

# WEDNESDAY

## Bible Study

### The Marks Of A Model Church

‘Life In The Local Church’ - 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

4 December 2024 - Revd Paul A. Carr

**Introduction** People’s last words are often very revealing, aren’t they. Bing Crosby remarked: *That was a great game of golf, fellers.* Oscar Wilde was reported to have said on his deathbed: *This wallpaper is disgusting. One of us will have to go.* I must confess that my heart sinks when I read that the NIV editors have entitled our text ‘Final Instructions’. I say that because these words are not just the quick-fire instructions of an anxious parent; they are carefully crafted closing words. In fact, Paul’s letters don’t just fizzle out to a feeble conclusion: every word is important. It’s been said that one of the best ways to see the big picture in Paul’s letters is to read the beginning and the end, as he often reveals his priorities in these sections. And as we enter the season of Advent, we are reminded of the collect of Thomas Cranmer ... Paul gives four suggestions for us to think about to ‘stir up’ our own Christian discipleship.

**1) Leadership vs11–13** The world can be a tough and unfriendly place, as we all know to our cost. It’s easy to get hurt by it and we can easily become disheartened and depressed. But God wants his church to be a community of mutual support and in vs11, Paul reminds us to: ... *encourage one another and build each other up* ... and much of this has to do with leadership. Without it, most organisations will fall apart: Military; Business; Charities; Education; Industry; Government. We all need leadership and guidance in our lives and the church is no different. Children need the leadership and guidance that only parents can give. And, just as the family needs a leader, so the flock needs a shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-5). This doesn’t mean that spiritual leaders are always right – far from it! Some of the great men of God in the Bible made mistakes: Abraham; Moses; David even Peter. But what responsibilities, according to Paul, do church members have toward their spiritual leaders?

**a) Accept Them vs12:** This is a difficult one, isn’t it? Whilst I may have earned the right through my selection, training; ordination and induction, to be a priest, I hadn’t earned the right to appear out of nowhere and begin the task of leading and ministering here as I did in January. I fully recognise that trust is earned; that it doesn’t happen overnight, and I know how much time it takes for meaningful relationships to be established and developed.

**b) Appreciate Them vs13a:** Don’t take them for granted - that’s what Paul means when he writes: *respect those who work hard among you.* Spiritual leadership is a great responsibility and a difficult task. Someone said to me just last week: *I wouldn’t want to do your job!* Neither do I at times! It’s not easy being in a position of leadership in any area of church life and that applies to our readers, worship leaders, churchwardens, church council members and the many who lead in any capacity. The battles and burdens are many and, sometimes, the encouragements are few. Paul is saying: *Get to know your leaders. Understand them. Appreciate them.*

**c) Love Them vs13b:** Loving our leaders would prove to be very difficult if we didn’t have the love of God as a bond between us, wouldn’t it? It would be a bit of a strain otherwise. How we all need to live out God’s love in the way we deal with one another. It’s only as we submit to one another in the Lord that there will be, as Paul suggests in vs13, *peace and harmony* in the church.

**2) Encouragement vs14–16** There's a saying in Africa that: *It takes a whole village to raise a child*. I think western Christianity could do well to take this on board. In vs14-16, Paul highlighted those people who need personal encouragement, vs14: ... *warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone*. It's a reminder how we constantly need to be sensitive to, and recognise, the needs of others and to identify the part that each of us can play in their encouragement.

**a) The Idle, vs14a:** This word means 'careless' and 'out of line' and was applied to a soldier who wouldn't keep rank and who insisted on marching his own way. Some military minded people often talk about not walking to the same drumbeat! This 'independent' attitude causes arguments and splits in any organisation. While the loving atmosphere of the church family encourages individual development, there are some things we must all do together. If there are no guidelines and boundaries there is chaos, likewise in the church. Paul dealt with this problem again when he wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians (3:6; 11) so this 'rebuke' must have fallen on deaf ears!

**b) The Timid, vs14b:** Those who are faint-hearted; always look on the black side; give up when going gets tough. Each family usually has one member like this and so does the church! We need to encourage and comfort them.

**c) The Weak, vs14c:** 'Hold fast to the weak' is the literal translation (those who had not grown strong in the Lord, Romans 14:1–15:3), 'don't let them fall.' Some children mature quicker than others. We have the strong and the weak in our natural families just as much as our church families. But this kind of ministry is not easy and so Paul added some wise counsel:

**d) Be Patient, vs14d:** This is where patience, a fruit of the spirit, comes in! We are to handle each other with patient care (and reassuring love). The weaker member who demands much help may one day be a leader - so never give up. I'm deeply grateful to those who persevered with me when I was a young Christian. Those who took risks and were patient with me, in the midst of my youthful exuberance, allowed me to make mistakes and patiently nurtured my faith.

**e) Watch Your Motives, vs15:** *Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.* We must expect to face rejection and opposition as we serve the Lord. We may receive little appreciation, but we should always serve in love, ready to forgive (Romans 12:17-21). If your desire is appreciation and praise in ministry, you'll often feel let down. However, if your motive is to be *a servant for Jesus' sake* (2 Corinthians 4:5) you'll never be disappointed.

**f) Be Joyful, vs16:** *Be joyful always.* Joy takes the burden out of service. *The joy of the Lord is your strength* (Nehemiah 8:10). God loves a cheerful servant as well as a cheerful giver! Every church family has its doubting Thomas or its gloomy Gareth! But God desires that His family should be happy, and each member should contribute to that joy.

**3) Worship vs17–24** Worship, it seems to me, is the most important activity church members share together. Ministry must flow out of worship; otherwise, it becomes just another activity in which we engage, without power and without heart. But let me ask you a question: How would you define what worship is? It means engaging with God. It involves honouring; serving; respect; faith; obedience; adoration etc. It is something we do 24/7 not just on a Sunday. What does Paul say worship involves?

**a) Prayer, vs17:** Prayer was important in the early church (1 Corinthians 11:1-6; Acts 1:13-14 etc) and should play an essential part in our church life today. Prayer is not the least we can do, but the most we can do. To pray continually doesn't mean we must always be mumbling prayers to ourselves, it means to be living in an attitude of prayer. You could say it's about keeping the receiver 'off the hook' and being in regular contact with God so that our prayer is part of one long conversation.

**b) Praise, vs18:** *Give thanks in all circumstances ...* thanksgiving is a vital element of worship. We may not always feel like praising or giving thanks. Our circumstances may not be conducive to doing those things, yet we are to do so. Why? *For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

**c) The Word of God, vs19-21:** Paul pictured the Spirit of God as fire (Isaiah 4:4; Acts 2:3; Revelation 4:5) and writes that we are not to: *put out the Spirit's fire*, vs19. Fire speaks of purity, power, light and warmth. When the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives/church we have God's love in our hearts, light for our minds and energy for our wills. He draws us together to bring harmony, and co-operation and shared purpose.

Paul writes *do not treat prophecies with contempt*. The early church did not have a completed Bible as we do, and those early prophets preached the truth as the Holy Spirit moved them. But it creates a bit of a dilemma: if we restrain these gifts, we may be guilty of quenching the Spirit; if we believe everything that is said we may obey false spirits.

The Bible teaches (and experience has shown) that the enemy (even the flesh) seeks to lead the church astray through a counterfeit message. God's Word tells us the truth about God. It displays His person; His character; His beauty. It reveals His plans and purposes for His people; His church and His world. Which is why we are to *test everything*. Paul gave specific rules for this in 1 Corinthians 14:29-33. Worship that ignores the Bible is not spiritual.

It may be emotional but unless there is spiritual truth, the Holy Spirit is not at work. I believe it's important that we allow the Spirit of God to teach us the Word of God when we meet in worship. Jesus taught (John 4) that worship must engage our heart and minds. A marriage of 'Word and Spirit' of intellect (Truth) and emotions (Spirit), which is both healthy and complimentary.

In 1 Timothy 4:14, we read that Timothy had been neglecting his gift and Paul told him not to allow the fire of the Spirit to go out in his heart: *stir up the gift of God, which is in you* (2 Timothy 1:6). Likewise, we must not allow the fire of the spirit in our own lives to be extinguished.

**d) Godly Living: vs22-24:** Paul highlights the *negative and positive in these verses*. The negative, vs22: Avoid every kind of evil. The KJV of vs22 is actually a better translation: *Abstain from all appearance of evil*. Not only are we to avoid it, we are to abstain from the appearance of it. I struggle to understand why it is that some Christians, who profess to believe the Bible, seem to conform to the standards and practices of the world with hardly any thought that what they are doing is both unbiblical and ungodly. The Positive, vs23: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus*. Sanctify simply means that we are: set apart for God's exclusive use. Paul is endorsing much of what he wrote earlier about holiness and living as children of light. To Paul, the mark of a true Christian is that an experience of Jesus affects every area of their life and, vs24: *The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it*.

We began this section thinking about what worship really is and one of the greatest definitions of worship I've stumbled upon is by William Temple, a late Archbishop of Canterbury, who said: *To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open up the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God*.

**4) Fellowship vs25-28** Fellowship is an important part of our commonality in Jesus. At the end of meeting together they were to, vs25, pray/minister to one another and, vs26, greet one another with a kiss. The 'holy kiss' wasn't a sensual thing! It was the sort of 'kiss' that we see in many European and Middle East countries today. It may not be very British, but it is certainly very Biblical. But the point is this: sometimes, church members don't spend as much time with each other as much as they could. We don't worship together from Sunday to Sunday.

Paul's words in vs11 are a helpful reminder for us to: *encourage one another and build each other up* ... the church is a family. And living/working together is vital to the health and growth of our church family and each one of us are a precious gift from God. I wonder, how do you react when you see others struggling with their faith, family, work and personal issues? What can you do to help? How might you better serve the family of the church? Are you sharing your God given ministry with others? Are you a spectator or a participator?

**Conclusion** I entitled the first talk in this series: 'What every church should be' and, after working through this these past three months, I think it's a pretty good model for being church. There is a lot for each of us to learn from it and put into practise. It gives us an excellent foundation for our life and for our faith. I'm sure each of us yearns to become the church God desires us to be and, as we 'press on' in this way we must remind ourselves that we are not only to receive the gospel but also pass it on. That is the only way the kingdom of God can grow in this community, through each of us passing on the Good News of Jesus (Christmas is an ideal time to do this). However, whatever we do, as Paul suggests in vs28, nothing but: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ being with us* ... can accomplish this.

And more grace seems an appropriate point on which to finish this wonderful letter of Saint Paul.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: Revd Paul raised three responses to church leadership: acceptance; appreciation and love. Discuss why some of these responses may be easier and/or more difficult. What would be the most important response of all?

2: Do you see others struggling with their faith, family, work and personal issues? What can you do to help and encourage the 'timid, weak and idle' (vs14) within our own church family?

3: What does it mean to be joyful 'always' to pray 'continually' and give thanks 'in all circumstances' vs16-18?

4: Our series on 1 Thessalonians has touched people in many different ways. What, for you, has been the most significant aspect of this study? What has helped and/or challenged you the most? What will you 'carry' with you into your future Christian life as a result of this series?