

## 1 Thessalonians 1: Copy That!

*"They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."* If you don't center your life around serving the living and true God then you are serving idols, you are living for that which is not living and not true, that which is lifeless and false. You are not living in the real world.

Buddhists believe that all people are trapped in a world of virtual reality - a world that seems real but is not real. As Christians we too claim that all who do not know Jesus are experiencing virtual reality. The blockbuster movie *The Matrix* is a lot closer to the truth than most realise. Everyone *does* live in a manufactured world, a world not constructed by computer overlords but by sinful human beings, a world that is an elaborate illusion. To this extent we are in agreement with Buddhists and Hindus. Everyone has been programmed to think they are living in the real world.

In the movie *The Matrix*, no one is in touch with reality except Morpheus, Trinity and their team. There is a prophecy that a person will come known as "The One" who will rescue people from a world of diabolical falsity and put them in touch with reality. That's how 1 Thessalonians 1 ends, with God's people waiting for God's Son from heaven to come and rescue us from the coming wrath. Did you know that every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the certain return of Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ is "The One."

The church is the team that is already in touch with reality. Paul opens this letter by writing to "the church of the Thessalonians." Did you notice the address on the front of the envelope? I'm not asking you to follow the white rabbit, but to follow the text of verse 1. The church of Thessalonica shares the same address as any true Christian church, namely "*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Our lives are in touch with reality because our whole lives are now taken up with serving the living and true God, not that which is lifeless and false, and because we are waiting for Jesus to come back and destroy everyone's illusions at a time of terrifying final judgment.

### A Well-Constructed Model

James O. Fraser was a famous man of prayer who served as a missionary to the Lisu people in the SW mountains of China from 1910 to 1949. He said, "Many of us cannot reach the mission-fields on our feet but we can always reach them on our knees." There were two churches in two different mountainous villages Fraser had to visit. One was easily accessible, the other remote. So he visited the first village church more often. Which church grew the best? The second, more remote village church. What reason did Fraser give for this difference? Because he couldn't visit the second church very often he prayed much harder for it.

God answers prayer. Persecution had prevented Paul from spending the time usually deemed necessary to establish a strong church and train leaders. He was, therefore, forced to rely on prayer alone as he sought the establishment of the Thessalonian church. Sometimes you come across a half-finished building. Someone started to build but did not have the resources to complete the job. Consider what is involved in building a healthy church community. We need to be building this church through our prayers. But let us not be half-hearted in our commitment to praying for this. Paul says, "*We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father...*" (v2-3a). We need to pray and keep praying until the job is complete.

## Role Models

In this chapter we learn about how God blessed this church in answer to Paul's faithful prayers. God blesses this young church so much that it becomes a model church for all Christians: "*You became imitators of us and of the Lord*" (v6).

You have to be careful about who you imitate. A new missionary arrived in Venezuela. He couldn't speak any Spanish and decided the best way to learn was by just mixing with the people. So he went by himself to a local church. He arrived late to a packed church so he was forced to sit in the front row. Not knowing what to do he decided to imitate the man sitting next to him. As they sang, the man clapped his hands, so the missionary clapped too. When the man stood up to pray, the missionary stood up too. When the man sat down, he sat down. When the man held the cup and bread for the Lord's Supper, he held the cup and bread. The missionary didn't understand one word of the sermon. He just tried to look like this man. Then the pastor started making announcements. People clapped, so he looked to see if the man was clapping. He was, and so the missionary clapped too. Then the pastor said something else. The man next to him stood up. So he stood up too. Suddenly a hush fell over the entire congregation. A few people gasped. He then realised nobody else was standing. So he sat down.

After the service ended, the pastor stood at the door shaking the hands of those who were leaving. When the missionary stretched out his hand to shake the pastor's hand, the pastor said, in English: "I take it you don't speak Spanish." The missionary replied: "No I don't. It's that obvious?" "Well yes," said the pastor, "I announced that the Acosta family had a newborn baby boy and would the proud father please stand up."

On the day when Jesus returns, you will feel much more embarrassed and humiliated than this missionary if you spend your life imitating the wrong people. Make no mistake about it. We are all imitators.

"*You became imitators of us and of the Lord*", Paul recalls. Researchers at the UCLA Brain Mapping Center found that two areas of the brain are activated when people observe a simple physical activity and proceed to imitate it. New born babies and young children are especially dependent on learning through imitation. Experts say imitation is the most powerful way children learn, providing them with a means to accomplish simple tasks such as turning on a light switch and complex tasks such as dressing themselves.

Imitation remains important as we grow older. Put in a novel social situation, like the missionary to Venezuela, adults use imitation to observe others and duplicate their behavior. When the Thessalonians heard the gospel they knew they had to reject the way they had been living and begin to live an entirely new life. They were in a novel social situation. It is when a person first becomes a Christian that he or she needs to be able to watch how other Christians show what it means to live as a Christian. Paul and his team were only in Thessalonica (today Salonica) for a few weeks before they were kicked out by hostile Jews. But that was enough time for the Thessalonians to see the quality of their Christian lives. Paul can say, "*You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.*" It is not usually possible for us to spend lots of time with mature, godly Christians. But we all need to spend quality time with such Christians. From time to time, do you meet with a more mature and godly Christian so that that person might encourage and help you to grow in your Christian life? If you are not presently meeting with someone, let me encourage you to approach a more mature and godly Christian and ask him or her to meet together every now and then - maybe once a week, or fortnight or month.

### Tested Models

*"You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given you by the Holy Spirit"* (vv5b-6). What was it about Paul and his co-workers that was imitated by the Thessalonian Christians? They joyfully welcomed the gospel in the face of severe suffering. Paul and his co-workers were muscular Christians, they were models of toughness. When the Thessalonian Christians did not allow persecution to prevent them from embracing the Christian message they were imitating Paul and his co-workers. In Acts 17 we read about what happened to Paul and Silas when they started communicating the gospel in Thessalonica: *"But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city"* (v5). Things got so hot that in verse 10 we read, *"As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea."* But the Thessalonian Christians had had time to observe how Paul and Silas behaved in the face of persecution and they were deeply impressed. It was precisely this kind of muscular Christianity that the Thessalonian Christians imitated. True Christians are willing to suffer for their faith. The gospel message is so wonderful that true Christians will not let anything stop them from responding to it.

In the 1820s the British attacked Rangoon, the capital of Burma. Adoniram Judson was serving in Burma as a pioneer missionary. He was American, not British, but to the Burmese all whites were the same. So for two years they imprisoned Judson with 100 other men in a single room. When he was released his wife, Ann, was so weakened by the ordeal that she died soon afterwards. This tore Judson apart and he entered into a period of deep depression. For 40 days he went into the heart of a tiger-infested Burmese jungle and wrestled with God. He returned to plunge into his work with renewed vigor and by 1839 recorded 47 baptisms. During 1832 there were 217 who came to Christ and 1144 baptisms in 1836. At the time of his death there were over 7000 baptized Karen Christians in Burma along with 63 churches and 123 missionaries and pastors. Why was Judson so greatly used of God? Why has the Karen church proved to be so resilient? Because Judson was a model of joyful perseverance in the face of immense suffering. That is the example the Karen Christians imitated. Today genocide is occurring in Myanmar. The Karen people number 10 million, one quarter of Burma's population. The Myanmar SPDC, State Peace and Development Council had the stated aim of eliminating the Karen people. One SPDC official was reported, "In ten years all Karen will be dead ... you will have to visit a museum in Rangoon to see one." The SPDC have attacked Karen villages, specifically targeting and destroying churches. To this day the mostly Christian Karen people remain steadfastly Christian despite the ferocious persecution of the Burmese government.

*"And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia - your faith in God has become known everywhere"* (vv7-8). Outstanding Christian faith is faith that holds us up under suffering. I first took Barbara seriously when I saw how she handled the tragic death of her only brother which fell hard on the unexpected death of her mother. It was in the face of great anguish and suffering that I saw the depth of her personal faith in Jesus. What will make this church a model church? At the end of the day a model church is not a church which has clear mission and vision statements, well-defined core values and action steps. It is not a church that is growing numerically. It is not a church that is well managed. A model church is primarily a church community that stands out for the quality of its Christian faith, a faith that stands up under severe testing. A model church has spiritual guts. It is a strong, resilient church.

### The Model Church

It is not only the tested, resilient faith of the Thessalonian Christians that makes them such a model church. Look at verse 3: *"We continually remember before our God and*

*Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Faith, yes, but also love and hope. Do notice the structure of Chapter 1. Paul begins by saying how impressed he is by their work of faith, their labour of love and their endurance of hope. He ends the chapter by noting how impressed all Christians are by their work of faith, their labour of love and their endurance of hope. Look at verses 8b-10: *"Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 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, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."* What is our work of faith? Turning to God from idols. What is our labour of love? Serving the living and true God. What is our endurance of hope? Waiting for his Son from heaven, that is, living in the constant expectation that Jesus will return and that when he does he will spare us from the terrible, catastrophic judgment that will fall upon all who do not know the Lord.

Link the statement concerning conversion from idols to the concluding remark concerning Jesus' role in rescuing believers from the coming wrath. Why is the venting of the anger of God imminent? Precisely because of idolatry. Idolatry occasions the wrath of God. To respond to the gospel in faith is to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus, the risen Lord. In the Old Testament references to "the living God" typically emphasise his fearful nature. For example, Deuteronomy 5:26: *"For what mortal man has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived?"* David expresses his indignation at the taunts of Goliath, demanding to know *"who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God"* (1 Sam 17:26; cf. v36). Darius issued a decree calling on all in his kingdom to fear and reverence the God of Daniel because *"he is the living God"* (Dan 6:26). Jeremiah 10:10 is more pertinent still for it refers to God as both "true" and "living": *"But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath."* This conjunction of the living (and true) God with wrath captures the force of 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10: to turn from idols to serve the living and true God is to part company with those who stand under the judgment of a terrifying God. It is those who serve the living and true God whom Jesus rescues from the coming wrath.

To sum up. Make sure you take God seriously as "the living and true God". It matters to him who you and I serve. To be secure on that great day when Jesus returns, as he most certainly will, we must stop devoting our lives to those things which shut us off from reality and lock us into lifestyles in which we are kidding ourselves if we think we really have life and know the truth. It is when we give ourselves up to serve God that the blinkers come off and we see how lifeless and false are the alternatives to serving him. Get to know mature, godly Christians and imitate their lives. Spend time with them. Read books especially about Christians who have remained steadfast despite suffering. As you think and pray about where the Lord would lead you from here be prepared to walk the hard way. May you stand out as an example for others to imitate of faith, hope and love!