

The Foundation of a True Church, Part 1

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

"You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say

anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

That passage, it describes the foundation, the true foundation and the true principle of life for every true church of Jesus Christ. I want us here to identify and to then highlight some of those features that are at our core, at our foundation, so that we know who we are, what we are, and even why we are.

First, let's consider, number one, point number one: The production of a true church. The production of a true church. Look at verses 1 to 3 again. “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Stop there for a second.

The letter comes here with the weight of Paul's apostolic authority, but it's written, as you see, addressed from this small, short-term missionary team: Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Silas was Paul's traveling companion on his second missionary journey, and Silvanus is simply the Roman way of saying his name and Silas the Greek way. But Timothy, then, was the convert from Lystra, Paul's young protégé. And these three men came to Thessalonica after leaving Philippi. You can read Acts 16 and 17 to read about the planting of those churches.

You remember Philippi, they had been unceremoniously dragged before the city magistrates. They'd been beaten with rods. They'd been imprisoned. And then in Thessalonica, more rioting and violence ensued, such that Paul and Silas, they needed to leave the city in the middle of the night, escaping to Berea. The enemies of Paul could and did use this fact of controversy and disruption to discredit his ministry.

You see everywhere this guy goes he causes trouble. He's a trouble-maker. He's causing problems. Why can't he leave well

enough alone? It wasn't Paul, though, who was the trouble-maker here, it's the enemies of the Gospel who stirred up trouble, not Paul. They hoped to prevent him from succeeding in his ministry. They hoped to bring disrepute to the Gospel he preached. And yet in spite of all opposition, some of it very physically painful, God planted two churches, one in Philippi, another in Thessalonica.

The church in Philippi started small, with a women's prayer meeting in the household of a suicidal jailer. The church in Thessalonica started with even stronger core, really. According to Acts 17:4, there were a few Jews, some God fearers, that is, Jewish proselytes, a large number of Greeks, former pagan background, number of the leading women.

In both cases, as I said, Paul was forced to leave those cities, which was heart-breaking for him. He's a shepherd; he loves these people. But for their sake, him being the lightning rod, bring the attack, he left. He entrusted that church, those little fledgling churches, he entrusted them to God. He entrusted those believers to God, and he had the joy of looking back to see that indeed a church had taken root, and that it

continued, and that it not only continued, but it continued to grow strong. His labor had not been in vain.

The churches were growing, they were thriving, they were becoming productive. And that was truly a remarkable thing, unmistakable evidence to him and to anybody else who cared to look of the presence and the power of God. And that's why Paul, here in the beginning of 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, he's so effusive in giving thanks to God for this church. That's why he begins this letter, verse 2, by describing the fact and the reasons for his constant thanksgiving.

Thessalonian church demonstrated that it was a true church of God because it manifested the signs of true life, and that's a life that only comes from God. The evidence he finds for their, for the existence of a true church and true life comes in verse 3 because Paul, there, remembered the clear evidence of spiritual life because he saw their spiritual productivity.

Look at verse 3 again. He remembered "before our God and Father," he says, "your work of faith, your labor of love and

your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Faith, love, and hope, have you ever heard those together before? We’ve heard those three virtues in close connection in a number of places in Scripture. We find them together in Romans 5, Ephesians 4, Colossians 1, 1 Corinthians 3. We find them in 2 Peter 1. Faith, love, hope, they represent clear, unmistakable evidence of a true work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. And you know what? Those virtues, faith biblically defined, love biblically defined, hope biblically defined, you cannot reproduce those through man; only comes from God.

Let me just stop to emphasize that point. A true work of God, it’s not about numbers. It’s not about popularity. As you read in Scripture, the majority is most often wrong. The majority is under judgment. The majority is the one that gets God’s condemnation. “Many are called, but few are chosen. Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there be that go that way. Few are those who enter through the narrow gate” and travel that narrow, compressed, confined road, a hard road. It’s a difficult road, but those few find life.

A true work of God is not about popularity. It's not about political influence. It's not even about legislative change. Rather, a true work of God is known by the presence and the growth of these three virtues: faith, love, and hope. And those three virtues take time to grow. They take time to see. It's like when you plant a seed into the ground. Farmers, you understand this. You plant something into the soil, and you don't expect when you turn around the next moment that you're going to see the full grown plant, bearing fruit. You expect it's going to take time. You expect it's going to take watering and fertilizing. But then something pokes through the soil eventually, and then it grows into strength, and then it grows into productivity.

It's the same thing with us. It's the same thing with these virtues. And you have to look closely, carefully, to see them. You have to know what you're looking for. By their very nature, faith, love, and hope, they don't parade themselves. They don't boast and brag. They don't broadcast themselves. But for those who care to notice, for those who have "ears to hear and eyes to see," for those who are looking for the true evidence of a true

work of God; faith, love, and hope are impossible to miss. And as I said, they are unexplainable by any human means.

Every true Christian possesses faith, love, and hope in some measure and every true Christian believes and loves and hopes. With regard to time, these three virtues are interesting. With regard to time, faith looks to the past; it trusts God for what he has done and looks to his faithfulness. Regarding time, love looks to the present, manifesting sacrifice for the good of others. In the present, hope always looks to the future; it's always reaching out for God's promises. And we could say that with regard to direction, with regard to focus, faith looks upward toward God, love looks outward toward others, hope looks onward toward Christ.

Regarding the source, we could say that faith is centered on the power of God, love comes from God, our hope is in God. Those three virtues, they are the heart of every true believer. They're at the heart of every true church because they're at the heart of every true Christian, and churches are made up, true churches are made up of true Christians. When a group of people who possess faith and love and hope, when they practice and

produce and increase in these virtues, when they assemble together under the instruction of the Scripture, under the organization of the Scripture, a church is formed.

A church is planted, provided that assembly continues in faith and love and hope. Christ will continue to abide with them. He'll continue to cause them to grow strong and increase. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church." "I will build my church; the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The mark of the church that he builds, though, are marked by these three virtues: faith, love, and hope. He promises those kinds of churches, Matthew 28:20, "Behold, I am with you always." Who's you? Believers, churches, his people.

Any church that departs from those three virtues Jesus calls them to repent in Revelation 2 and 3. And if they will not repent of their faithless work, their loveless labors, their false hopes, Jesus departs. He leaves them to themselves. He removes their candlestick, and in the end he tells them, if they don't repent, he says "I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

So since these three virtues are so vital as the distinguishing marks of every true believer and therefore of every true church, we need to take a few minutes to understand these things better, don't you think? Let's start with the work of faith. That's the first reason that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy thank God, because they remembered the Thessalonians' "work of faith." That word, work, our English word, energy comes from this Greek word for work. It's *ergon*. And we're talking here about action, about deeds, about works. This isn't something invisible. It's visible, it's active, it's energetic, it's productive.

That is exactly what James was confronting in James 2:14-26, that "faith without works is dead." Plenty of people sitting in church pews or maybe church chairs, as is the case, but they're sitting around, and they claim to be Christians, but you see no good works coming out of their lives; I don't mean nice moral things, I mean biblically defined works that are generated by faith. Some people seem very indifferent to that concern.

They seem very flippant about the lack of that thing in their life. May be relatively moral people, may be nice people, may be very good neighbors. But there's no faith energized works in their lives at all. And that's the essence, there, of self-deception, for someone to believe he's fine with God but to demonstrate no evidence of saving faith, which ought to be of grave concern.

The phrase, work of faith, it refers to work that is prompted by faith, that is directed by faith, that flows out of faith. And that is to say that not all works, not all activity that you can see, is faith generated. You see this all the time, people who are active in the church, they do a lot of things, they do a lot of things in their community, but they're driven by other motivations. They have this sense of needing to give back to the community. They have a sense of desire for friendship. They want to avoid loneliness.

They, sometimes they, it's a matter of tradition. For some, they think religious activity is a way to maintain favor with God. So Paul here, he commends the Thessalonians not for just work and activity; anybody does that; the world does that. But

specifically, for the work, the activity of faith, a work that is generated by what they believe. And that is to say that the Thessalonians, they believed God, they took him at his word, and therefore, they acted. They trusted him, and that produced pious activity in their lives.

Listen, faith is the most foundational virtue of the Christian life. It is the most foundational, and I mean by that, it is a foundation out of which every other virtue grows. It is the most foundational virtue of the Christian life. We are saved by God's grace through what? Faith. Faith. Put simply, faith is taking God at his Word. It's trusting God. It's embracing what he said. Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Faith requires the intellect; it requires comprehension and understanding. Faith affects the emotions; it produces holy affections in us. We love what God loves; we hate what God hates. And then faith fires up the will. It drives the motivation to produce good works in our lives. Biblical saving faith, it's never static, it's never just at rest, always dynamic, always living, always resulting in action. As we like

to say, we are justified by God's grace through faith alone, but it's not through a faith that *is* alone. It's through a faith that's active.

Paul identified faith as really the foundational, driving force in his own apostolic ministry. His entire apostolic ministry was a ministry generated driven, a work of faith. In one of his most autobiographical letters, 2 Corinthians, Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4, I'm just kinda putting 13, verses 13 to 18 together, he says, "since we have this spirit of faith according to what's been written, 'I believed, and therefore I spoke,' we also believe and therefore we also speak."

You see? "I believe; therefore, I speak." As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. But the things that are seen are transient. That is, temporal, temporary, passing. "But the things that are unseen are eternal." They stay. Believing God is what drove Paul's apostolic ministry. "I believed, and therefore I spoke." Paul believed God. He trusted him. He became a slave to God's authority, his Word. And what he saw before his eyes did not matter as much as the unseen things revealed in God's Word.

So to believe God, to read his Holy Word, to trust it, to obey it, that is an issue, beloved, of authority. Whose authority are you following? You've lined yourself up underneath the authority of the one and only God. You acknowledge that he alone is the authority. His Word is law and his will is your will. By holding fast to God's Word, you come to know the truth. You come to know the God of the truth. You develop deep-seated convictions about him, about his works, about his ways. You learn to appreciate God, worship God, which leads to more deeply rooted, clearly defined set of convictions in your life. From those convictions grow good works.

Over in Peter's second epistle, you can over there is you'd like, in 2 Peter in chapter 1 verses 5 to 7, there's a chain of Christian virtues listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7, and that entire chain is anchored in faith, in believing God, in taking him at his Word. Peter writes, "Since God has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness," verse 3, "therefore," verses 5-7, "make every effort," that is work hard at it, "to supplement your faith with virtue, and your virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control

with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.”

Did you notice, there, the other two virtues in our text in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, steadfastness and love, there? They’re also links in Peter’s chain of virtues. But faith is the anchor, that’s the starting point; faith, then virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and finally love. Faith is the first one, makes sense, right? We enter into a relationship with God by faith. It’s the anchor point.

And those are the virtues that undergird what Paul calls “the work of faith.” You can turn back to 1 Thessalonians. They undergird what Paul calls, the work of faith. Every true Christian, every true church not only possesses those virtues, but practices its faith in genuine works of faith. That is the first product. It’s activity, energy, work that’s prompted, directly connected, to what we believe from God’s Word.

You want some examples? Let give you some examples, concrete examples. We believe that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ," right? Therefore, what do we proclaim when we share the Gospel with people? Our own experience? Or the word about Christ, an accurate message of the Gospel. That's an example. We believe that the Gospel is a message of salvation from sin, rescue from the just and holy wrath of God. Well therefore, we correct people's false expectations about what God intends to do for them. We help them to see what salvation is from. It's not from their sense of dissatisfaction. It's not from an unhappy life. It's not from bad decisions. It's not from the mistakes that they've made. It's from their sin, and it's from the wrath of God. And salvation means a relationship with him. We believe that God himself is the reward of the Gospel. As Jesus said in John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Therefore, we don't allow people to self-define salvation as happiness, of feelings of peace and well-being, of any other kind of health, wealth, and prosperity message. We proclaim the Gospel of God, the salvation of God, in God's terms. So we come

to people and we say, Do you want to be forgiven of your sin? Oh, I don't have sin. Oh, actually, let me proclaim the law of God to you and help you to understand that you have fallen short of it, like I have and like everybody else has, and you're in danger. You're in danger of hell, eternal hell. And if you want salvation, God will take away your sin, and he'll also give you forever a relationship with him. That's the reward.

Do you want God, or do you want your sin? That's the decision to make, right? We believe that all have sinned, "the wages of sin is death." Therefore, we help people define what sin is by explaining God's law to them, by showing how they violate it, by warning them of the consequences of sin, eternal torment in hell. We believe repentance is a significant aspect of the Gospel message; therefore, we call people to repent of their sins and turn to Christ.

We define the terms for them. We don't let them self-define terms like believe and salvation and sin. We don't let them do that because they're unbelievers. They need truth revealed to them just as we've needed truth revealed to us. Paul said, "I

believe; therefore, I speak.” That’s what we do, too, beloved.
That’s what we do.

Those are concrete examples. There are many other examples we could bring up. But those are examples of what the work of faith involves. If it’s faith-generated, it’s going to be faith-consistent, not popular but faithful. Isn’t it? Faithful. Not always to pleasing to sinners, not always making them feel comfortable, but wholly pleasing to God, and I’ll say, by the way, wholly pleasing to God’s elect. Listen, I want you to tell me the truth. Don’t mess around with lies. Don’t mess around with half-truths. Don’t try to make me feel comfortable. Tell me the truth, and let me reckon with God.