

Thinking Biblically About the Church

1Thessalonians 1:1-5a

It seems like a fairly safe statement to say that the apostle Paul is one of the most influential figures in the life of the early church.

Even if we are only vaguely familiar with what the Bible says about him it is hard to deny his significance.

His testimony is a powerful piece of evidence to support the historical reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

When Luke first introduces him in Acts chapter 7, he is a young man going by the name Saul and he is an approving witness to first follower of Jesus being put to death for his faith.

After that the young Pharisee took up the charge of persecuting followers of Jesus with great zeal.

God allowed that to go on for some time until Saul was on his way to Damascus to do harm to the church and while on the way the risen LORD came to meet him and changed his life forever.

Jesus decided to transform this man, who hated Him, into His servant to bring the message of forgiveness through faith alone in the person and work of Christ alone beyond the Jewish people to people of every ethnicity.

That is what happened. Over the course of the next thirty plus years he travelled throughout a huge portion of the Roman Empire under the name Paul telling people about the good news of Jesus. I don't know of another way to explain that other than to say Jesus really conquered the grave and is reigning at the right hand of the Father.

Through Paul's ministry churches were established in a number of places, one of them being the city of Thessalonica.

It was on his second missionary journey that he arrived in that city.

He came to the region on account of a vision from the LORD and he came to Thessalonica right after a beating and a brief imprisonment in the city of Philippi.

He came to the city and as was his habit he preached the gospel to the Jews who lived there in their meeting place called a synagogue.

Several in the city were convinced and put their faith in Jesus which made the unbelieving Jews jealous.

These unbelievers were able to stir up a great deal of trouble for the new converts and the decision was made among the believers to send Paul and his fellow gospel workers onto another city to preach the word of life there.

We know from the end of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three of 1Thessalonians that Paul being separated from the church put a tremendous burden of concern upon his heart for the believers there.

Because of that burden he sent Timothy to check up on them and much to Paul's relief and joy Timothy returns with a good report.

That coupled with the testimony of others about the church prompts the writing of the book that is before us this morning.

This letter in many ways is about the apostle delighting in the gospel being worked out in the lives of these believers and an encouragement for them to persevere in their faith.

This is also much more than a letter from Paul to the Thessalonians, it is much bigger than that.

This is the Word of God to the people of God in every age.

In the same way that Paul deeply desires for these believers to keep growing in their faith, hope, and love so too the LORD deeply desires the same for all his people including those of us gathered here at First Baptist Leamington.

[I've entitled this series, "Living out the Hope of the Gospel". One of the ways that happens in the lives of believers is through belonging to and being a part of the ministry of the local church. One of the most important aspects to doing that well is to have our thinking about the church shaped by the Bible. I am sure that if we took a survey of a bunch of people on the street and even many in the pews and just asked the simple question, "What is the Church?" We would get a whole bunch of different answers. If someone asked you that question what would you say? Would your answer be based on the Scriptures or personal thoughts and feelings? In the opening five and a half verses of 1Thessalonians 1 we are given some important insights with regards to the church and I want to encourage us all to allow our thinking to be shaped by the bible. At first glance verse 1 appears to be a standard opening for correspondence in the ancient world, but woven into this greeting is a tremendous lesson for us about the church. This opening verse shows us that...]

Point #1 – The church is a gathering of people who are in Christ. (Verse 1)

God has, is, and will continue to call a people to Himself through the work of His Son that they might regularly meet together to the glory of His name.

Like most letters in the ancient world this one begins by naming the authors.

Paul is named first, this is likely because he is the chief writer.

Commentator Robert L. Thomas points out that the name 'Paul' means 'little'.

His Hebrew name is 'Saul' and he was born into the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as the first king of Israel a man also named Saul which means 'desired'.

So the name carried a sense of worldly standing with it.
 From his testimony in the book of Philippians there is little doubt that he had a high view of himself before he met Jesus, but now having encountered the glory of the risen Christ he goes by a name that presents humility rather than pride.

In addition to himself he names Silvanus and Timothy.

Most scholars think that Silvanus and Silas are the same person.

Silas had been beaten and imprisoned alongside Paul in Philippi and was still ministering by his side when this letter is penned.

Timothy, likely the best known of Paul's co-workers is a young man who became like a son to the apostle in the ministry.

Silas and Timothy were with Paul when he first came to Thessalonica. Here are three men whom Jesus had called to Himself and to one another to minister the gospel, which is a picture of the church.

Their purpose in preaching the gospel was to see other people come to faith in Christ.

That is exactly what happened in this city which is made clear by who is receiving the letter. (**Verse 1**)

The word translated 'church' here was a word that was used to describe a number of types of gatherings of people.

It is a word made up from two other words. The first word means 'out from' and the second word means 'called' or 'summoned'.

Most literally it means to be 'called out from' or to be 'set apart'.

So inherent in the very word 'church' is the idea of being a distinct gathering of people.

[We can see many examples of this idea in our own time. People are called out of society to into the House of Commons. People are set apart from society to serve as police officers, firefighters, EMTs, Nurses, Doctors, etc. In each one of those groups there is something to identify those people as belonging to those groups. Police get a badge, doctors get a license to practice medicine, and so on.]

It is the same idea with the word church. The church is a distinct gathering of people who have been called out of the general population of humanity.

What makes this group distinct?

For most groups belonging is dependent on education, social standing, economics, or shared interests.

Look again at what it says about this church/gathering of people.

It says, they are ‘in God the Father and the LORD Jesus Christ’. Notice how he equates the Father and Jesus! That says something to us about the equality of the Persons and the Trinity and it also says something of how we belong to God.

Only someone who is ‘in Christ’ can also say they are ‘in God’.

That is to say only someone who belongs to Jesus also belongs to God or we might say is in a right relationship with God.

To this distinct group of people he writes “Grace to you and peace.”

Anyone who is truly in Christ has some sense of their need of grace.

We know we have broken God’s laws and we know that there is nothing we can do to make that right.

We know that we don’t deserve anything good and so we know that the gift of eternal life in Jesus comes as a result of the gift of God.

That is the basic meaning of the word grace, it means an undeserved gift.

Have you considered when we need grace as believers?

If we think of our need of grace as being only at the moment of conversion then we are being far too narrow in our thinking?

We will never get to the place where need grace less. If anything, the longer we walk with the LORD the more clearly we can see just how great our need is.

To grace he adds the word ‘peace’.

At its most basic level ‘peace’ means the absence of conflict or hostility.

That is what the grace of God does for His people. It takes us from being at war with God to having peace with God.

Commentator Leon Morris points out though that the Hebrew concept of peace is deeper than that. Peace biblically speaking is more than the absence of hostility it is the idea of complete wholeness.

It is when fear, doubt, and worry no longer abide in the heart and mind and in their place faith and trust in the LORD are growing day by day.

[We call this building a church. We call it a church because it has been set apart as a place where people who are in Christ gather together on a regular basis to worship the LORD and to encourage one another in our common faith. We do that by grace and hopefully we do that enjoying an increasing sense of the peace of God which passes understanding. If it is not that, it is just a building. People may still call it a church but it is just a lifeless building of no lasting

value. The church brothers and sisters is made up of people! People who are in Christ and who gather together. As Paul, Silas, and Timothy are thinking about those who are in Christ in Thessalonica it leads him to do something and what he does teaches us this second lesson about the church, that...]

Point #2 – In the church we find reason to thank God. (Verses 2-3)

It is an absolute miracle for people to believe and be transformed by the gospel message and we should regularly express our thanks to the LORD for that.

Let's look together at verse 2 and let's notice together what Paul is doing and also how often it is taking place.

When this letter was read to the church it is very unlikely that anyone heard these words and thought to themselves, "Paul is down on his knees with folded hands thanking God for me every moment of every day."

That would be impossible since Paul had to do things like eat and sleep like a normal human being.

The way this would have been heard, and the way it ought to be heard is that these gospel servants have in their minds the church as a whole.

While no doubt individuals would come to mind, it is the entire group of gathered believers for which they are giving thanks.

The words 'always' and 'constantly' should be understood as being on a regular basis, probably a daily basis.

That is both impressive to me and convicting.

The consistency of their thanksgiving shows an appreciation for the church that runs deep in their hearts.

This kind of ongoing thankfulness for people is a testimony of the value and love they placed upon these local congregations.

I deeply admire that and I confess I feel the conviction of it because I know the need for those things to grow in my heart.

I confess I can very easily turn the church into a burden rather than a reason to give thanks to the LORD.

I have observed though that when I put aside the sinfulness of self-focus and give thanks for my fellow believers it not only reminds me of the preciousness of all of you it cultivates a love for you in my heart.

I know some of you meet and pray on a regular basis, some of you pray regularly for the church in your personal prayers and so you know what I'm talking about.

I also suspect that a number of us, myself included, need to make it a more consistent habit.

We should pray for the church regularly and the apostle here gives us some wonderful things to fill the content of our thanksgiving in **verse 3**.

If you are familiar with the bible then you know that it teaches that we are made right with God through faith and not by what we do.

When Paul writes here about the ‘work of faith’ of the Thessalonians he is talking about works done as a result of faith.

Believing in Jesus and therefore being saved leads to the believers doing things.

None of those things make us right with God they are the result of being right with God by faith alone.

He then mentions a ‘labor of love’.

The word translated ‘labor’ here is a bit more intense than the word translated as ‘work’. Labor suggests hard work, work that causes physical strain, and work that endures hardship.

How many have you ever worked hard at a job you didn’t love?

Have you ever worked at something like that to the point where you could hardly move the next day?

How many of you were excited to do it again?

It is possible to work hard at stuff that we have no affection for, I believe doing that can even be good for our character, but Paul is talking about something different here.

He is talking about working at something that you love to the point of physical strain.

You wake up in the morning stiff as a board but you are still happy to go do it again.

These believers are working for the LORD like that, talk about a reason to give thanks for them.

Finally, he thanks the LORD for their ‘steadfastness of hope in the LORD Jesus.’

Like all people these believers had gone through some challenging things, but their hope in Christ was unwavering.

That is amazing! If people really know and believe in our LORD and saviour and the power of his resurrection there is always a reason to have hope.

I’ve seen it in people, and it is such a power reason to give thanks to the LORD.

[I know very well what it is like to focus on the negative and with people there is usually a good number of negative things to choose from. Of course bad things need to be dealt with rather than ignored, but if we camp out there in our hearts and minds it’s going to kill our affection for

the church and that will kill our affection for the LORD. Just the fact that there are people in pews this morning to sing to the LORD and listen to God's word is reason to give thanks. The fact that there are people who give of their time, energy, and affections for the good of God's people is reason to give thanks. The fact that there are people who are facing really challenging things and people who have already gone through incredible levels of grief and hardship who are still hoping in Jesus is reason to give thanks to God. That raises a question, "Why give thanks to God?" The answer to that is our third lesson from this text, that...]

Point #3 – The church exists according to the will and work of God. (Verses 4-5a)

The LORD has determined within Himself to love His people and because of that He exercises His power for our good.

The beginning of verse 4 is still connected to the statement about giving thanks at the beginning of verse 3.

Why are Paul, Silas, and Timothy constantly thanking God for the Church in Thessalonica? **(Verse 4)**

Some translations begin the verse with 'knowing'.

This is more than something they once thought to be true, this is something they know to be true on an ongoing basis.

Before he says what they know to be true, he reminds the believers that they are 'loved by God.'

It is always good to be reminded of what it means to be loved by the LORD.

God's love is His desire to act for the eternal highest good of His people.

The highest expression of His love is the Person and Work of His Son.

Because of God's holiness He must give a just punishment for every act of disobedience.

That just punishment is eternity under His wrath.

On account of His love, however, He is unwilling to allow His people to be lost and so He determined to deal with all of our offenses.

Jesus came into the world living in perfect obedience and He used that perfection to offer Himself in our place bearing the fullness of God's wrath on our behalf so that our debt can be paid and we can be right with God.

We know that His work was sufficient because He did not stay dead.

On account of His resurrection we can trust Him by faith and receive the gift of eternal life.

If we want to know that we are loved by God, we simply need to look to the cross and empty tomb of Jesus and believe.

He also says here that they give constant thanks to God, ‘knowing...that He (that is God) has chosen you.’

I know that is a bit of a stumbling block for people and I fully admit that it brings us into the realm of things beyond our capacity to fully understand, but can we just appreciate together for a moment that the clear implication of being chosen by God means that these things happen according to His will and work?

That is exactly where the apostle goes in **the first half of verse 5.**

How can Paul speak with confidence about these believers being chosen?

His confidence has nothing to do with any kind of attempt to guess ahead of time who is chosen and who is not.

It has nothing to do with what people look like, where they are from, or how much power and influence they may have.

What is his confidence based on? His confidence is based on what he witnessed when he came preaching the gospel to the people of this city.

The gospel ministry in that city was more than saying the right things, the preaching was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

While it is certainly possible that he is referring to miracles performed among the people that were more common in the apostolic era, he doesn't actually name any here.

What he actually names is that these believers received the word 'with full conviction'.

That means they became fully convinced that what was being preached to them is true.

How does that happen? It happens by the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of people.

How do Paul, Silas, and Timothy know they are chosen by God? They are believing and living out the gospel.

Think of all that God does to bring a people to Himself.

He decides to create all things. Who does He consult about that? No one.

In His knowledge and power in all eternity past He decided to send Jesus into the world. Whose opinion did He ask about that?

He ordered the history of the world so that Jesus would come into the world at the time of His choosing. Whose permission did He ask for in that?

Did He send the Spirit because we deserve it or because He determined to?

The more you look at the plan of salvation the more you see it all happens according to God's sovereign choice.

[How many people played games at school where there were two captains who picked teams? If your experience was anything like mine then it was always those who were best at the game]

or sport who got picked first and the next best followed all the way down to the least skilled. Why did teams get picked that way? Because the team captains wanted to choose the people who would give them the best chance of winning. What if, however, the captain was so good at the game that he didn't need a team to win? He would be free to choose the worst players and still win the game. What would that do for the worst players? It would allow them to enter into the joy of winning on account of their captain.]

If we think that God chooses based on our skill, ability, or goodness the only thing we will end up doing is living in a prideful delusion which can be easily attacked and destroyed.

God's choosing ought to be the most humbling thought in our minds.

Why me? Why someone who has failed so much and fallen so short?

It is completely according to God's unsearchable knowledge and for His eternal glory that He calls people who are dead in their sins to life in Christ.

This truth is not intended to twist us into knots, it is intended to order our thinking and our worship.

When we think about the church are we thinking biblically?

It is easy to make the church about all kinds of things that it is not.

It is easy to become disappointed and even upset with the church when we have the wrong idea of what it is.

Let's aim for something better!

Let's keep in mind that the church is a people called out of the world to belong to Jesus.

A people of faith, love, and hope for which we ought to constantly thank the LORD.

A people established and kept by will and work of the LORD.

It's an amazing thing, the church of Christ.

I hope you know the joy of truly belonging and if you don't the invitation is before you this morning to belong by belonging to God through faith alone in Christ alone.