



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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Volume 14 Issue 22

June 7, 2015

### **A Healthy Church, Part 4**

Most if not all of you know that the stability of a structure ultimately is not based on its foundation, but that upon which the foundation is built- for example, bedrock verses limestone or sand. So what does the foundation do? It determines what the overall structure is going to look like.

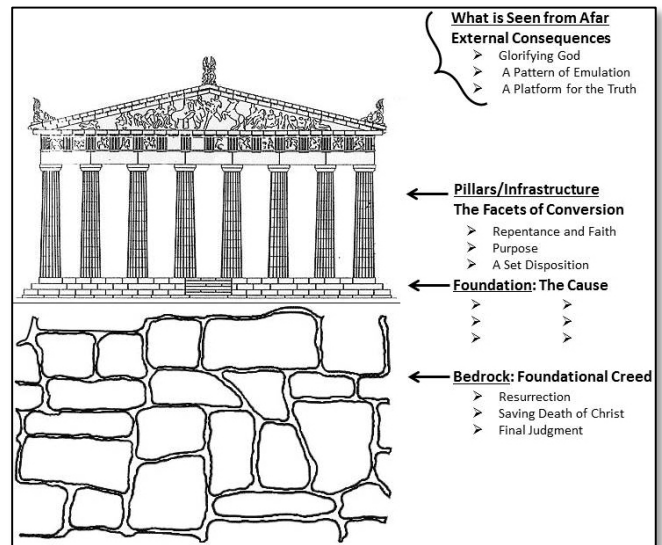
In 1 Thessalonians 1 Paul gives a description of the Thessalonian church and so his prescription for what it must embody. In this description he focusses upon the church's foundation.

When Paul received word from Timothy that the believers in Thessalonica were standing

firm in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 3:6), the apostle penned this epistle in which our current section was written ultimately to

1. Praise God for His preserving grace,
2. Commend the brethren in Thessalonica for their commitment to Christ and their unswerving passion to serve Him, and
3. Encourage this body and so further direct them in the Faith.

So we have in our passage a cross-sectional view of a healthy church which is both descriptive and prescriptive! Recall, Paul started with what was obvious about the Thessalonians, their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.” This is followed by a consideration of that which made this church what it was. As ones seeking to emulate this body, it is most helpful to consider the internal workings of this church first, for it was based on these that its most prominent characteristics flowed. Accordingly, we are working our way *backwards*



through this chapter. Thus far we have seen the foundational creed upon which the church rests, the bedrock upon which every church is built! (1Thessalonians 1:10). We have also seen the facets of their conversion (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). This is what we could call the pillars or infrastructure. And then there is the external consequences (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8). Specifically that which was seen and appreciated by the rest of Christendom both in Paul’s day and our own. This brings us today to the foundation upon which this church rests, specifically the cause showing us why the church does what it does.

### Election

1 Thessalonians 1:2, 4, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of *you* in our prayers... knowing, brethren<sup>1</sup> beloved by God, His choice of you.”

This statement clarifies why the believers in Thessalonica (and for that matter, everywhere else) were “more than conquerors”! In eternity past, God set His love upon them which reflected a divine choosing of the individual before he was even born.

Ephesians 1:4-5a, “... [God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love [in parallel with His “choice” and

so explaining why He chose whom He chose] He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself...”-

Do you understand that before the world began, God had you in His heart? Do you understand that “according to His good pleasure” He chose you to be saved?! In fact notice, this sovereign election was not based upon anything in us.

2 Timothy 1:9, “[God] has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”

Thus Paul wrote this:

Romans 8:29a, “For whom He foreknew [in the Bible this is an active word; it means “to love beforehand.” Do you know why you are saved? It had nothing to do with you, but God; the Lord set His love upon you before you were even born!], He also predestined to *become* conformed to the image of His Son...”

Lest you think this was just Paul, this truth is found throughout Scripture. Jesus Christ taught it this way:

John 15:16, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain...”

Why is it that the Thessalonians did what they did? Why is it that any Christian grows in grace? It is because Christ, in choosing us, has set His love upon us! Accordingly, in the end we will thrive, endure, or stand because Christ has purposed for us to do nothing less. Speaking of the servant, Paul explains it this way:

Romans 14:4b, “...and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

This is the doctrine of election. Before time began, God set His love upon us and so chose us to be His servants! Now from the Pauline corpus we learn many more things about God’s election of the child of God. Notice these specific elements:

1. It was determined in eternity past (Ephesians 1:4, 5).
2. It is sovereign and unconditional; that is, it is not conditioned on foreseen works or foreseen faith (Romans 9:11-13; 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28; 4:7; Ephesians 1:4; 2:8).
3. It is just (Romans 9:14, 15).
4. It is immutable and effectual. Those chosen eventually reach heaven; they obtain salvation (Romans 11:7).
5. Although election belongs to God’s decree from eternity, it becomes a dynamic force in the hearts and lives of God’s children (Colossians 3:12-17). As such it

- produces such fruits as adoption as sons, calling, faith, justification, and much, much more (cf. Romans 8:28–30, 33; Ephesians 1:4, 5; Titus 1:1).
6. It concerns individuals (Romans 16:13; Philippians 4:3; cf. Acts 9:15).
  7. It comprehends these individuals “in Christ” with the result that they are viewed as one body (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:10).
  8. It is an election not only to salvation but also to service (again note Colossians 3:12–17; cf. Acts 9:15, 16).
  9. It has as its final aim God’s glory, and so is the work of His delight (Ephesians 1:4–6).

Lest you think this is just “*a bunch of theology and so no big deal*,” you must see that this is a most glorious truth! When you were saved, God was NOT one of many options whom you were wise enough to choose. To the contrary, in the spirit of Hosea 3, we were used up sinners in love with our sin- quite unlovely and so worthless to this world. Yet for reasons we may never know, God set His love upon us, bought us out of slavery, and then took us to the wilderness in order to love, nourish, and cherish us.

Now after all of that, do you suppose God simply is going to release us to an impersonal fate? Listen, if He loved you and so chose you while you were a sinner, don’t you suppose now that you are His beloved He not only will keep you saved, but will protect, nourish, mature, guide, and lead you to glory?<sup>2</sup> That was the point Paul made in Romans 5.

Romans 5:10, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”

That is why Paul could say with such confidence, speaking of the church in Philippi...

Philippians 1:6: “*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*”

In fact notice the phrase “beloved by God” (1 Thessalonians 1:4) is a unique Greek phrase.<sup>3</sup> The expression is a perfect participle which tells us that God’s love began in the past and continues up to an eternal present.<sup>4</sup> In other words, if you ever doubted God’s love and so purpose for you, here is a passage which definitely teaches that God not only set His love upon us in the past, but will continue to love us in the present forever!

So why is it that the brethren in Thessalonica grew as they did? Why is it that this church, in the midst of severe persecution, stood firm in Christ and did not compromise (v. 6)? And how is it that this church remained true to the Lord in the midst of some very difficult circumstances? Because Paul “knew” (the word here speaks of fulness of knowledge [οἶδα (*oída*)] and so complete confidence) that they were the beloved of God and that God had chosen them!

You say, “Didn’t Paul know this before he sent Timothy?”

For sure (cf. Galatians 1:15; Acts 26:16), but that doesn't mean he always remained true to that knowledge. Like us, he was a sinner who "did not always do the things he wished" (Romans 7:14ff). It could very well have been that at Timothy's good report Paul responded with, "*Of course! Why in all the world was I so worried?!*"

We can have this same confidence concerning Bethel, its family units, and its people. In and through all things God is working out His perfect plan for you in Christ. Let me tell you something: if I didn't believe this, I would not be in the ministry! A large part of my understanding of my call is that I have been placed here to help you through the providence God has ordained for you. *I can't make you stand... but I know Someone who will!*

You say: *if it is true that election ensured the fidelity of this and all churches, then why don't all churches thrive?* Answer: God uses means- secondary causes- to bring about His perfect plan. And one of the secondary means God uses to establish a healthy church is solid teaching.

### Solid Teaching

1 Thessalonians 1:5a, "For our<sup>5</sup> gospel did not come to you in word only..."

There is no question that Paul's focus in this verse is the next point, "... but also in power and in the Holy Spirit." Accordingly, it is easy to read over Paul's opening statement here, but that would be a mistake. I wish it went without saying today, but it doesn't. A healthy church is founded upon the solid teaching of the word! And of all people and generations we need to hear this! Speaking of the last days, Amos had this warning from God:

Amos 8:11-12, "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord God, 'When I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.'"

Many a preacher has prayed at the beginning of his sermon preparations, "Lord, give me a message from this passage to bring to Your people." You may not realize it, but this is a dangerous approach to Scripture. The church is built NOT on the messages that a man might derive from scripture, be they winsome and moving, BUT on the word itself! This becomes all the more important in light of Paul's admonitions to the church bodies in the last days:

2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in

accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

Let me tell you something! The focus of this and every pulpit must NOT be an inspirational message delivered by an effective preacher. AGAIN, the focus must ever and always be the declaration of God’s word! Notice the preface to 2 Timothy 4:3-4.

2 Timothy 4:1-2a, 3a, “I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word [not your opinion, hobby horse, burden, or message] 3 for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine...”

How we need to guard our hearts here! For believe it or not, our sinful hearts gravitate toward arrogant, proud teachers who do NOT preach the truth, BUT “inspiring messages.” Allow the sin of past brethren to warn you, God said this to Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 5:30-31a, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their *own* authority; and My people love it so!...”-

This sounds crazy, but this is the kind of teaching you and I really want in our flesh! Such was what the early church wanted in Corinth. Paul said:

2 Corinthians 11:4, “...if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear *this* beautifully.”

Christian, the bottom line when it comes to the church you attend and the teaching you submit yourself to must be: is the truth of God’s word faithfully proclaimed?! Healthy churches are built upon the solid preaching and teaching of the word of God! This is the content of the meal that produces spiritual giants! This explains how the church in the early days endured so much and yet remained true to their Lord. In Paul’s message to the Ephesian elders he wrote this:

Acts 20:26-27 (ESV), “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”

Wolves eventually would infiltrate this church, but not before Paul spent three solid years teaching, discipling, and grounding this body in the faith!

Jeremiah 23:28, “The prophet who has a dream may relate *his* dream [God here is speaking of the false prophets of Israel who had become servants of Baal and so in the congregation stood up and essentially said, “God has laid this burden on my heart!” cf.

Jeremiah 23:31-32], but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have *in common* with grain?’ declares the Lord.”

Family of God, who cares what burden God supposedly has laid on my heart? My calling as a preacher, the calling that rests on all teachers and preachers of God’s word, is proclaiming the truth of God’s word- nothing more and nothing less! Peter warned the man given the gift of preaching this way:

1 Peter 4:11a, “Whoever speaks, *let him speak*, as it were, the utterances of God...”

The standard and passion of Paul was this:

1 Thessalonians 2:3-4, “But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts.”

Paul didn’t tickle men’s ears; he didn’t preach “the burden of his heart.” Rather he spoke knowing that he stood before God in all things and so he spoke the truth of God’s word! Paul obviously took this calling quite seriously such that the church in Thessalonica was founded upon the faithful teaching of God’s word.<sup>6</sup> If you are going to grow in grace, you therefore must grow in the word! Notice a third explanation for why the church looked as it did, divine enabling.

### Divine Enabling

1 Thessalonians 1:5b, “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit...”

Salvation is comprised of ten separate parts which can be organized in a chart with five columns labeled as either actions which involve only God or actions that involve both God and man. You may or may not have noticed, but Paul here, in explaining how the Thessalonians came to be the church they were, vacillates between an exclusively divine cause and a cause which involves man. Notice the first point, election, is exclusively an activity of God. We can’t control who is chosen by God and who is not. The second point, solid teaching is something we have a part in, don’t we? We can choose to listen to solid teaching or to have our ears tickled with moving stories and personal messages which God supposedly has laid on the heart of a speaker. With the third point, divine enabling, we are back to that which is exclusively an activity of God.

The phrase, “...in power and in the Holy Spirit...” refers to one and the same thing. According to the good pleasure of God, the word which Paul preached did not return void; it was used by the Holy Spirit powerfully to transform this body into a peculiar people! This is in keeping with how God deigns to use His word.

Isaiah 55:10-11, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it.”

This doesn't mean that there is inherent power in the word of God; there isn't. But God has deigned to use the word of God in bringing about His purpose and end. Accordingly, we conclude that never does the word of God go forth in vain! I love the words of the Hebrew writer who uses the metaphor of the burnt offering in which an animal was dissected and specially arranged on the altar of burnt offering by a priest.

Hebrews 4:12-13, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword [this is referencing the knife used by the priest in cutting up the animal], and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”

One of the purposes of God's word in the life of the believer is the transformation of his person into the image of Christ. The word cuts us and dissects us and so refashions us as servants of God. We read about it in Jeremiah who explains why the preacher should only preach God's word:

Jeremiah 23:29, “‘Is not My word like fire?’ declares the Lord, ‘and like a hammer which shatters a rock.’”

God has deigned to use His word to consume/transform an entire nation (think how one little spark can destroy the largest forest) or crush a heart made hard by sin. Taking this together we conclude that the word of God is not magic and so contains no efficacy in and of itself. Quoting it will not chase away a demon! Yet if God is going to transform an individual, it almost always will be through the ministrations of the Holy Spirit working by and with His Word!

We need to realize this. So often we think sanctification or cultural engagement is “by might or by power” (Zechariah 4:6)- that is human wisdom and persuasiveness. Yet it is NOT! The passage continues, “‘...but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts.” Recall the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Recall why this is such an important doctrine upon which any and every church rests. The resurrection of Christ testifies to nothing less than the deity of Christ. Many have been raised from the dead, but only one man, the God-man Jesus Christ, raised HIMSELF from the dead (John 2:19, 21)! And now through the saving grace of Christ, this resurrection power is operative in our lives.



Romans 6:4-5, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also *in the likeness* of His resurrection."

This is what we mean by "resurrection power." We are NOT talking here about speaking in tongues or doing miracles of healing. RATHER, we are talking about growing in grace when everything is set against you. Standing firm in one's trust of the Lord when the world says, "Curse God and die." That is what the resurrection power of Christ is all about, having died with Him we now evidence the life of Christ reigning in us- "we too walk in newness of life"!

Accordingly, the church in Thessalonica did that which was unthinkable: they suffered greatly at the hands of their countrymen, and yet thrived in their faith! From this we conclude that the word of God was not given to them in vain; the Holy Spirit took the word and produced in the Thessalonians a heart devoted to the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 1:6, "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit."

There was nothing mundane about the Thessalonians' conversion. It was in the face of great opposition which would continue on for some time. Now much later in time, the Thessalonians were suffering, yet they were not shrinking back:

2 Thessalonians 1:4, "...we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure."

Again, what's to explain this endurance in the midst of such difficult circumstances? The Spirit of God powerfully transformed this body into an army for the Lord whose hope and longing were rooted not in this world but in the coming Kingdom of Christ. As such, the more they were beaten; the more they thrived! So we see a third reason for why this Church was so healthy, the enabling grace of God!

Now as I referenced earlier, this clearly is a prerogative of God; we don't do anything in order for God to enable us to stand. So how ought this to encourage us? How does knowledge of this make us healthy as a body? Simply stated, it should make us as a body all the more dependent upon God! Listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2, he essentially says the same thing as he does here with one addition:

1 Corinthians 2:4-5: "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

What's the addition? The "so that" statement, "...that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God!" Christian, this is what knowledge of God's Enabling Grace ought to evoke in us... devotion to the Lord, dependence upon His wisdom and grace. To learn this, we therefore must travel through rough seas! Accordingly, let us be done with the "victim mentality" which makes us passive as we suffer and so subject to the thinking of a fallen mind. Rather, we must take every trial and hardship and actively trust God through it!

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> In 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Paul refers to the Thessalonian believers as “brothers” 28 times! This is much more than his other epistles.

<sup>2</sup> cf. also Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

<sup>3</sup> ἠγαπημένοι ὑπὸ [τοῦ] θεοῦ (*ēgarēmenoi hupo [tou] theou*).

<sup>4</sup> In the Greek *loved* is a perfect participle, combining the thoughts that love existed in the past and that it continues into the present in full force. The construction occurs only here in the New Testament (though 2 Thess. 2:13; Jude 1 are similar), and is richer in meaning than the usual expression (found for example in Romans 1:7). (Morris, L., *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An introduction and commentary*, p. 45)

<sup>5</sup> Morris wrote, “The possessive *our...* mean[s]... that they had made the gospel they preached their own. It was for them far more than a fine theory; it was something to be lived and proclaimed with power.” (*Ibid.*, p. 46)

<sup>6</sup> The teaching which the Thessalonians received went way beyond a simple gospel message (cf. again 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Notice (1) the church in Thessalonica was comprised primarily of Jews- Jews who knew their Old Testaments and so many of the doctrines which we hold dear today. This wasn’t a congregation that began with NO knowledge of the truth. They already would have understood much from God’s word. (2) Furthermore, Paul’s stay in Thessalonica went beyond the three weeks referenced in Acts 17:2- for he received a gift from the church in Philippi on multiple occasions (cf. Philippians 4:16); throughout all this time he spent long hours instructing this body...

=1 Thessalonians 2:11-12: “...you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children [all present participles indicating continuous action], so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”- the idea is that the whole time that Paul was there- day in and day out, every day- he was teaching and preaching the word of God! Notice, this instruction included teaching on (1) Eschatology, 1 Thessalonians 1:9a; 5:1-3; 2 Thessalonians 2:5, (2) The Last Judgment, 1 Thessalonians 1:9b, (3) The Gospel, 1 Thessalonians 2:8, (4) Godliness, 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, (5) God’s sovereignty, 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4, (6) Holy living, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-6a, and (7) Ecclesiology and how the church ought to function and so relate to one another, 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

...add to all of this the two epistles written to them and we can see why this church was so greatly used by God in the ancient world.