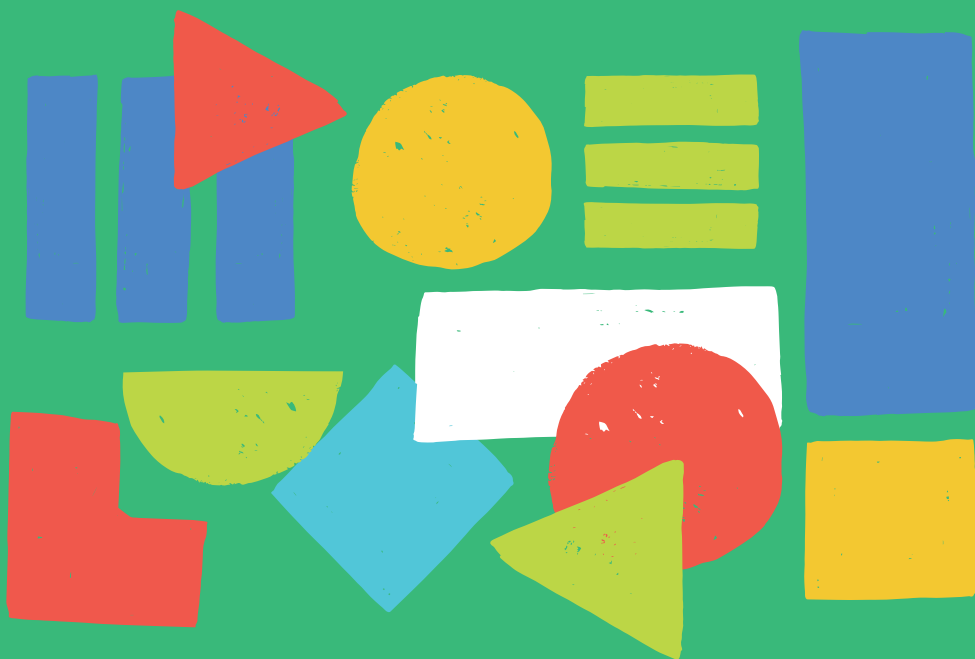


HOW TO BE **CHURCH**

1 THESSALONIANS



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1 THESSALONIANS

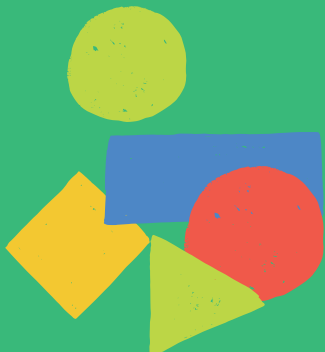
Sometime in the late AD 40s, about 15 or so years after the resurrection of Jesus, two significant leaders called Paul and Silas travelled to the city of Thessalonica to tell people about Him.

A number of people in this small city became Christians, and they formed a group which became known as an *ekklesia*, or *gathering*. After 2000 years, we have all sorts of inherited assumptions about what church is, but in the first century, 'church' was brand new, it was a rag-tag group of new Christians who were still working out what following Jesus as a community actually looked like in real life.

A few years after they had left the city, Paul, Silas and their friend Timothy wrote to this new church, the letter which we call now call *1 Thessalonians*, and this letter does three things that help us think about church culture:

1. It looks **back** to the good things that had happened there; the decisions, emphases and character qualities that set the church up to thrive.
2. It snapshots their **present** reality - how they were growing nicely in being Jesus followers at the point when Paul wrote to them.
3. It looks **forward** to what the Thessalonian church could do in future to continue in good health. It also looks even further ahead, to the end of the world.

Put all this together, and we have the New Testament's best example of a thriving, healthy church, formed less than 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, with lots of insights into how it ended up that way. All those centuries of Christians making mistakes and emphasising the wrong things hadn't happened yet!



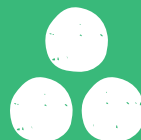
The letter of 1 Thessalonians could be divided up as follows; each part telling us something vital to understanding what made the church in that city a model.



IDENTITY



MESSAGE



CULTURE



MATURITY



LEADERSHIP



RELATIONSHIPS



PURPOSE



HABITS

By spending some significant time in this letter, we should be encouraged, reassured, challenged, and equipped for our journey onwards as a church. Our hope is that we increasingly become a church made in the image and way of Jesus, and nothing else.

CHURCHES WITH A 'MODEL' CULTURE...

Whilst studying particular passages is always very helpful, there are some very important things that can be drawn out by looking across the letter as a whole, seeing which themes and ideas reoccur. It might be helpful to draw attention to one or more of these at some point as we journey through the series.

Understand their identity in terms of being 1) in Jesus and 2) in highly committed family relationships with one another.

1 Thessalonians begins, significantly, with the reminder that the church are 'in Jesus'. This is their controlling identity; the truth about who they are that precedes other ideas, philosophies and activities. Everything else in the book is built on this. A vital implication of this is that the Thessalonians are in 'family' relationships with one another. There is no doubt this was also of high importance to their self-understanding. The temptations to see church in other ways, such as an institution or religious club, would have made little sense to them.

Begin and end with the wonderful news about Jesus, the Gospel, and turn it into practical wisdom on how to live.

The letter is packed with theology, and as is Paul's regular writing habit, it begins with theology as a priority before looking to anything practical. However the two go hand in hand. Good theology without practice is simply academic, practise without

good theology is simply moralistic do-gooding. Paul begins with the Gospel message, never deviating from it in application. The Gospel is the 'big picture' good news *and* it is the framework for small-scale decisions and behaviours. It is an *event* and a *way* that are inextricable in the life of the church.

Have leaders who love and invest in people, counting it as a joy.

The Thessalonian church benefited greatly from Paul and his friends, and probably had some good leaders after they'd gone, too. The way Paul undertook leadership, which we can see glimpsed regularly throughout the text, was deeply sacrificial. There is little evidence of podiums, PR or power-dressing to impress, and there is ample evidence of a man who put a frankly crazy amount of passion, energy, and resilience into loving a local church. Today, there are lots of leaders who work hard and love their church, but who find doing so to be draining. Paul derived a tangible joy from the Thessalonians, likely because the Gospel message had so inculcated him that he was able to love well even through the ardours of working with messy people.

It is also clear that good Christian leadership was not predicated on merely 'being nice', but rather on a wider range of tools that included urging, encouraging, truth-speaking, praying, admonishing and communicating affection. Undeniably, the overriding goal was the spiritual development of others, above the completion of tasks or the growth of profile.

Put good character above all other traits and talents.

Frog Orr-Ewing notes, *'The church and western society in general have moved quickly from speaking in terms of character, to understanding the self in terms of personality.'* It is difficult to emphasise how important character is to the Biblical understanding of living well. How different would the world be if every church put good character at the top of the tree! The preacher Martin Lloyd Jones once said *'The great concern of the New Testament Epistles is not about the size of the church, it is about the purity of the church'*. In other words, God is less concerned about the number of bums on seats, and more concerned about the extent to which people actually live in His ways. If the church is a place of good character, everything else that matters follows downstream. As Naomi Walmsley once commented, *'It's better to model a value than to value a model'*. Above any fashionable way of doing church activity, simply being like Jesus in attitude is what counts.

Expect but contextualise suffering, especially in anticipation of Jesus' coming return.

Paul expected the Thessalonians to suffer. They already had, but more was surely coming. It is very tempting to think of suffering as mere purposeless inconvenience, and some churches even teach the nonsense that suffering is always a direct result of deficient faith. No, suffering is *normative* for followers of Jesus, and particularly *because* of following Jesus. However, it can be endured differently,

even to the astonishment of the wider world, when seen in light of Jesus' return.

Actively pursue good relationships with both God and other people

It is common for today's churches, at least in affluent settings, to put a big emphasis on projects and initiatives. From training courses to food distributions to 'discipleship' programs, the church is involved in all sorts of things. Most of it is *excellent*. Most of it has a place. However, 1 Thessalonians shows us that churches are at their best when they help people become more like Jesus in their attitudes and behaviours. Often, projects and programs *will help* accomplish this, but we must be mindful that the end goal is that the Gospel is communicated, embraced and lived out in steady but wonderful character change. Jesus is the only thing the church uniquely has to offer the world, and He happens to be the thing the world needs most.

Trust God that there will be fruit in our lives, His Spirit will move, and the ending is good.

When we trust God and do as He asks, it is inevitable that we will see the fruit in our lives - much as we may not be able to predict what that fruit will be. One day, He will make all things as they should be and we His people will enjoy eternal life with our God.

PART 1: IDENTITY

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1



INTRODUCTION

'Every other systems says, if you follow the rules, if you compete, if you perform, then you're accepted. Christianity says no, I'm accepted in Jesus Christ, therefore I perform.'

Tim Keller

Without being 'in Jesus', most of what this letter has to say would just be nice sounding moral and social advice with a few interesting theological ideas thrown in. But with Jesus, it's a whole new wonderful way of seeing life, the universe and remarkably to our modern culture, even how you see your self. If the church, and each person who calls it home, was just to take hold of this, so much else would fall into place. It's the absolute basis of a healthy church.

READ

1 Thessalonians 1:1.

DISCUSS

What insights does this verse give us about the nature of church? List as many as you can. (I know, its only one verse!)

What do we mean by 'identity'?

If someone was to ask you who you are, what would you say?

What does the world tell you about who you are? What has some truth to it and what is unhelpful?

Why is it important that we are 'in' not just God the Father but 'the Lord Jesus Christ'? Why do all 3 names/titles given to Jesus in this context matter?

What traits do you think would be very evident in someone who very practically found their core identity in Jesus?

Where would you like to see the identity God has given you have a transformative effect on your character in the coming year?

Why is it SO important that a healthy church builds on the foundation of our identity in Jesus over anything else?

PART 2: MESSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-16



INTRODUCTION

We wrongly tend to think of 'faith' as meaning a sort of irrational optimism about something. Following Jesus does mean *doing things*, but the work spills over *from* the other things, the internal stuff. *Outward* shaped by inward. Faith, love and hope - and who they were *in* - those were the things that mattered, more than the activities that came downstream afterwards.

The foundation for everything that happened in Thessalonica and anything good in church history was the *Gospel*; from a Greek work that simply means 'good news'. That's the ideal phrase because the message that the church was built on was *news* in that it was about historical events - Jesus' death and resurrection - it was more than a philosophy, *but it was also qualitative*. It was *good*. It was not something to be dispassionate about. It was something to give your life to.

'When the gospel is taught clearly, and the people of the church believe it deeply, it does more than renew us personally. The doctrine of grace also creates a culture of grace. In such a church, the gospel is both articulated at the obvious level of doctrine and embodied at the subtle level of vibe, ethos, feel, relationships and community. Without the doctrine,

the culture is unsustainable. Without the culture, the doctrine appears pointless'.

Ray Ortlund

READ

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

DISCUSS

In your own words: what does this passage tell us was absolutely critical to the growth of the Thessalonian church in its earliest days?

What *is* the Gospel message that the New Testament authors were so focused on living and sharing, in your own words?

Why do we often get excited at things that are not the Gospel - projects, ideas, philosophies, approaches, political views, etc? How can we prevent this from happening?

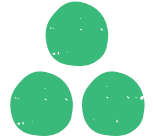
Given that we're all imperfect people, what is it to be a 'model' of the Gospel? How can we do that better, not merely as individuals but as a community? What sort of things would help us to do this, based on the text?

Why is it vital that local church communities are built entirely on the Gospel message and nothing else?

PART 3:

CULTURE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12



INTRODUCTION

'We humans are culture creators. How we are around each other will always take on a particular relational dynamic, a shared personality, a noticeable tone. It can never be otherwise. We shape one another in many complex ways, and a resulting culture always emerges. It's true of friendship groups, of workplaces, of families, and of churches. There will always be a vibe, a feel, an intangible but powerful way the group tends to be together.'

Sam Allberry

'These early Christian influencers were not controlled by a whole range of things that control people today. They were truly free from many of the things that entangle people... and it showed.'

'In my ministry life, I had marched God's people through 40 days of everything, done hundreds of 'programs', and developed small group system after small group system, but none of this actually changed the culture of the church that I had led. It took me some time to come to terms with the fact that most of my ministry had been driven by a strategy and not the cultivating of a culture.'

Bishop Clark Lowenfeld

READ

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DISCUSS

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PART 4: MESSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-16



INTRODUCTION

Here's the exciting thing: when a church is healthy, and people imitate faith in others and become imitable themselves, and when that's the norm, growth is *inevitable*. Impacting our community is inevitable. When the spirit of God takes hold of a church and it is truly a family, characterised with purpose and humility and relationships and commitment – all centred on God – lives will change. People will become followers of Jesus. People will mature. Other places and other churches will be impacted too. And it is *incredible*.

READ

1Thessalonians 2:13-16

DISCUSS

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PART 5: LEADERSHIP

1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13



INTRODUCTION

In all his writings, amounting to half the New Testament, Paul calls only two things 'good news' - the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for all humanity and Timothy's report about how the church is getting on in Thessalonica!

READ

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

DISCUSS

What insights about Paul's leadership can you glean for this? (Passion, emphases, priorities, etc.)

What qualities do you look for in a leader?

How would you describe the way Paul regards the Thessalonians in your own words?

What, that is in this passage, do you see other leaders do?

How is the leadership demonstrated in this passage is a) similar and b) different from what the world

around us often tells us about good leadership?

Do you 'glory' in how other people are doing in their faith? Why or why not? How does this mindset about the people you are in a spiritual family with challenge yo

PART 6: RELATIONSHIPS

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-12



INTRODUCTION

Because of the cross, we get to swap sexual histories with Jesus. He gets all our lust, our selfish extra-marital sex, our affairs, our abuse, our addictions, our sexual judgementalism of others. We get His sexual history – self-sacrificial, pure, treating every other person as a human not an object, perfect sexual integrity. All of that is transferred to us in the sight of God. It's not just abstract theology, this is what God actually does for us.

'The very idea that sexuality in the narrow sense of its physical expression lies at the core of personal identity is largely a 20th-century innovation yet within a few generations this view of human personhood has become for many the only conceivable way of thinking about their lives.'

Jonathan Grant

'Christianity worked a cultural revolution, restringing and channelling male eros (sexual desire) elevating the status of both women and the human body, and infusing marriage - and sexuality - with love.'

Rod Dreher

READ

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

DISCUSS

What vision for human relationships does Paul have here? Put it in to your own words.

Why does our sexual behaviour affect not only ourselves, but others around us?

It is clear in the text that God's will is for us to be sanctified. What does that mean? Do you think of your life as a journey towards sanctification? Why or why not?

How can we make an openness about our desires (sexual or otherwise) with one another a normal part of church life? What benefits would this have?

When we think about practically loving other people, there might be certain things that spring to mind. This passage shows us some things that may be less obvious. But are there other ways to practically love that the church forgets or ignores? Are there ways in which others could love you better than they may not be aware of?

PART 7:
PURPOSE
1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:11



SHARE

Do you ever think about Jesus coming back? What do you imagine it will be like?

READ

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

DISCUSS

What does Paul 1) say will happen and 2) say we need to do about it, in your own words?

Does the thought of death or the return of Jesus (whichever is first) scare you? What do you think this passage says to our fears?

How does having an 'eternal perspective' change small every day decisions? Give some examples!

Being ruthlessly practical: how are individual Christians – and whole churches – supposed to live differently in light of Jesus' coming return?

Based on this passage, and anything else we've seen in 1 Thessalonians, what is the purpose of the church? Has your view changed or modified at all?

PART 8: HABITS

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28



INTRODUCTION

If Christians were to cultivate a spiritual life characterised by finding regular joys in God's provision, praying through the trivial rhythms of each day and remaining thankful in times of plenty and times of little, we would be relentless good news to a world beset with anxiety, greed and almost obsessive self-focus. More than that; we would be formed into the sort of people God wants us to be.

READ

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

DISCUSS

What stand out to you? Surprises you? Challenges you?

Which of the things Paul raises most resonate with you right now and why?

Based on what you've encountered through 1 Thessalonians, what IS church, in your own words? Has your view changed or modified at all?

What does our church need to grow in *culturally*? How can this be achieved?

QUOTE

Ray Ortlund & Sam Allberry write: *'I'm not willing to pray and suffer and labour and give my life to maintain an ecclesiastical institution that isn't beautiful. But I am willing to labour and suffer and pray for and give my life to the creation of a beautiful church that can astonish this generation. Sign me up for that. That's Gospel culture.'*

DISCUSS

What do to make of this quote?

How does a church become beautiful?

Do you want to be a part of a church like this, and how?



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