

COMMENDED

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul's letter to the Christian community in Thessalonica was written shortly after he, Silas, and Timothy had been in that area of Macedonia during his Second Missionary Trip. Paul preached the gospel message in a synagogue in that city and many Thessalonians (both Jews and Gentiles) converted to Christianity. Some Jews, however, became jealous and caused a disturbance in the city. They accused Paul of claiming there was another king (named Jesus) which was an act of treason against the Roman emperor. Before they could arrest him, Paul was sent away, leaving behind a community of new believers. Since Paul was concerned they might not withstand the threat of persecution, Paul sent Timothy to encourage them. Timothy's assessment was that they endured the persecution but now had concerns about the Lord's return. In addition, some believers continued to engage in sexual immorality, while others refused to work for a living. Paul wrote this letter in response to Timothy's report and to encourage and commend them for the good reputation that had spread throughout that area of Europe since the time they believed the Gospel.

Their good reputation was a result of having a "proper witness" not only to those in the pagan world in which this city was located, but beyond that area. There are Scriptural "norms" by which we can assess ourselves relative to how we, as a group of believers, are doing. We are not likely to find a check list, but we can gain insight by examining various passages related to the operation of the early churches. Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica can help us understand what some of these norms are.

Partnership – 1:1

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 1 Thessalonians 1:1 (ESV)

Paul worked with others in mutual assistance in his ministry to share the good news of the Kingdom. Two of these associates were Silas and Timothy. They had the same objectives as Paul; that is, they were like-minded in their understanding and outlook on life. This association was deeper than what one might normally expect had these three simply been partners who were working to start a business to make money, for example. This joint venture in which they were involved was not just a job or career but was their very lives. The objectives they were working to accomplish were of eternal rather than temporal values.

All of us have various associations with others. We gravitate toward people who are like-minded with us. Perhaps a more important consideration is related to what are the objectives that we and our friends have for our lives. Are these objectives a result of our salvation or would we have the same objectives if we were not saved?

Paul addressed this letter to the church located in a rather large city in the region of Macedonia. A great benefit of our salvation is being in (a part of) the church. The word "church" (in the Greek text) literally means "called out group." So, is there a benefit associated with being "called out" or "chosen?" Well, it depends on who does the choosing and what is the purpose of being chosen. For the "church" we are chosen by God and we were chosen for salvation. Being a part of the church finds benefits in that we are in a special relationship with God and other believers. Some of the descriptions of the church (found in the letters of Paul) give us an idea of what being in the church is all about. We are considered to be children of God, the bride of Christ, members of the household of God, the army of God, body of Christ, God's handiwork, and the temple of God. When we consider the benefits of being part of all

these expressions of the church, then we can be extremely thankful to be part of it. The other side of this coin is that such blessings also carry with them responsibilities which are commendable if we are fulfilling what is expected of such descriptions.

Paul described the church as being “in God” and “in Christ?” We previously noted that the literally meaning of the word translated as “church” is “called out ones.” We certainly understand that those who are “the church” have been called out of “the world” system and the ways of the world. The idea of being called out has a complementary necessity of being “called into” another situation, condition, or existence. That “other” situation into which the church must find itself is to be “in God” and “in Christ.” We might argue that these are the same and that while we might see some distinctions in these two, we must also recognize that these are inseparable.

There are many verses in the writings of Paul that use the term “in Christ” as a description of our spiritual position or location. We are physically located in the world (name the city, country, etc.), but spiritually we are either in Christ or not in Christ. The meaning of the phrase “in Christ” goes beyond just being associated with Christ but goes to being a part of all that Christ is. Being “in Christ” means that we benefit from and have responsibility for the ongoing work and ministry of Christ. We share in His holiness, His love, His power, His concerns. We reign with Him, we suffer with Him, we are grieved when He is grieved, we rejoice with Him. The benefits of salvation are available to those who are in Christ.

Paul concluded the obligatory greeting of this letter with a blessing for the readers. It may be a mark of prosperous and enduring civilizations to have benevolent intents toward other people that show up in the way we initially interact with others. Even in what some might think are primitive societies this was a common practice. Shaking hands, saying words such as “aloha” or “shalom,” and holding up one’s right hand are evidences of such attempts to communicate the idea that there is a desire for beneficial or nonthreatening interactions. The combination of “grace and peace” captures well this idea. Approaching others in “grace and peace” is “behaving in a Godlike manner.” The idea is that we would like to be beneficial to others regardless of whether such benefits are deserved or not (that’s grace). We are also motivated to have peaceful interactions in so far as anything that we might initiate.

Evidence – 1:2-5a

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. 1 Thessalonians 1:2–5a (ESV)

Prayer is a benefit and not a burden. It is beyond our comprehension that we can communicate with the Creator of the Universe and that He hears what we say. Beyond that, He knows what we think and even beyond that He knows the intents of our hearts even when we are confused about what motivates us. Being able to pray for ourselves is awesome enough, but being able to pray for others and have positive influence in their lives is such a tremendous benefit that all of us should “pray without ceasing.” If we want to have positive influence and make a real difference in life, then prayer is essential.

When Paul was praying for the Christians in Thessalonica, he had several specific things in mind that helped shape his prayers for them. The first was their “work of faith.” We might use the NIV translation of “work produced by faith” to get a better picture of what Paul is writing about. If we recall the writings of James, we recognize the connection of “faith and works” in that true faith is validated by “works of faith.” As James wrote, unless our faith produces results

(works), then it is dead. (We need to be careful and not confuse “results” with “activities.”)

In our present-day churches we may see many things being accomplished. The question then becomes “by what means did we produce the accomplished results?” Was it based on strength and resources provided by God or was it based on our own efforts? Abraham was characterized as doing a work of faith when he followed God’s direction and offered up his son Isaac. If the “work” we accomplish in our churches is not based on God’s enablement, then it is simply work of the flesh since it is done in the strength of the members. Many churches think they can do anything because they have plenty of money and know sound business principles. That is nothing more than faith in ourselves and in the world system.

A church should also be known by its “labor of love.” We tend to use the words “work” and “labor” interchangeably. In the context of this passage, we should think of “work” as the result of “labor.” Our efforts or actions are the “labor” and the outcome or result is the “work.” The idea of “labor prompted by love” has to be concerned with the motive or driving force behind our actions. We sing the chorus “God is Love” and we recognize the inseparability of unconditional love and the character or nature of God. We learn from Scripture that this love has been poured into our hearts (our being) so that we, too, have the nature of God within us. Consequently, the natural (meaning by nature) response we have as Christians should be actions that flow from no other motive than unconditional love. It is not something that we “decide” to do because it will please God (or a less noble purpose), it is spontaneous action based on our new nature. If we have to analyze the situation and determine what is “the right thing to do,” then we are functioning on the basis of the “knowledge of good and evil.” We are deciding in our intellect (a soul function) what should be done rather than simply bearing the fruit that comes from a transformed nature that is a result of having a born-again spirit within us.

Steadfastness also characterized this very young church. The Greek word is *hupomeno* which has also been translated as abide, stay, stand, and dwell. In our vernacular, we might call this “stick-to-it-tive-ness.” Such endurance that characterized this early church was inspired by “hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Hope is *firm confidence in a future reality*. In this case, the reality is the fact that Jesus is Lord and that regardless of the problems we encounter in this world that His sovereignty and reign are certain. Such hope inspires us to “keep on keeping on.”

If God had not loved us, He would not have chosen us for salvation, He would not have provided a way for our salvation nor would He have invited us to become a part of all that He has done on our behalf. Warren Wiersbe wrote “As far as God the Father 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 and received Christ; as far as the Son is concerned, we were saved when He died for us on the cross.” All of this was motivated by God’s love.

The evidence that Paul had that the Christians at Thessalonica were called of God was seen in the results that came about from the Gospel message. The message that was delivered to them was not just a bunch of words but that message was used by the Holy Spirit to produce conviction and assurance in their lives which lead to repentance and belief unto salvation. The Holy Spirit uses such assurance to lead us into a closer walk with the Lord. Paul could see the evidence of change in their lives and he knew they were beneficiaries of God’s salvation.

Influence – 1:5b-8

^{5b} You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from

you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 1 Thessalonians 1:5b-8 (ESV)

Just as Paul knew the genuineness of the Christians at Thessalonica, they knew that Paul, Silas and Timothy were genuine, also. These three men demonstrated the truth of the gospel by their lives as they cared for the people of Thessalonica.

We often hear talk about “influential” people. When we hear this, we may think of business leaders, teachers, coaches, and others. The truth of the matter is that all of us are people of influence. We can influence others to be as we are and that can be either positive or negative. Though we do not usually think of influence in these terms, we can influence others to be the antithesis or the opposites of what we are. This also can be either positive or negative.

Most of us think “what we do doesn't influence others.” Worse than that: we think that “what others do doesn't influence us.” All of us tend to be imitators; therefore, we need to imitate what is right, what is better, what is higher, what is more noble, and even what is unattainable.

Not only do individuals exert influence, groups and organization have influence. In fact, organizations take on a persona and much of what we can say regarding the influence-wielding ability of an individual also applies to distinctive groups. Of course, we recognize these characteristics as the basis for stereotyping. It can be discouraging when we can readily think of so many negative role models (either individuals or groups), but positive models seem to be scarce. All of us are aware that our churches are being characterized in a negatively interpreted persona by much of today's society. Many churches have reacted to this by trying to “fit-in” and conform to societal pressures. In doing this, they have become reflections of the world rather than windows to the Kingdom of God. When this happens, then churches miss the opportunity to be the proper witness as required by God and as a result they simply reinforce the negative persona.

The church at Thessalonica loved the word of God. They “welcomed it with joy.” Some churches are content to feed on pop psychology and listen to lectures based on articles or books that deny the validity of the Scriptures. True believers are hungry for the word of God and are not satisfied with anything less. The church at Thessalonica not only received the word with joy, they also proclaimed it to others. Apparently, they were not timid about it. Paul said “The Lord's message **rang** out from them.”

Purpose – 1:9-10

⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 (ESV)

As a church goes about sharing the gospel and the members live a life that is an imitation of Christ, then people in the community and beyond will know that something good is happening. The witness of our lives should show evidence that we are different that we used to be. When all the world around us is falling apart, our confident witness is that God is still in control and that He loves us and will rescue us as we rely upon (wait for) Christ Who is the Author of our salvation, confirmed in His resurrection with an ultimate outcome of being spared from God's wrath that will impact the wicked who rebel against Him and reject His love.