

The Marks Of A Model Church

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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I often hear people say, “If you’re looking for a perfect church, if you find it, don’t join it, because if you do, it won’t be perfect anymore.” There are no perfect churches, because there are no perfect people. Churches consist of people, and nobody is perfect.

But there are churches that are closer to the pattern and model that God has given to us in the Bible, in His Word. I think the church in Thessalonica was just such a church. If I were going to look for a model church in the New Testament, it would be the church in Thessalonica. Even though it was a newly planted church—it hadn’t been in existence long, they were new believers and they came out of a paganist background—they were an exemplary church. Paul mentions that in verse 7. He said of the Thessalonians, “You became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.”

The word “examples” is the Greek word “tupos.” We get our word “type” from it. The word “tupos” literally meant that when you would strike something, it left an impression. The impression or shape that was left became a picture or type of the item that struck that thing. So the word developed into the concept of a type, a picture, a pattern or a model.

So Paul said, “You in Thessalonica became a model of the believers to everyone in Macedonia and in Achaia.” Macedonia is northern Greece, and Achaia is southern Greece. So in northern and southern Greece, they became an example to all the churches.

The church in Thessalonica started in Acts 17. On Paul’s second missionary journey, he was traveling with Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy. He also traveled with Dr. Luke, the author of Luke and the book of Acts. They came to Macedonia in northern Greece. They first went to Philippi, and then they went to Thessalonica. It says in Acts 17:2-3 that he went into the synagogue and “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’” Then in anger, many of the Jews drove him out of Thessalonica, so he had to go down to Berea.

The believers in Thessalonica only had Paul with them for about three-to-four Sabbath days. So he was only there with them for about four weeks and then was driven out of town. So this church was very fresh and new.

But after just a few months, Paul wrote back to the Thessalonians from Corinth, in Acts 18. The epistle of 1 Thessalonians is believed to be the first letter that Paul penned, about 51 AD.

Why did Paul write 1 Thessalonians? Let me give you four reasons. Number one, to commend them, chapter 1. Number two, to vindicate himself, chapters 2-3. He was being attacked by false teachers. He only defended himself because of the sake of the Gospel. He wasn’t

concerned with his reputation. He was worried about the Gospel going out. Since he was a preacher of the Gospel, he had to defend himself and what he preached. Number three, he wrote 1 Thessalonians to admonish them to live holy lives, chapter 4. Many of them were Gentiles living in a pagan culture, so since they were brought out of that pagan culture, they needed to live godly lives. And number four, to instruct them about dead believers and their relationship to the coming Lord. We'll get the classic rapture passage in chapter 4, verses 13-14, where Paul says, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus." They were worried that their friends who had died had missed the rapture. Some of them had died, but the Lord had not yet come back. In just the short three-to-four weeks, Paul had taught them about the coming of the Lord.

If you die before the rapture, don't freak out. You will be in the presence of the Lord. We sorrow when a Christian believer dies, but not "as others who have no hope."

Now why was the church at Thessalonica a model church? I want to give you three reasons or marks of a model church. They were an elect from God, they were evangelistic and they were expectant. Another way to describe them could be found in verse 3. They had a "work of faith," they had a "labor of love" and they had "patience of hope." They had it tied into their faith, their love and their hope.

So every follower of Christ is to be a believer, a lover and a hope. I like to think of Christians as believing in God, loving God and others and hoping for the coming again of Jesus Christ. And that's a Biblical concept of hope. It's not that you hope it will happen; it's a confident assurance that Christ will return, and you are looking for that to happen.

The first category of this perfect church is that they were an elect church, verses 1-4. "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace." Some older manuscripts omit "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." But the King James Bible includes that. Continuing, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ..."—notice our hope is centered in Jesus Christ—"...in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren..."—and here's our theme—"...your election by God." This is a clear reference in the Bible that God elects those who are His own. "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world," the Bible says.

There are three things in these four verses I want to point out. Verse 1 is the salutation, verses 2-3 is the commendation and verse 4 is the election of the believer.

First, in verse 1 we see the salutation. It starts with the human author, Paul. And he mentions his companions Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy, or Timotheus. They were actually traveling companions of Paul, and they were with Paul when he founded the church in Acts 17 on his

second missionary journey.

There is no disputing that Paul was the human author of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The “human author” indicates that God uses human beings to write His Word. He superintends them by the Holy Spirit, so the very words they wrote were the very words of God. The Bible has two natures: it is written by man, and it is written by God. So even though God used human instruments, the Bible says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” That means that God superintended the authors, so the very words they wrote were the words of God.

I believe in what’s called a “verbal plenary,” or that all the words in the Bible are given by inspiration of God. It’s not just the broad concepts that are given by God but the actual words. How does God use a human author, his personality, his style, his writing and make sure it is His Word? I don’t know but it’s awesome. I believe that God did just that. I believe the Bible is unique; it is the only living, powerful, active Word of God. So even though it has a human author, it is of divine origin. Paul was the founder, you might say, of the church, even though he was elected by God “before the foundation of the world.”

Notice in verse 1 the recipients of this salutation. It is “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And the salutation is “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The word “church” is the Greek word “ekklesia.” It literally means “called out assembly.” The church is not a building; it’s the people. We refer to the building as the church, but the people who come into and go out of the building are the church. So the church consists of living, breathing people. Jesus saves us by His grace and forms us into His body, the bride, the habitation of God by His Spirit.

Now I want you to notice the church’s position spiritually, in verse 1: “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church is not a social club; it’s a living organism. It’s founded, living, growing and thriving “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The greeting is “Grace...”—or “charis”—“...to you and peace...”—or “shalom”—“...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The fact that Paul couples Jesus Christ as the source of grace and peace with God the Father is an indication of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we move to the commendation in verses 2-3. “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing...”—he also says in chapter 5, verse 17 that we are to “pray without ceasing”—“...your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father.” Our hope is not in government, not in man, not in politics, not in science; it’s in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice that Paul was thankful and prayerful for the church. Are you thankful for the local church, and do you pray for the local church? Be thankful for this church. I’m thankful for this church. I’m thankful to be a part of this church. I’m thankful to be a part of this family of God. I need your prayers, and I need your encouragement. You need my prayers and my encouragement.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’”

There are a lot of people who think you can live the Christian life apart from the church. You cannot do that. You can be a Christian without being involved in a local church, but you can't be a good Christian without being involved in a local church. Be a part of a local church, and be thankful for that local church. Get on your knees and be prayerful for that local church.

I think it's interesting that Paul says, “We give thanks to God always for you all.” It's not always easy to thank God for everybody in the local church. Someone said, “To live above with the saints in love—that will be glory. But to dwell below with the saints I know—brother, that's another story.”

Sometimes pastors have been known to pray for blessed subtractions. “Lord, just remove them from the church, in Jesus' name. Or change them. But do something, Lord! This is difficult!”

But when Paul thought of all the believers in this church at Thessalonica, his heart was thrilled. He rejoiced because they were an example, a model to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. So he was thankful and prayerful for them.

Now what was Paul thankful for, verse 3? He was thankful for their “work of faith, labor of love and patience of hope.” That's a great three-part message from the Word for any preacher. This is a description of the model church.

What is the “work of faith”? It is your work produced by faith. We're not saved by works, but we're saved unto good works. Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” So works are the fruit, not the root, of our salvation. You're not saved by working, but if you're saved, you will work. “If you're saved and you know it, your life will surely show it.” Works is evidence of your salvation.

So this is speaking of the Thessalonians' election that is directed toward God.

Secondly, Paul was thankful for their “labor of love.” One translation has “your labor motivated by love.” It could be their love for God, their love for people or it could be a general reference about their labor in serving God. But in the context, it probably refers to their evangelism. We will see that they were an evangelistic church. What could be more loving than sharing the Gospel with people? People are lost, going to hell, dying without Christ. The most loving thing you could do is to preach the Gospel to them.

So the Thessalonians labored out of love to preach the Gospel. This was their evangelism.

Then, thirdly, verse 3, they had “patience of hope.” A better rendering of the word “patience” here would be “steadfast endurance.” Patience gives you an image of being passive and not being uptight. But steadfast endurance has the idea of being faithful through trials, suffering and hardship. What this is saying—and it is absolutely amazing—is that the hope of the coming

of the Lord makes us strong, gives us endurance and helps us to be steadfast.

If you take away the hope of the coming again of Christ, it is a very dark world. What a crazy last couple of years we've been through. Where would we be without the hope of the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ? He's coming again, and I look forward to that. And it's not "just a pie in the sky in the sweet by and by." Heaven is not just a destination; it's a present motivation. It should motivate us to work out our faith, to labor with our love, which is our motive, and to be patiently enduring, steadfast for the coming again of Jesus Christ.

Someone renders this, "Your endurance inspired by hope; waiting, which expresses itself in endurance; an expectant hope that endures." And notice that it is the coming again of Jesus Christ.

So we have a faith that works, love that labors and a hope that endures. All of these are productive. You can't just sit around and say, "I have faith, I have love, I have hope." You can say it with your lips, but let me see it in your life. Let me see your faith working, let me see your love laboring and let me see your hope giving you steadfast endurance. It changes the way we live. How important that is.

Now, thirdly, we see in verse 4, their election. It says, "...knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God." They are loved and chosen by God. The church is a community loved and chosen by God.

It's a sad truth that the doctrine of election is a basis for discussion, debate, strife and division among Christians. That ought not to be so. I believe that this doctrine is Biblical. God chose Abraham, and He chose the nation of Israel. Jesus said in John 15:16, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you." The Bible says in Ephesians 1:4, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world."

We could get bogged down and talk about the doctrine of election, free will and evangelism. I believe that both election and free will are taught in the Bible. God sovereignly elects, by His love and grace, but man must also repent and believe and trust in Jesus Christ. Christians get all hot under the collar and upset and freak out. I don't know why you'd want to freak out over the doctrine that God chose you.

Remember when you were in school and at recess they picked sports teams? Two captains were picked, and they usually were the best players. They picked who was to be on their teams. Maybe you were the last to be picked. Maybe you weren't even picked; you were just the last one standing there. But a captain says, "Okay, we'll take you. Come on. You can be on our team."

You know how defeating that felt. But to realize that "God chose me?!" You repent of your sins, you believe in Jesus Christ and then you open your Bible and Jesus said, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you." Which is it? Both. Sovereignly, God in His grace, in His mercy and in His love chose you. And you repent, you believe, you surrender to God. But you can choose to

resist the grace of God and His salvation.

I don't know how to reconcile the two, other than they reconcile in a higher unity. And I never seek to reconcile friends; I think they work together in God's economy. We have free will; we can resist God's grace, yet God sovereignly, in His love, chooses us.

So I like to put it quite simply: if you're a Christian, you're a Christian because God chose you. You are saved because God chose you. Isn't that a marvelous truth? That's the true church.

This doctrine of election should bring humility, not pride. It should bring holiness, not apathy or complacency. It should bring witness, not lazy selfishness. If I realize I'm chosen by God, it should humble me. It should make me want to live a holy life. It should make me want to witness and share the Gospel with others.

That leads to my next, main point. The church at Thessalonica was not only a model church because they were the elect, but, secondly, also because they were evangelistic, verses 5-8. "For our Gospel..."—there's the good news—"...did not come to you in word only, but also in power..."—there's our word "dunamis"—"...and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers..."—there's our word, "imitators" or "models"—"...of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you..."—here's their evangelism—"...the word of the Lord has sounded forth..."—or "trumpeted" or "thundered out"—"...not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything."

So he said, "We don't need to talk about you, because everyone knows about you. Because you're so evangelistic, you're spreading the good news."

Election and evangelism are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes people get the idea that if the people who are going to be saved are elected by God, then why should we witness? Why should we preach? Why should we evangelize? The answer is because the God who ordained the end—the salvation of sinners—also ordained the means to that end—the preaching of the Gospel.

Don't ask me to explain it; I think we just need to obey it. The Bible says, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature."

"Well, you know, the elect will be saved. The nonelect will not be saved. So why should we do any evangelism?"

If we have received the Word, we are to live the Word, then we are to be distributors of the Word. Election does not negate that responsibility. We all are to be involved in preaching the Gospel to the world. It's the whole church's job to preach the whole Gospel to the whole world.

I want you to know three facts about the Gospel in its relationship to the believers in Thessalonica. Number one, the Gospel came to them, verse 5. "For our Gospel did not come to you in word only." Notice the words "come to you." So it actually came to them. First, he says it negatively: "For our Gospel did not come to you in word only."

It did come in words, but it didn't come in words only. Remember Paul said that the preaching of the Gospel "is the power of God to salvation"? So this preaching came with words, but it had the power of the Spirit behind it.

Verse 5, the Gospel came "...also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake."

So we have the Word of God and the Spirit of God. I wish I could convey how important these two things are in the Christian life. The Scriptures and the Spirit, the Word of God and the Spirit of God. I call these the dynamic duo in the life of the believer. You can't live the Christian life without God's Word; you can't grow in the Lord without the Word. And you can't grow without the Spirit. If you have just the Word, you'll dry up. If you have just the Spirit, you'll blow up. If you have both, you'll grow up. So the Word of God and the Spirit of God work together in harmony.

God speaks through what He has spoken. Not only are the Scriptures given by inspiration of God, but they are still "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword." When you read the Bible, you're actually hearing God speak and the Holy Spirit, who alone can teach us, and bring illumination. So the Spirit brings inspiration, the Spirit helps with interpretation and the Spirit brings transformation of our lives. John R. W. Stott said, "The Spirit without the Word is weaponless, and the Word without the Spirit is powerless." I like that.

The sad thing is that so many times in churches, it's all the Word and no Spirit, or it's all the Spirit and no Word. We need a balance of both so that we can grow in the Lord.

Now notice also that the Gospel came with deep conviction, verse 5. Paul uses the phrase "in much assurance." Paul preached the Gospel with great conviction, and so should we.

I heard a story about Benjamin Franklin, who I don't believe was a true Christian. He was once listening to the evangelist, George Whitfield, preach in an open-air setting. There was a crowd of thousands gathered. Benjamin Franklin was standing in the crowd, someone saw him and knew he was a critic, so he asked, "Benjamin, what are you doing here?! I know you don't believe the Gospel."

Benjamin Franklin answered him, "No, but George Whitfield does. I always like to listen to a man who believes what he is preaching."

So what we need is conviction, to preach with assurance this good news of Jesus Christ. And that's how the Gospel was delivered to them in Thessalonica.

Then, secondly, notice that the Gospel was received by them, verse 6. “And you became followers...”—or “imitators”; we get our word “mimics” from that—“...of us and of the Lord, having received...”—there it is—“...the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.” So in spite of the suffering it brought, they received the Word. To receive the Gospel means that you come into opposition from the world.

But they also had the “joy of the Holy Spirit.” In Acts 8, when Philip preached in Samaria, it was said, “There was great joy in that city” because of his preaching. In Acts 16, the Philippian jailer was converted, “And he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.” So you receive the Word, it brings the affliction and the opposition of the world, but you have this deep-seated joy.

Remember when you first got saved? Your friends didn’t like you anymore. They didn’t invite you to parties anymore. They didn’t want to hang out with you anymore, because you were a “Jesus freak.” You found opposition in your life. But in your heart, you had the joy of the Lord.

So who cares what happens? You have the joy of the Lord from the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, verse 7, the Gospel was spread by them. This is their evangelism. They became examples of all they believed; they lived it out in their lives. Then they sounded it out. So in verse 7, they preached the Gospel by their lives; in verse 8, they preached the Gospel with their lips. We have to use both our lives and our lips.

The words “sounded forth,” in verse 8, means “to trumpet out” or “to thunder out.” It has the idea of sound, acoustic and reverberation. As sound echoes, so too they preached out, reverberated and trumpeted out the Gospel. So it speaks of their evangelism, of preaching the Gospel.

They preached “not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.” And they spread the Word by their lives and by their lips.

So they received the Word, lived the Word and they preached the Word. What an important thing for us to do also: receive God’s Word, live God’s Word in our lives and preach God’s Word with our lips. That’s the example of a model church.

Then there is a third mark of a model church. Not only were they elected by God, not only were they evangelistic in reaching out to others, but also they were expectant. They were looking up for the coming again of Jesus Christ, verses 9-10. “For they themselves declare...”—or “show” or “picture”—“...concerning us what manner of entry we had to you.” So it was the way they lived and the way they preached showed that Paul’s ministry among them was effective. Continuing in verse 9, “...and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead...”—that is, God the Father raised Him from the dead—“...even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” This is future tense—the wrath that is coming. He has delivered us from this.

Now notice three things in this model church. They “turned to God from idols.” It indicates that they probably were mostly Gentiles, and they came from a pagan background. But even as non-Gentiles—whatever you might be—whenever you become a Christian, you have to repent. That means that you turn around; that means you turn from the world, and you follow God. That is their “work of faith.”

Secondly, they “serve the living and the true God.” That’s their “labor of love.” They shared the Gospel.

Thirdly, in verse 10, “they [waited] for His Son from heaven.” The mark of a model church is that they’re living in expectation of Christ’s soon coming. God have mercy on the church that doesn’t believe that Christ is coming again! I don’t know what I’d do without that blessed hope. Titus said, “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” By the way, “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” is a direct reference to the deity of Jesus.

We are looking for that. The darker the world gets, the more I watch the news and see what’s going on politically in America, my prayer is, “Even so come, Lord Jesus.” It’s the blessed hope. So the church in Thessalonica lived in constant expectation.

Now my question to you is, are you living in expectation? Do you believe that Jesus could come today? The Bible says, “Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Some ask, “Do you believe the Lord is coming today?”

“No, not today.”

But He may come today. I believe in the imminent return of Jesus Christ to rapture His church to heaven. I believe in a pre-tribulation rapture. Verse 10 says, “delivers us from the wrath to come.” That’s a reference to a pre-tribulation rapture. And I believe it is for those who are elect, for those who are chosen and for those who know Christ as their Lord and Savior, for the part of the church, the ekklesia, the body of Christ that will be caught up to meet Him in the clouds. So a church that is a model church lives in expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

In John 14:2-3, Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” I believe that is the rapture. Jesus promised to prepare a place in heaven and to come back for us and take us to heaven.

At the end of each chapter of 1 Thessalonians, there is a reference to the coming again of Jesus Christ. And in each case, it has practical implications for the Christian life. In the case of chapter 1, it is the doctrine of salvation and assurance. The evidence of their election was their evangelism and their expectation.

So they were saved, their lives showed it by the way they lived—with their lives and their lips—and they lived in constant expectation of Jesus Christ.

Notice in verse 10, it says, “whom He raised from the dead.” Jesus died, Jesus rose, Jesus Christ is coming back again.

So the model church has a faith that works, a love that labors and a hope that endures. May God help us to become the model church.