

1 Thessalonians 1 • An Example of a Good Church

Introduction

Not every church mentioned in Scripture needed to be admonished for bad behavior or its weaknesses. The church in Thessalonica is provided as a wonderful example of a good church. In a time when so many false approaches to church growth are being embraced, we need to carefully measure what the so-called “experts” offer as a good example of a church versus that provided in Scripture. One of the chief principles is that the quality of your individual walk in Christ is not just important to you personally, but contributes directly to the health of the church overall. Our responsibility for personal faithfulness actually extends its impact upon the corporate faithfulness of our church.

¹Paul and Silvanus and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; ⁵for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

[Read v.1-5]

Q: What does the Greek word here translated “church” literally mean?

A: “Ecclesia” means “a called-out group”.

Q: From what was the Thessalonian church called out from, and to what was it called into?

A: It was called out from the world to be exclusively devoted to “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. Peter would express this as being “called out of darkness into His marvelous light”.

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, a royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

1 Peter 2:9

[Note: To fully understand how each thought in this paragraph fully relates to and supports each other, we will purposely start from the end and work our way backwards. We will then see how everything properly relates when read in the normal order.]

Q: How did salvation come to the Thessalonians?

A: It originated with hearing God’s Word – the Gospel (v.5) – and being confirmed:

- “...in power...”
- “...and in the Holy Spirit...”
- “...and with full conviction...”

Point: This is a picture of the “good soil” from the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15) in which the Word is fully implanted and becomes fruitful and not of someone who is simply a “hearer” of the Word, but a “doer”.

Q: What is indicated in v.4 that they discovered AFTER they fully received the Word?

A: They learned that even before they had made the choice to come to Christ, He had already chosen them.

Point: It’s been stated that the mystery of God’s election and man’s decision will never be fully understood this side of heaven because although the Bible teaches both, the twin truths of election and decision are not contradictory, but complimentary to each other. As far as God is concerned, we were saved when He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world; as far as the Spirit is concerned, we were saved when we responded to His call to receive Christ; as far as the Son is concerned, we were saved when He died for us on the cross.

Q: How did Paul know that the Thessalonians were saved?

A: By the evidence in their lives listed in v.3.

Q: What are the three main characteristics of this church identified by Paul in v.3 which also correspond to Paul's teachings in his other epistles?

A: Faith, love, and hope.

Q: What does "work of faith" actually mean?

A: "Faith" is used here interchangeably with "faithfulness" or the quality of one's Christianity. When people are truly walking with Christ, their faith will be evidenced by their works. Works will not save, but faith not leading to works is not a saving faith. [See James 2:14-26.] True Christianity is proven by a changed life.

Q: What does "labor of love" actually mean?

A: The true Christian has a new motive for living, to love Christ and to love others. Whereas the unsaved live only for themselves, the saved are willing to toil and work because of this love.

and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25

Q: What does "steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" actually mean?

A: The saved can endure life's trials because they know that Christ is coming for them, either in this life or the one to come. They don't need to give up in times of trial because they know the Savior will deliver them.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:6-9

Q: How are these three qualities found to parallel the three evidences of salvation expounded in v.9-10?

- "Work of faith" – "You turned to God from idols"
- "Labor of love" – "You...serve a living and true God"
- "Steadfastness of hope" – "You...wait for His Son from heaven"

Point: *The Thessalonians were an elect people. Those called out of this world and designated for Christ alone are visibly proven by the quality of their faith providing works from a changed life, their labor of love actively toiling not just for Christ but for love of others, and a steadfastness of hope that transcends all current conditions because greater is their trust in Christ than in the world. Such a group is a true "church" – "a group called out" – for Christ.*

⁶You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

[Read v.6-7]

Q: What does it mean that they “became imitators”?

A: They were not just hearers of the Word, but doers, putting it into practice.

Q: What might be surprising about what happened to them once they began living the Word?

A: It was received both “in much tribulation” and “with the joy of the Holy Spirit”. (v.6)

Point: Just as Paul and company preached the Gospel with joy, so it was received; but just as Paul and company preached it under conditions of “much tribulation” (see Acts 16-17), so that, too, was experienced. The Thessalonians had to put the Word into practice in every sense it was active in the examples of both Jesus and Paul’s ministry team.

Q: How did this cycle continue to propagate itself?

A: The Thessalonians in turn “became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia”.

Point: The Thessalonians were an exemplary people. When the Word is both properly planted and received, the result is true discipleship which in turn begets additional generations of discipleship, not simply converts. The example of living the Word is in turn passed on as an example of how to live by it under all circumstances.

⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

[Read v.8]

Q: What is the phrase “sounded forth” describing? What does it mean?

A: It communicates the idea of blowing a trumpet. It describes someone boldly preaching the Gospel for Christ.

Point: The Thessalonians were an enthusiastic people, enthusiastic witnesses for Christ. They were not an “ecclesia” – “a group called out” to be separate and isolated, but to change the world around them by employing the same message which changed them.

⁹For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

[Read v.9-10]

Q: What is inferred here as to the present condition of the unsaved? What are the lost doing?

A: They’re blindly worshiping and serving their idols.

Q: And what are the saved doing?

A: They’re serving “a living and true God” while they “wait for His Son from heaven”.

Q: So how is the true Believer supposed to wait for Christ’s return?

A: By being busy living a faithful life and preaching the Gospel.

Q: How does v.10 make a distinction between the saved and the unsaved?

A: God’s wrath will not come upon the saved, but only the unsaved.

Point: The Thessalonians were an expectant people. We have nothing to fear regarding the End Times if we only continue to walk daily, faithful lives according to His Word.

Overall Application

The characteristics of a good church, according to the example of the church in Thessalonica:

- *They were an elect people. (v. 1-5)*
- *They were an exemplary people (v. 6-7)*
- *They were an enthusiastic people (v. 8)*
- *They were an expectant people (v. 9-10)*

Discuss as it pertains to yourself: How am I helping make my church a model church in Christ?