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## MODEL CHURCH CHAPTER

### I THESSALONIANS 1

You probably have heard it said, "If you ever find a perfect church, please do not join it; if you do it will not be perfect any longer!" Since local churches are made up of human beings, even though saved by God's grace, from the human perspective, we yet have our faults.

When the church in Thessalonica is referred to as a "Model Church" the term is not meant to convey the idea that its membership was comprised of sinlessly perfect persons. After all, they were living, breathing human beings with sinful natures living in a pagan culture, just like us! By "Model" is meant that they were practicing their Christianity in a manner which commends itself to us today. They were modeling the new-found life in Jesus Christ in an exemplary manner which we would do well to imitate.

Paul came to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. His entrance into the city is recorded in acts chapter 17. *"When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue."* (Acts 17:1)

Thessalonica was the capitol of Macedonia and a city of considerable size and influence. It had a population of approximately 70,000 at the time. As was Paul's custom, he went to population centers where he could maximize his Gospel outreach. Also, as was his custom, he went to the local synagogue, if there was one.

Therefore, we read, *"Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths 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." And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas."* (Acts 17:2-4)

That is the beginning of the church in the city of Thessalonica which early on was a shining model of a New Testament church. What characteristics of this church make it a model church? Notice seven marks of a model church in this chapter:

#### **1. IT WAS A CHURCH ENVELOPED BY GOD.**

*"Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ...."* (v.1a)

Although Paul wrote the letter to the church in Thessalonica it was a joint communication from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. Silvanus or Silas, as he is called in the previous chapters, and Timothy were joint signatories with him on this letter, because they had been with him when the church was founded.

When Paul was forced to flee the city because of the uprising against him, Silas and Timothy remained there. “..... *the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still.*” (Acts 17:14) This team had a heart for the work and friends who would be happy to hear from them. This missionary trio followed up their ministry by writing a letter of encouragement.

In the introduction Paul uses a phrase of which he was very fond: “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ....*” (v.1b) He reminds them that they were divinely enveloped - divinely situated, “*in God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Paul uses the phrase “*in Christ*” over 160 times in his epistles.

He speaks of “*the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” – Romans 3:4;

He says “*there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus*” – Romans 8:1

He says that all Christians “*are one body in Christ.*” – Romans 12:5

He writes that his relatives, Andronicus and Junia, “*were in Christ before me.*” – Romans 16:7

He addresses the church in Corinth as “*them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus.*” – I Cor. 1:2

He addresses the Ephesian church as “*the faithful in Christ Jesus.*” – (Eph. 1:1)

He addresses the Philippian church saying, “*to all the saints in Christ Jesus.*” – Phil. 1:1)

He addresses the Colossian church as “*faithful brethren in Christ.*” – Col. 1:2

And on and on he goes throughout his writings. You could say that Christians are truly the “in” crowd! Their temporal address was “Thessalonica”; their spiritual address was “*in Christ.*” Their earthly address was “Thessalonica”; their eternal address was “*in Christ.*”

To be “*in Christ*” is Paul’s way of emphasizing our union with Christ. Jesus spoke of this union using the analogy of the vine and the branches in John chapter 15. He said, “*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.*” (John 15:4-5)

Illust. A young girl was on her way home from Vacation Bible School and met the town skeptic coming toward her. He said, “I see you have been wasting your time going down to the church again. What did they brain-wash you with today?” She said, “I learned that as a Christian I am sealed up in Jesus and He is sealed up in me!” The skeptic said, “Ah, Maggie, there you go again! Why the devil can get you out of Jesus and Jesus out of you and you would be just like me!” Maggie replied, “No! No! That’s not possible, for first, he would have to get Jesus out of me, and the Bible says that “I am sealed until the day of redemption” and that’s a long time!” And then he would have to go to heaven and get me out of Jesus and he can’t do that because Jesus kicked him out of heaven a long time ago!”

Every true church and true Christian enjoys the same position as did the church in Thessalonica. We are “*in Christ*” and Christ is in us – “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” (Col. 1:27) Now, that is double security!

## **2. IT WAS A CHURCH ENRICHED WITH GOD’S GIFTS.**

“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” (v.1)

Not only were they divinely situated but they were divinely sustained by the glorious gifts of the grace of God and the peace of God.

"Grace" - Paul uses the term grace about 100 times in his 13 epistles. Grace means:

- The favor of God toward his people which results in their deliverance from the guilt and punishment of sin;
- Grace is God's love for the undeserving;
- It is His unmerited favor bestowed upon mankind.

"Peace" - When the grace of forgiveness is received there is an awareness, a consciousness of having the burden of the guilt of sin removed, resulting in peace "*which passes all understanding.*" (Phil. 4:7) Paul uses the word "*peace*" more than 40 times in his epistles.

Both grace and this peace have their origins in God the Father and have been made available to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Do not miss the divine order in the Paul's greeting in verse 1 – "*Grace to you and peace.*" That is the God-ordained order. It is never "peace and grace." Grace is the root and peace is the fruit; grace is the fountain, and peace is the stream which flows from this fountain.

Works religion says, "I will, by my own efforts, gain peace with God and then He will give me His grace." However, God says in essence, "Receive my grace made available by the work of My Son, Jesus Christ, and I will give you peace."

The Thessalonian church had been enriched with the twin gifts of grace and peace. And, so have all believers in all ages. Grace, it's amazing! Peace, it's abundant!

### **3. IT WAS A CHURCH EVIDENCING GOD'S LIFE.** Versus 2, 3,4.

*"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 in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God."*

This is the first time that this series of words: faith, hope, and love of occurs in Paul's epistles. Faith, hope and love are the three cardinal virtues of the Christian life and the three greatest evidences of salvation.

#### ***Faith is industrious.***

James says, "*Faith without works is dead.*" (James 2:20) Nothing tells us more about a person than the way in which they work. They may work in fear of a whip; they may work from a sense of duty; or they may work inspired by faith. There is work which is inspired by faith.

In the Greek the word "*labor*" is work that requires great exertion. The idea is that the work is definitely faith work, that is, it is work which springs from faith. This exertion is prompted by love and the endurance is inspired by hope.

Paul thanks God for the work that was being accomplished by these new converts but he does not reveal what work they were involved in. It was probably very practical work such as caring for the sick, comforting the dying, and other ministries of compassion. This was work resulting from faith.

***Love is propitious.***

And then, there is labor which is prompted by love. "Propitious" means, "To be favorably inclined." Love-labor is the most satisfying expenditure of energy. Work done out of a heart full of love always has a glory-glow about it. Paul described their productivity as a "*labor of love.*"

Illust. A man was traveling through Bulgaria and he stayed at the home of a friend for an extended period of time. All the time he was there the daughter was stitching away at a dress. He said to her, "Don't you ever get tired of that eternal sewing?" She replied, "Oh no! You see, this is my wedding dress." The sign of true love is when one finds glory in drudgery.

***Hope is tenacious.***

There is an endurance which is founded upon and fostered by hope. A person can endure almost anything so long as he has hope. Hope is like walking in darkness and knowing that you are walking toward the eventual dawn of a new day. Life with Christ is an endless hope; life without Christ is a hopeless end.

When Alexander the great was setting out on his campaigns, he divided all his possessions among his friends. Someone said to him, "Are you not keeping anything for yourself?" He replied, "Yes, I am keeping hope."

The performance of the Thessalonian Christians is a model for us. They had a faith that worked, they had love that labored and they had a hope that produced patience and endurance. Faith is industrious, love is propitious and hope is tenacious. Let us duplicate these qualities found in the church in the city of Thessalonica!

**4. IT WAS A CHURCH EXEMPLIFYING PERSEVERANCE IN SUFFERING.** *Verses 5,6,7*  
*"For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but 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. And you became followers 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."*

Paul said, "*you became followers of us.*" The word "*followers*" in the Greek means "*imitators.*" Our word "*mimickers*" is from the same Greek root word. Paul says that they were imitating him as he imitated the Christ they saw in him. The earnestness, devotion, enthusiasm and willingness to suffer for Christ which they saw in Paul, they were imitating.

It is evident from the very beginning that the believers in Thessalonica suffered persecution. In Paul's second letter to them is proof that they were continuing to experience persecution. He wrote, "*We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the*

*righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you.* (II Thessalonians 1:4-6) In this environment of opposition, we can understand and appreciate better Paul's commendation of their "*faith, hope and love.*"

Charles H. Spurgeon makes this wise observation: "Faith never looks so grand in summer weather as it does in winter. Love is too often like a glow-worm, showing but little light except it be in the midst of surrounding darkness. Hope itself is like a star - not to be seen in the sunshine of prosperity, and only to be discovered in the night of adversity." (Spurgeon's Morning and Evening)

The enemies of the Gospel in Thessalonica said, "*These that have turned the world upside down have come here also.*" That is a great commendation! It is often the impression today that the preaching of the Word of God is not supposed to disturb the status quo. It is also often the impression that the preacher is supposed to be a namby-pamby sort of fellow and blend in with everyone, siding with the existing political system.

But Christianity is revolutionary. The world today needs turning upside down, or rather, right side up! But this revolution must take place in individual hearts first. We will have a changed world when we have changed people. We will have a better world when we have better people in it! When Jesus Christ comes into a life, He does not just rearrange it, He makes it new! "*Old things are passed away, and behold, all things are become new.*" (II Cor. 5:17)

A man bought a painting and tried to fit it into his room. He hung it here, there and everywhere but it did not fit anywhere. He finally called the painter who came to his home, looked about and said, "You can't fit the picture to the room. You must fit the room to the picture."

You cannot take Jesus Christ into your life with all of its clutter and sin and fit Him into your sinful lifestyle. You cannot just rearrange the furniture. There are some furnishings in your life that will have to be tossed on the garbage dump when Jesus Christ moves in!

In spite of opposition in Thessalonica a church was planted that grew and impacted all of Macedonia and Greece! The Christians in Thessalonica had been changed by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and they were changing society in the atmosphere of opposition and persecution.

It has been said that "The doors of opportunity swing on the hinges of opposition." We see the door of opportunity swinging wide open in Thessalonica in spite of the opposition. The beginning of the ministry there was inauspicious and reminds us that we are not to "*despise the day of small things.*" (Zech. 4:10) Truly, "Little is much if God is in it."

Perseverance has been defined as "continuing to plow when things are severe!" These Christians were persecuted and afflicted yet joyous followers of Jesus Christ. That is perseverance. Let us take courage from their example.

**5. IT WAS A CHURCH EVANGELISTIC IN OUTREACH.** Verse 8

*“For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, 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.”*

Thessalonica was a popular trading center located on the Egnatian Highway which linked the East with the West. There were many travelers from many different regions passing through Thessalonica and therefore, the news of the Gospel could spread very quickly to regions far away.

The excitement of a new and great discovery resulted in their enthusiastic propagation of their new-found faith. How did the news spread? They had no radio or TV stations, printing presses or internet. The news was communicated and circulated by person-to-person contact; from mouth to ear. They visibly and verbally propagated the Gospel. They were heralds of the Gospel. They were broadcasting the truth abroad without a radio station!

Notice that they were both "receivers" (in verse five we are told that the Word of God had come to them) and they were also "transmitters" (the word of God went out from them.) Have you received the Gospel message? Are you transmitting the Gospel message? Wherever Paul went, the people told him about the faith of the Thessalonian believers. They were famous for the right reason!

A mighty spiritual change had been brought about in Thessalonica. The new converts could not keep quiet. They had experienced a transformation of mind and heart and consequently this was a church filled with contagious enthusiasm. In every heart there was a song, and on every lip a testimony.

This church in Thessalonica had reached all over Macedonia. They not only sang:

"Throw Out The Life Line" - they did!

"Send The Light" - they did!

"Bring Them In" - they did!

"If Jesus Goes With Me I'll Go" - they went!

"We've A Story To Tell To The Nations" - they told it!

Many congregations are content to pay a staff to do the witnessing and soul winning. But in New Testament churches, the entire congregation was involved in propagating the gospel. A survey of church growth indicates that 70 to 80% of a church's growth is the result of friends witnessing to friends and relatives witnessing to relatives. While other methods of outreach help, nothing is as effective as the personal contact. Let us "mimic" their model!

**6. IT WAS A CHURCH EARNESTLY SERVING GOD.** Verse 9

*“For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God....”*

Two actions deserve notice:

**Their severance.**

For them true conversion implied at least two things: a turning to the living God and a turning away from dead idols. This "turning" was a simultaneous turning "to" and a turning "from." Idols are not real persons - God is real; the idols were counterfeits, God is genuine; idols are unable to help - God is almighty and eager to help. They received the true and living God and renounced false gods. They took a stand for something - "*turned to God*"; they took a stand against something - "*from idols*."

Psalm 135:15-17 says this about idols: "*The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them.*"

We become like that which we worship. When God converts a person he changes the entire person from the inside out and ever after the genuine believer grows "*in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*" (II Peter 3:18) There is first the inward change and then there is the outward evidence. Have you severed from idols?

**Their service.**

Do not miss this: they did not remain idle after they turned from idols! These believers had experienced a real inner change which had become manifested outwardly for their lives were now moving in a totally different and opposite direction from their previous lives. The "*living and true God*" was now the focus of their lives and labors. They were now working for the One whom they worshipped; serving the One who saved them.

After their conversion they served "*the living and true God.*" When there is a change of Masters there is a change of purpose, interests and pursuits in life. There is no such person as an unemployed Christian! Of course, I am not speaking of the employment in which one is engaged for the purpose of gaining a livelihood, but the employment in the service of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. In that sense, there is no such person as an unemployed Christian. Whether every Christian is busy in their God-assigned employment is another matter.

God said to the Israelites under the Law, "*And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*" (Deuteronomy 10:12) God expects no less from those of us who claim to know, love and worship "*the living and true God*" in this age of grace.

To every believer is given a gift or gifts for service. In I Corinthians 12 Paul writes, "*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols.....*" (v. 1-2) and then he proceeds to spell out various gifts that God had given them.

Then in Romans 12 he writes, "*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them....*" (Romans 12:6). No Christian is ungifted. Christians who are not actively engaged in serving "*the living and true God*" may have "*turned to God from idols*" but

they are not following the example of the Christians in the church in Thessalonica who, having severed their connection to idols, were now serving their new Master, the Lord Jesus.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard spoken by the Lord Jesus, the landowner "*went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?'*" (Matthew 20:6) Good advice is given to such Christian idlers by the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes: "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.*" (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

#### **7. IT WAS A CHURCH EXPECTING THE LORD'S RETURN. Verse 10**

*"... and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."*

What were these Christians in Thessalonica to do after they were saved? Two actions characterized what they did and they are a challenge to us: they served God and they waited anticipatively for the return of the Savior.

The turning to God from idol worship did not leave them idle! Their old life was behind them and now they were facing the future for the first time with hope in their hearts. Idol worship was a hopeless endeavor. Now for the first time they had hope - something, or I should say, Someone for whom to live. While serving they were awaiting the return of Jesus Christ.

As they focused upon the future they had a new purpose in life. They must live in a constant state of readiness for the Lord's return and fill their waking hours with doing that which would please the one for whom they were waiting. This "waiting" was not an idle, blasé wasting away the time, but an active anticipation which resulted in productive participation. While waiting we are to be watching and working! Jesus said, "*occupy till I come*" (Luke 19:13), that is, "*transact business until I come.*"

These Thessalonian Christians believed in the return of Jesus Christ. No church or Christian can be a model of New Testament Christianity that does not believe in and anticipate the return of the Lord Jesus. We too are called upon to serve in the world and to wait upon the Lord's return. Loyal service and patient waiting should characterize us as well.

### **Conclusion**

A model church is made up of model Christians. Every Christian should ask themselves this question: "What kind of church would our church be if every member were just like me?"

How can a model church be realized? There at the very least four actions that each Christian can take to make their church a model church:

#### ***Attend the church.***

"Live members go to church - dead ones are carried there." Did you hear about the church that dwindled until it got so small that when the pastor addressed the congregation with the words, "Dearly beloved," the old maid thought he was proposing to her?



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***Extend the church.***

How do we extend the church? By outreach! Outreach is each one reaching one.

***Defend the church.***

The devil provides opposition enough against the church without the insiders joining the outsiders in criticizing it! The church is God's family – defend it as if it were comprised of blood relatives – it is! Jesus said that the church is His Body. (I Cor. 12:27) Be careful what you say about it.

***Commend the church.***

We commend the church by what we are, what we do and what we say; we commend the church with our family, our finances, our faithfulness and our fruitfulness. We commend or condemn Christianity by our example.

Let us model the Model of Models, Jesus, individually in our daily lives and then we will be the model corporately as a church that we ought to be.

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