

# A Model Church

## INTRODUCTION

During Paul's second missionary journey, Paul received the Macedonian call in a vision when he was at Troas. He decided to cross over the sea for Macedonia (Acts 16:8-10). His first station was Philippi. He planted the church of Philippi. Paul was imprisoned in Philippi and after his release, he moved on to the next city Thessalonica, and planted the church of Thessalonica at around AD 50.

The planting of the church of Thessalonica was not smooth, its journey was very rocky.

Paul and Silas arrived in the city, and went to the Jewish synagogue on three Sabbath (Acts 17:2). And for three Saturday in a row, Paul reasoned from scriptures, proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the death. They managed to convert some Jews and some Greeks (Acts 17:4).

However, some of the Jewish leaders were annoyed. They started a riot, and stormed the home of Jason where Paul and Silas had been staying (Acts 17:8). But Paul and Silas were not around, but the brothers had to send him to the neighboring town of Berea in the covering of the night (Acts 17:10).

You can imagine Paul's concern for these brand new believers: no pastor and no bible except the Old Testament used by the Jews. Would they survive? Or would they give up and blend back to their former lives?

So as soon as he could, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out how they were getting on:

*"For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain." (1 Thess. 3:5 NIV)*

So, how did they turn out? What did Timothy report? Was it a good report or the bad one? Let's find out:

*"And so you became **a model** to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." (1 Thess. 1:7 NIV)*

It was a **GOOD** and **GREAT** report. The church was **A MODEL CHURCH**.

The word "**model**" is a special word, in Greek is "**tupos**", it means "*a mark made as the result of a blow or pressure*" (Bauer's Lexicon). The church of Thessalonica had stamped themselves as the preferred example to others to imitate and copy in the region of Macedonia and Achaia.

In this sermon, we will work through the first chapter of the first letter of the Thessalonians and learn three **characteristics** that made the church of Thessalonica a model church for others to follow:

1. A model church pursuing for virtues with eternal significance (1 Thess. 1:3)
2. A model church that reflects life-changing conversion (1 Thess. 1:4-6; 9)
3. A model church of effective evangelism (1 Thess. 1:8-10)

## A Model Church

### A MODEL CHURCH PURSUING VIRTUES WITH ETERNAL SIGNIFICANCE (1 THESS. 1:3)

What are the virtues with eternal significance the Thessalonians pursued?

*“We remember before our God and Father **your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 1:3 NIV)*

The Thessalonians pursued three eternal virtues of faith, love and hope. Why pursuing for these triad virtues has eternal significance. To answer the question, we must look into two passages in the scripture:

*“And now these three **remain**: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13 NIV)*

*“But where there are prophecies, they will **cease**; where there are tongues, they will be **stilled**; where there is knowledge, it will **pass away**.” (1 Cor. 13:8 NIV)*

The Corinthians sought after spiritual gift that meant for personal edification and they used it in public worship which resulted in confusion. Paul reprimanded the Corinthians for seeking after the temporal – spiritual gifts will cease, still and pass-away in one’s lifespan as spiritual gifts are not required in eternity. Whereas the Thessalonians sought after virtues of faith, love and hope, and they have eternal significance, as they will remain.

Our love for God will continue into eternity as God is love; our faith in Christ will not cease as we live by faith now, our faith will turn into sight at His second coming; and finally our hope in Christ will not pass away as the blessed hope has come to be with us during His second coming.

How did the Thessalonians pursue the three eternal virtues?

Firstly, they pursued faith that produced good work. How did the faith of the Thessalonians produce good work? It is summed up in 1 Thess. 1:9, that the Thessalonians had *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”* (1 Thess. 1:9 NIV). Forsaking idol worship and turn to God was the good work of the Thessalonians prompted by their faith in God. Thus their faith was active and producing. James in his letter tells us that faith without work is dead, *“as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”* (James 2:26 NIV)

Secondly, they pursued love that prompted unceasing labor. What does it mean by “unceasing labor”? The Greek word for labor is “**koros**”, it emphasizes “**pain and weariness**” involved in the effort of extending love. How did the Thessalonians pursue love in pain and weariness as they served the saints? This was observed in their contribution to help the famine stricken fellow brothers in Judea:

*“And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup>In the midst of a **very severe trial**, their overflowing joy and **their extreme poverty** welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup>For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even **beyond their ability**. Entirely on their own.”* (2 Cor. 8:1-3 NIV)

Church of Thessalonians was one of the churches in Macedonia, thus this text did refer to the church of Thessalonica. How did the church serve the saints with pain and weariness? This was evident from the description Paul used when they contributed the fund for the famine stricken fellow believers in Judea, they were in **very severe trial** and in **extreme poverty**. They did not serve the saints with the surplus, they did it in their scarcity, and even beyond their ability. They felt a pinch in their giving.

## A Model Church

Thirdly, they pursued hope that inspired endurance. The young church indeed went through unprecedented persecution, “...in spite of **severe suffering**, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). In the midst of their suffering, they focused on the promise of hope for the return of the Lord to deliver them from current trouble and the final tribulation in the end time, “and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess. 1:10 NIV). Thus their hope on the return of the Lord inspired them to endure on current suffering. The Thessalonians provides the best example for us to imitate their endurance when we are stricken by persecution and trial.

### A MODEL CHURCH THAT REFLECTS LIFE-CHANGING CONVERSION 1 THESS. 1:4-6; 9)

We often meet up with people who claim that they are Christians but their testimonies do not justify their claims. This experience will not apply to the Thessalonians, people getting in touch with them would testify that they were the changed people. Two contributing factors are required to bring about Thessalonians’ life-changing conversion.

Firstly, life-changing conversion requires the anointed preaching of the gospel with three elements:

*“<sup>4</sup>For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup>because **our gospel** came to you not simply with words but also **with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction**. You know **how we lived among you** for your sake.” (1 Thess. 1:4-5 NIV)*

1. The first element is the element of content, “**our gospel**”, i.e. the message of the gospel. Paul called his message as “*the gospel of God*”, and it was “*approved*” and “*entrusted*” by God to Apostle Paul (1 Thess. 2:4, 8). His message “*was not trying to please people but God*” (1 Thess. 2:4b NIV). And he did not preach word of “*flattery*” (1 Thess. 2:5 NIV). No wonder his critics commented that his preaching was lack of eloquence or wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1). Neither Paul was attractive in his outer appearance. Historians said that Paul was a bow-legged person.
2. The second element is the element of the Holy Spirit, “**with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction**” (1 Thess. 1:5 NIV). The gospel preached to the Thessalonians were anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Without the anointing of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s preaching would be lifeless, as John Stott puts it, “*the Spirit without the Word is weaponless; the Word without the Spirit is powerless*” [Quote John Stott]. The gospel not only was anointed by the Holy Spirit, it brought about “**deep conviction**” on the seekers. NLT has a better expression on the term “**deep conviction**”, “*...for the Holy Spirit gave you **full assurance that what we said was true***” (1Thess. 1:5b NLT).
3. The third element is the element of testimony, “**how we live among you**” (1 Thess. 1:5 NIV). Paul walked the talk, “*we loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel, but our lives as well*” (1 Thess. 2:8 NIV).

Secondly, life-changing conversion requires positive response from the seekers. How did the Thessalonians responded to the anointed preaching of Paul’s preaching? They responded to Paul’s life-changing preaching with three steps of life-changing conversion.

## A Model Church

1. The first step of life-changing conversion is repentance. The Thessalonians responded to the preaching of Paul message with deep conviction, *“because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction (1 Thess. 1:5 NIV). And they turned to God from idol, “they tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9 NIV). There was a 180° change of their lifestyle – formerly they were devoted idol-worshipper, and now they turned and served the living God.*
2. The second step of life-changing conversion is obedience. The Thessalonians renounced idolatry, and served God who created the universe, *“...serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1 9 NIV). They also became imitator of Christ, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord...” (1 Thess. 1:6a NIV).*
3. The third step of life-changing conversion is living a Spirit-filled life. This was apparent as they welcomed the message with the joy of the Holy Spirit, *“...for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6 NIV). Filling with the joy of the Holy Spirit is identical to being filled with the Holy Spirit, “and the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52 NIV).*

Why many Christians lack spiritual dynamics as the Thessalonians? One of the reason is many do not go through life-changing conversion – converts are not challenge to forsake their sins and to repent from their old ways of lives. Many conversions are appealed by secondary motivations such as: the gospel of prosperity, promises of healing and blessing, and relational motivation – accepting Christ as the spouse is a Christian. Another reason is many are ignorance of Spirit-filled living or they have not taught of how to live a Spirit filled life. We are in need of the preaching of the crossed-centered gospel like what Jonathan Edwards preached in the 18 century that ignited the first American Great Awakening, with his famous sermon titled “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God”. Christianity was liberated from the ritual religion to fervency and eagerness to receive Christ from hell fire.

### A MODEL CHURCH OF EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

All local churches are obeying the Great Commission, but many are poorly performed in their evangelistic endeavor. The church of Thessalonica stood as odd against the norm. Why?

First of all, they did not contain the gospel within the four walls, instead they reverberated the gospel, and “broadcasted” it beyond their four walls, *“the Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thess. 1:8a NIV).*

**“Rang out”** (use only here, nowhere else) in Greek is **“exēchéomai”**, it means “to sound forth, emit, sound, resound” (Thayer Greek Lexicon); or “reverberated” (The Bible-knowledge commentary). The famous “The Bible-knowledge commentary” describes how the gospel was reverberated by the Thessalonians: *“Paul saw the Thessalonians as **AMPLIFIERS** or relay stations that not only received the gospel message but sent it farther on its way with increased **POWER** and **SCOPE**” (Pg. 692). and “Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica had the effect of speaking into a public address microphone; his words were received and repeated by many different **‘SPEAKERS’** in many remote places where his unaided voice could not have reached” (pg. 692).*

The mind-boggling question is with the lack of multi-media apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp, how could the Thessalonians manage to spread the gospel to the vast region of Macedonia and Achaia? The only possible means is by mouth to mouth transmission of the gospel like virus

## A Model Church

spreading from one person to another. John Stott commented on the Thessalonians' outreach work as, "we might call it '**HOLY GOSSIP**'; It is the excited transmission from mouth to mouth of the impact which the good news is making on people" (Quote John Stott, *the Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 38.).

Secondly, they saturated the whole region of Macedonia and Achaia with their contagious testimonies.

*"Your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it." (1 Thess. 1:8b, 8c NIV)*

The Thessalonians' testimonies were termed as "**your faith in God**" by Paul. Their testimonies were no ordinary testimonies, as their testimonies were contagious, and their testimonies had "**become known everywhere**". Thus, their testimonies were contagious, like a "virus" infecting the whole community.

The contagious testimonies of the Thessalonians consisted of three elements:

*"<sup>9</sup>for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell **how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God**, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath." (1 Thess. 1:8b-10 NIV)*

1. The first element of their contagious testimonies was "what they were". There was a strong evidence that the Thessalonians were devoted idol-worshipper as Mount Olympus was situated just 50 miles away from the town, and they believed that their gods lived in the Mount Olympus.
2. The second element of their contagious testimonies was "what they are". They had a story to tell to others of their current changed lifestyle of serving the living and true God now.
3. The third element of their contagious testimony was "what they will be". They were anticipating Christ redemption from the current and future wrath of God to be poured in the last day.

### CONCLUSION:

You have gone through the Paul's recommendation of a model church – church of Thessalonica. What are your thoughts?

Are you convince that the church of Thessalonica was a model church?

Or do you have a better model to recommend?