structure of this blessing. It is made up of two major clauses that are divided as follows:

First Clause: May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely,

Second Clause: and may your spirit, self, and body as a whole be kept blamelessly at the triumphal coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Within these two clauses, elements of parallel structure are also visible between the two verbs, two pronouns, and two adjectives in what amounts to a chiastic structure.44

Optative Verb: ἀγιάσατι (“may he sanctify”)

Recipients: ὑμᾶς (“you”)

Adjective: ὅλοτελεῖς (“completely”)

Conjunction: καὶ (“and”)

Adjective: ὅλοξκληρον (“whole”)

44. Weima, 1-2 Thessalonians, 418.
Paul begins this blessing by using a reassuring and comforting title for God: ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης (“the God of peace”). The powerful Roman Empire promised peace through its Pax Romana, but cannot deliver from divine judgment (cf. 1 Thess 5:3). It is God who delivers us from the wrath of judgment through Jesus (cf. 1 Thess 1:9; 5:9). In light of the anxiety caused by suffering (e.g., 2 Thess 1:4), it is not surprising that a similar blessing comes at the close of 2 Thessalonians: “May the Lord of peace himself give you peace” (2 Thess 3:16). The optative mood verb ἀγιάσαι with the pronoun ὑμᾶς expresses the blessing of the first phrase: “May he sanctify you.” The adjective ὀλοτελεῖς is a hapax legomenon in the New Testament and rare in other literature, but is found used with physiological terminology. 45 Although an adjective, ὀλοτελεῖς is translated adverbially here (“completely”); it is describing “the totality of sanctification.” 16 Malherbe notes that ὀλοτελεῖς is used in tandem with the similar sounding ὀλόκληρον in the second clause as “synonymous adjectives denoting entirety.” 47 The use of the personal pronoun αὐτός prior to the title for God serves as an intensifier: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.”

The second clause has an epexegetical function: it explains further the meaning of the first clause about being sanctified completely. The optative mood verb of this clause, τηρηθείη, is used with the adjective ἄμεμπτως to express the blessing of the second clause: “may ... be kept blameless.” The passive voice of τηρηθείη without an expressed agent implies that this is a divine action (i.e., kept blameless by “the God of peace”). This understanding is confirmed in the statements that follow: “The one who is calling you is faithful, who also will do it.” There is a virtually synonymous relationship between the verbal actions of these two clauses: “sanctify” and “keep blameless.” The object of this divine “keep blameless” action is the “whole” person, as is clear from both the adjective ὀλόκληρον, which modifies all three nouns that follow, and the triad: ὀλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα (“your spirit, self, and body as a whole”). Gordon Fee notes that “whatever distinctions he may have understood are quite secondary to the greater

45. Malherbe notes that it was used by Actius (first or second century AD) of the fully formed human embryo in Compendium of Tenets (see Ps.-Plutarch, On the Opinions of Philosophers 5.21); see Letters to the Thessalonians, 228.

46. Malherbe, Letters to the Thessalonians, 228.

47. Ibid.
concern of completeness.” The use of the triad may reflect completeness in a way similar to the language of “heart, soul, and might” in the Shema (Deut 6:4) and “heart, soul, mind, and strength” in Jesus’ summary of the law (Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:37). Given the fact that one of the issues that Paul addresses is the misunderstanding that the death of fellow Christians prior to Christ’s coming means those Christians will miss out on blessings brought at the parousia, Jeffrey Weima posits that this triad may be a final word of assurance that addresses this misunderstanding: “By closing the letter with a prayer that God may keep their spirit and soul and body ‘whole’ (holokleron) at the second coming of Christ, Paul responds one last time to such fears by assuring his readers that a believer’s whole person will be involved in the day of Christ’s return. Thus those who die before the Parousia of Christ will neither miss that vindicating and magnificent eschatological event, nor will they be in any way at a disadvantage compared to believers who are still living.”

Although Paul is emphasizing the complete human being with this triad, nevertheless each anthropological term is important, as emphasized above. πνεῦμα (spirit) is put in first position because it reflects Paul’s own anthropological priority on the Spirit. For Paul, any talk about the spirit of one who is in Christ is talk of the Spirit who has enlivened and transformed the individual spirit. Paul uses ψυχή not in the sense of Hellenistic conceptions of the soul, but to signify the unique individual self with which each human has been created. It is conceivable that Paul could have written about the whole person in terms of just πνεῦμα and σῶμα (cf. 2 Cor 7:1). If he would not have mentioned ψυχή to the Thessalonians in this context, however, some of them, because ψυχή was central in their understanding of man, would have been left wondering what would happen to their ψυχή in the afterlife, especially at the triumphal coming of Jesus. Paul anticipates this question by including ψυχή in his triad that emphasizes the whole person participating in the last day deliverance, not merely a disembodied ψυχή. Finally, Paul mentions σῶμα (body) because, unlike the denigration of the body as a prison for the soul in Hellenistic philosophy, the human body is a creation of God that will be resurrected and restored to glory; for Paul, σῶμα is essential to what it means to be an anthropos. The eschatological thrust of this blessing is made explicit in its closing words. The blessing is for the whole person to be kept blameless ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ

49. Ibid., 228n79.
50. Weima, 1–2 Thessalonians, 422.
51. Ibid.
Χριστοῦ ("at the triumphal coming of our Lord Jesus Christ"). παρουσία is a comforting and frequent subject in the Thessalonian letters, signifying the visible and public triumphal coming of Jesus on the last day in deliverance and judgment (1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8).

Paul follows up this blessing with confident assurance: "The one who is calling you is faithful, who also will do it." There is to be no doubt in the Thessalonian congregation that the God of peace will sanctify them completely, and keep their spirit, self, and body as a whole blameless until the last day. Paul had already expressed the firm basis for this certain hope: "Because we believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thess 4:14; cf. 5:9–10).

Bibliography


52. BDAG, 780–81.
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