

WEDNESDAY

Bible Study

The Marks Of A Model Church

‘What Every Church Should Be’ - 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

18 September 2024 - Revd Paul A. Carr

INTRODUCTION Some churches are closer to the New Testament ideal than others. The church at Thessalonica was in that category! Paul gave thanks, at least three times, for the church and the way it responded to his ministry (1:2; 2:13; 3:9). But what are the characteristics that made this church so ideal and such a joy to Paul's heart? They were:

1) SUPERNATURAL Look at the description Paul gives of them in vs1: *‘To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace and peace to you.’* Have you ever realised what that means? It means that by virtue of these people accepting Paul's message that Jesus is the Lord of the Universe, they are drawn into the very presence of the God they never knew. They now inhabit a divine environment. They found a God who created the world in a supernatural way; who gave them a supernatural saviour; and who gave supernatural gifts. They found that God's supernatural nature is grace and peace. And you can't get any more supernatural than raising the dead, can you? But the point is this: we serve a supernatural God who works in supernatural ways.

2) CHOSEN The word church, vs1, means a ‘called-out people’ - God's chosen ones (Acts 15:13-18). Seven times in John 17 Jesus referred to believers as those whom the Father gave to Him out of the world (17:2; 6; 9; 11-12; 24). The Bible teaches that the entire plan of salvation was born in the heart of God long before man was created. God has chosen us from the beginning, (2 Thessalonians 2:13). You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, John 15:16. He (the Father) has chosen us in Him (Jesus) before the foundation of the world, Ephesians 1:4. God ‘choosing us’ is known as the doctrine of divine election. It's the age-old debate of Calvinism and Arminianism of God's sovereignty and man's free will (which I'm not going to enter into today). It's an issue which has confused, frightened and divided Christians for 100's of years - yet it shouldn't. There's no conflict between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, even though it seems as though we cannot reconcile the two. One of the best books on this subject is: *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by JI Packer.

3) PERSUADED When the word ‘church’ is mentioned to you, what picture springs to mind? A building with gothic architecture? An institutional Church? Look at how Paul describes these believers in vs1. It literally reads: ‘To a church of Thessalonians.’ There is nothing particularly religious about the word ‘church’ *ekklesia*. It is simply a way of saying ‘a group of Thessalonians.’ Acts 17 describes how this group was brought together. There we are told that apostle Paul and a few friends turned up in town and went straight to the synagogue in line with their usual strategy of targeting the Jews first.

And arguing from the Old Testament Scriptures they tried to persuade them that Jesus was God's appointed and long-awaited King who had to suffer and rise from the dead. And Luke informs us that some were persuaded. This was not just an emotional experience; they became convinced of the truth. In addition to some Jews, a good number of Greeks as well as a number of well to do women also became followers of Jesus. But then some of the synagogue Jews turned nasty and ran Paul and his friends out of town.

So, we are talking about a time period of no more than 3 to 4 weeks to gather a group of believers by preaching the gospel, then initiate some follow up talks on Christian basics and that was it - a model church was formed. Isn't that astonishing? We don't know how many there were, chances are it was no more than 50-60 people, but this gathering became the model for the entire region. We may well want to ask: what is so special about this group of Christians who had very little by way of organisational structure - no special building, no organ, no Vicar, but which nonetheless propels Paul into rapturous praise to God?

As we have seen in Acts 17, when these people became Christians, they are not described as being converted, but as having been persuaded. That is, their minds were engaged as they listened very carefully to Paul's arguments about who Jesus is and what he has done. New Testament evangelism always involves the mind. But it doesn't stop at the mind; it filters down to the heart and captures the whole person leading to a totally different way of thinking and behaving; a complete reordering of lifestyle and values and ethics. Paul commends their work produced by faith, their labour prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope. Faith, hope and love are often said to be the cardinal virtues of the Christian life, and the three greatest evidences of salvation. Faith must always lead to works (James 2:14-26). It has been said: We are not saved by faith plus works, but by a faith that works.

4) ENTHUSIASTIC The faith, love and hope of the Thessalonians showed itself in their sharing the Gospel with others. They received the word, vs5-6, they proclaimed the word, vs7-8 and they lived the word, vs9. It is the responsibility, and privilege, of every believer, and every church, to receive, share and live the message of salvation with a lost and dying world. To my knowledge you do not find any exhortation in the NT letters to evangelise? There are a number of commissions for the church in the Gospels (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:1-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8), but none in the letters. Why? Because it would have been like writing a letter to someone encouraging them to breathe. It was something that came naturally. In NT churches entire congregations were involved in sharing the Good News of Jesus (Acts 2:44-47; 5:42).

A survey was conducted amongst Christians in the UK to try and discover what single factor was decisive in their conversion and coming to faith in Jesus. The results were as follows:

- The influence of a particular church over a period of time - 28%
- The influence of members of one's own family - 26%
- The influence of Christian friends - 20%
- A specific evangelistic event or activity - 13%.
- Others (BWF or special event) - 13%

What is the significance of these statistics? Well simply that the vast majority of people become Christians over a period of time as a result of exposure to the Christian faith through Christian people.

This should be a great encouragement to us, especially when it comes to our desire to see family and friends trusting in Jesus and it should encourage us to see ourselves as 'links in the chain' in the journey of introducing people to so wonderful a Saviour.

5) TRANSFORMED The heart of Christianity is transformation. In Romans 12:2, Paul says that we are to 'be transformed by the renewing of our minds'. This was how Paul knew those Thessalonians were chosen of God. He saw a change in their lives. This doesn't mean they are perfect, but it does mean they are possessors of a new life that cannot be hidden, and it does mean that they are striving towards holiness. If you compare vs3 with vs9-10, you get the picture: Your work of faith - You turned to God from idols; Your labour of love - To serve the living and true God; Your patience of hope - To wait for His Son from heaven.

The word morph is taken from the Greek word Morphoo and refers to the 'the inward and real formation of the essential nature of a person.' This desire for transformation, according to most psychologists, lies deep in every human heart and is the essence of hope for many people. That's why so many people enter therapy; join health clubs, read self-help books, undergo cosmetic surgery. Unfortunately, no amount of self-help will change a person because it doesn't change the heart - only God can do that. It seems to me that it was God who initiated 'extreme makeovers?' It's true, isn't it? God is in the business of transforming people.

A recent poll suggested that the number one reason given for abandoning the Christian faith was hypocrisy (38%). The respondents were put off by the behaviour of church members, which contradicted their professed beliefs. Bishop Sean highlighted this in his Diocesan charge. But it has to be said that while many are switched off Christianity because of the behaviour of professing Christians, many are turned on because of what they see in Christian lives. Things such as integrity of lifestyle; the fact that we have real friendships; and better attitudes to other people. The question is this: Are people attracted, or turned off, by your Christian lifestyle/fait? No one who put their trust in Jesus was ever disappointed. Whether it was a leper cut off from society. A prostitute spurned by the religious establishment. A broken-hearted widow who just lost her only son. They could all come to Jesus, and he was there for them.

But it is not simply individual Christians that need to model the new life, which is to be found in Jesus, whole Christian communities need to do so as well. No church can spread the Gospel with any degree of integrity, let alone creditability, unless it has been visibly changed by the Gospel it preaches. If all those who proclaimed to be Christians were taken from Paphos tomorrow. If churches were to be closed down, would anyone notice the difference? Sure, there might be one or two problems when it came to funerals and weddings. But would it be noticed? One would hope that the difference would be very noticeable indeed.

This is the way the American writer Richard Neuhaus lays down the challenge: *'The church best serves the world when it is most distinctively and unapologetically the church ... when the church dares to be different, it models for the world what God calls the world to become. The church models what it means to be a community of caring and a community of character.'*

6) ATTENTIVE But why else did Paul commend the Thessalonian church? Because they were an attentive community and, by that, I mean they applied their faith. They responded to all that Paul said and did something about it.

They received the word vs 5&8

They followed their spiritual leaders vs 6a

They willingly suffered for Jesus vs 6b

They encouraged each other vs 7-8

They turned from their idols vs 9

They believed in the physical return of Jesus vs 10

CONCLUSION I've entitled this talk *What Every Church Should Be*, and this opening chapter certainly gives us plenty to think about. The Thessalonians were a people of faith, hope and love and this was the very basis of their motivation to live for, and serve, Jesus. In a similar way we should understand that we are called to be a church that is Supernatural, Chosen, Persuaded, Enthusiastic, Transformed and Attentive.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: *Of the six points Paul covered, 'Supernatural, Chosen, Persuaded, Enthusiastic, Transformed and Attentive' which ones connect with you the most, and why?*

2: *Paul (the priest) spoke a lot about 'transformed' lives being a great evidence of a life touched by the Spirit of God. He also talked about how people are either turned off, or on, by other Christians. Share examples of a Christian whose lifestyle has had both a positive and negative impact on your life (no names need to be mentioned!)*

3: *Read Richard Neuhaus' quote. How would you describe the reputation of ACP in the community of Paphos?*

4: *Describe elements of what you believe should constitute the perfect church - the type of church worth belonging to. Does ACP share any of those attributes? If not, what would you most like to see in place?*