



# HG1: 1 Thessalonians (1/6) 'What Every Church Should Be'

## 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

### Home Group Sermon Notes

14<sup>th</sup> September 2008 - Revd Paul A. Carr

**Background:** Thessalonica was an ancient city in northern Greece. In Paul's day 200,000 people lived there, mostly Greeks, but also some Romans and a Jewish minority. Thessaloniki (as it is now called) is still thriving and is one of the few cities that has survived from the New Testament era. In Acts 17:1-15, Luke explains how Paul went to Thessalonica in response to a vision, Acts 16:9, to: Come over into Macedonia and help us. Paul's commission was to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Ephesians 3:1-12) but he always started his ministry among the Jews. The local synagogue was the place where the Torah was known and Paul could, usually, get a sympathetic hearing - at least until persecution began.

**Paul's Purpose for Writing:** Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians about 50/51 A.D., it was probably one of the first letters he wrote though it is argued that Galatians was written earlier (he wrote 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians just a short time later). 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians was written to a young church who were experiencing real problems in a world that wasn't tolerant to their Christian faith.

**Then and Now:** We can easily identify with these people because they, and we, live in a similar dangerous and perilous world and face many of the same problems - in the coming weeks, you'll see how up-to-date and practical this letter is. Within twenty years of it being written, 70 A. D., the whole of the Ancient East was embroiled in warfare and rebellion as the armies of Titus besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and took the Jews into captivity. The movements that culminated in these events had already begun when this letter was written. However, in the midst of all this, these people had found, in the good news of Jesus, their reason and purpose for life had been drastically altered and reborn - and this letter reflects that.

**Introduction:** No doubt you've heard the saying: *If you ever find the perfect church, please don't join it. Because, if you do, it won't be perfect anymore!* Because churches are made up of human beings, saved by God's grace, no church is perfect. But some churches are closer to the New Testament ideal than others. The church at Thessalonica was in that category! Paul gave thanks, at least three times, for the church and the way it responded to his ministry (1:2; 2:13; 3:9). But what are the characteristics that made this church so ideal and such a joy to Paul's heart? They were:

**1) A Supernatural Community:** Just take a look at the full description Paul gives of them in vs1. Do you realise what that means? It means that by virtue of these people accepting Paul's message that Jesus is the Lord of the Universe, they are drawn into the very presence of the God they never knew. They now inhabit a divine environment, if I may put it like that. They found a supernatural God; who created the world in a supernatural way; who gave them a supernatural saviour; and who gave supernatural gifts. They found that God's supernatural nature is grace and peace. They found him to be a supernaturally kind and generous God - the God who loves to give and to give. This is the God who stoops down to lift us up like a Father would lift up his little child. Of course, the theme of a supernatural God could take up a whole sermon series, rather than just a bullet point this morning. The point is this: we have a supernatural God who works in supernatural ways.

**2) A Chosen Community:** The word church, vs1, means a 'called-out people' - God's chosen ones. (Acts 15:13-18). Seven times in John 17 Jesus referred to believers as those whom the Father gave to Him out of the world (17:2; 6; 9; 11-12; 24). In a similar way, Paul knew God, vs4, had chosen the Thessalonians to be His. The Bible teaches that the entire plan of salvation was born in the heart of God long before man was created or the universe formed. God has chosen us from the beginning, (2 Thessalonians 2:13). You have not chosen me but I have chosen you, John 15:16. He (the Father) has chosen us in Him (Jesus) before the foundation of the world, Ephesians 1:4. Isn't that amazing? God 'choosing us' is known as the doctrine of divine election. This confuses some people and frightens others, yet it shouldn't. There's no conflict between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, even though it seems as though we cannot reconcile the two. It's the age-old debate of Calvinism and Arminianism (which I'm not going to enter this morning!). However, one of the best books I've read on this subject is: *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* - JI Packer). Someone once said: *Try to explain election and you may lose your mind, but explain it away - and you may lose your soul!*

**3) A Persuaded Community:** When the word 'church' is mentioned to you, what picture springs to mind? A building with gothic architecture? An institution like the Church of England? Or it could be a career move, couldn't it? We talk, don't we, of people going 'into the church!' But look at how Paul describes these believers in vs1. It literally reads: 'To a church of Thessalonians.' There is nothing particularly religious about the word 'church' *ekklesia*. It is simply a way of saying 'a group of Thessalonians' as we might say 'a group of Billericians.' And just how this group was brought together is described in Acts 17. There we are told that apostle Paul and a few friends turned up in town and went straight to the synagogue in line with their usual strategy of targeting the Jews first. And arguing from the Scriptures, the Old Testament, they tried to persuade them that Jesus was God's appointed and long awaited King who had to suffer and rise from the dead. And Luke informs us that some were persuaded. This was not just an emotional experience; they became convinced of the truth. In addition to some Jews, a good number of Greeks as well as a number of well to do women also became followers of Jesus. But then some of the synagogue Jews turned nasty and ran Paul and his friends out of town.

So we are talking about a time period of no more than 3 to 4 weeks to gather a group of believers by preaching the gospel, then initiate some follow up talks on Christian basics (an Alpha Course) and that was it - your model church was formed. Isn't that astonishing? We don't know how many there were, chances are it was no more than 50-60 people, but there it is, this gathering, which has become the model for the entire region. And so we might want to ask: what is so special about this group of Christians who had very little by way of organisational structure - no special building, no organ, no Vicar, but which nonetheless propels Paul into rapturous praise to God?

As we have seen in Acts 17, when these people became Christians, they are not described as being converted, but as having been persuaded. That is, their minds were engaged as they listened very carefully to Paul's arguments about who Jesus is and what he has done. So NT evangelism always involves the mind. But it doesn't stop at the mind; it filters down to capture the whole person leading to a totally different way of thinking and behaving; a complete reordering of lifestyle and values and ethics. What we have here is the threefold experience of faith, love and hope. Faith, directed upwards towards God, love directed outwards towards others, hope, reaching onwards into the future to Jesus. And all of these things have an observable effect in the here and now. How do you view the ideal church - a church worth belonging to?

Paul commends their work produced by faith, their labour prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope. Faith, hope and love are often said to be the cardinal virtues of the Christian life, and the three greatest evidences of salvation. Faith must always lead to works (James 2:14-26). It has been said: *We are not saved by faith plus works, but by a faith that works.*

**4) An Enthusiastic Community:** The faith, love and hope of the Thessalonians showed itself in their sharing the Gospel with others. They *received* the word, vs5-6, they *proclaimed* the word, vs7-8 and they *lived* the word, vs9. Every believer, and every church, must receive and spread God's word. It is our responsibility, and privilege, to share the message of salvation with a lost and dying world. There are a number of commissions for the church to obey (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:1-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). To my knowledge you do not find any exhortation in the NT letters to evangelise? Why? Well, because it would have been like writing a letter to someone encouraging them to breathe. In NT churches entire congregations were involved in sharing the Good News of Jesus (Acts 2:44-47; 5:42). How we, too, need to be an enthusiastic congregation in sharing our faith. A recent survey of church growth suggested that 70 to 80% of church growth is the result of friends sharing Jesus with their friends and relatives to relatives. Whilst open-air evangelism and other methods of outreach help it is the personal contact brings the harvest, which is why each of you should be inviting someone to come with you on BTCS. As I suggested on my first Sunday here, I promise you that I will do my best to faithfully preach and teach the God's word to challenge and encourage you, to enable you to grow in faith, as well as those you bring along with you. And, let all of us, expect our supernatural God, through the power and presence of his empowering Holy spirit to begin a work in all of our hearts and lives. And, let us all share, by the warmth of our welcome and the vitality of our worship, in proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

**5) A Transformed Community:** In Romans 12:2, Paul says that we are to '*be transformed by the renewing of our minds*'. The heart of Christianity is transformation and is something many people are seeking. Isn't that why so many people enter therapy; join health clubs, read self-help books, undergo cosmetic surgery? Unfortunately, no amount of self-help will change a person because they can't change their heart – only God can do that. But isn't God the business 'extreme makeovers'? Isn't God the business of transformation, of changing people?

A recent poll suggested that the number one reason given for abandoning the Christian faith was hypocrisy (38%). The respondents were put off by the behaviour of church members, which contradicted their professed beliefs. But it has to be said that while many are switched off Christianity because of the behaviour of professing Christians, many are turned on because of what they see in Christian lives. Things such as integrity of lifestyle; the fact that we have real friendships; and better attitudes to other people. You see it is all to do with modelling isn't it? You have those who badly model the Christian faith. The result? Hypocrisy and a switching off. And you have those who model well what it means to be a Christian with the result that even some of Christianity's most vociferous critics are often reduced to silent admiration. The question is this: Are people attracted, or turned off, by your Christian lifestyle/faith? When Jesus was on earth, no one who put their trust in him was ever disappointed. Whether it was a leper cut off from society. A prostitute spurned by the religious establishment. A broken hearted widow who just lost her only son.

But it is not simply individual Christians that need to model the new life, which is to be found in Jesus, whole Christian communities need to do it. No church can spread the Gospel with any degree of integrity, let alone credibility, unless it has been visibly changed by the Gospel it preaches. If all those who proclaimed to be Christians were taken from Billericay tomorrow. If churches were to be closed down, would anyone notice the difference? Really? Sure there might be one or two problems when it came to funerals and weddings. But would it be noticed? One would hope that the difference would be very noticeable indeed. This is the way the American writer Richard Neuhaus lays down the challenge: '*The church best serves the world when it is most distinctively and unapologetically the church ... when the church dares to be different, it models for the world what God calls the world to become. The church models what it means to be a community of caring and a community of character.*' This was how Paul knew those Thessalonians were chosen of God. He saw a change in their lives. This doesn't mean they are perfect but it does mean they are possessors of a new life that cannot be hidden and it does mean that they are striving towards holiness. If you compare vs3 with vs9-10, you get the picture: *Your work of faith - You turned to God from idols; Your labour of love - To serve the living and true God; Your patience of hope - To wait for His Son from heaven.*

**6) An Attentive Community:** But why else did Paul commend the Thessalonian church? They were an attentive community and, by that, I mean they applied their faith.

***They received the word, vs5&8.*** The people received and believed what Paul and Silas taught and never lost that eagerness for God's word and we're going to look at this a little more closely next week in ch2. Do you love to hear what Bible teachers/preachers have to say?

***They followed their spiritual leaders, vs6a.*** The word follower is actually interpreted imitator. These new believers not only accepted the message and the messengers but they also imitated their lives.

***They willingly suffered for Jesus, vs6b.*** The faith of these believers angered their friends and relatives and this led to persecution, 2:14-16. Faith will always be tested and persecution is one of the tests, (Matthew 13:21; 2 Timothy 3:12).

***They encouraged each other, vs7-8.*** Christians either encourage or discourage each other – it's a fact! This principle also applies to churches. Paul used the churches of Macedonia as a stimulus for the Corinthian church to give the missionary offering (2 Corinthians 8:1-8). Even though they were new believers, the Thessalonians set a good example that encouraged the surrounding churches. '*And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia ... your faith has become known everywhere.*' Now that a great compliment isn't it? Christians living miles away were saying: 'We want to be like them, that is exactly how our church ought to be.' However, it seems to me we should never try and compete with other churches – it's not what God wants us to do. All God requires is that we do the best that we can with the resources we have. We must also remember Jesus' words in Luke 12:48: '*... From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

***They turned from their idols, vs9:*** They turned from idols to serve God. Now an idol is anything, which occupies the place of God in our lives. If the Thessalonians had continued to worship their dead idols while professing faith in the living God, it would have proved that they were not among God's elect – His chosen people.

***They believed in the physical return of Jesus, vs10.*** They believed that Jesus would return and rescue them. We'll take a much closer look at this in ch4 – it's an integral part of the Christian faith.

**Conclusion:** I've called this sermon: *What every church should be* and this opening chapter certainly gives us plenty to think about doesn't it? The Thessalonians were a people of faith, hope and love and this was the very basis of their motivation to live for, and serve, Jesus. In a similar way we, as a Christian community, should understand that we are called to be a: Supernatural community; a Chosen community; a Persuaded community; an Enthusiastic community; and, most of all, a Transformed community, because if we do not allow God to change our hearts and minds and begin to live a Holy lifestyle, that is attractive to those who don't yet know Jesus for themselves, then we are wasting our time. Because the message we give out is one that says, quite simply, following Jesus doesn't work. Does this mean that if we have the spiritual characteristics that Paul has highlighted here, and live as though Jesus really is Lord of our lives, that Emmanuel church will become what God wants it to be and that we'll see significant growth, both spiritually and numerically? I sincerely pray it will.



# **HG1: 1 Thessalonians (1/6)** **'What Every Church Should Be'**

## **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

### **Home Group Study Sheet**

14<sup>th</sup> September 2008 - Revd Paul A. Carr

COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to House Group along with any previous/other notes that might be helpful.*

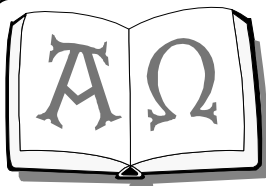
#### **Welcome/Icebreaker (10 mins)**

What is your most satisfying accomplishment ever?



#### **Looking Upwards - Worship (10 mins)**

Songs of Worship; Prayers; Bible Readings; Meditations etc.



#### **Looking Upwards - Bible Study (40 mins)**

Read through the above Bible reading (and any readings below and the references in the sermon notes) and answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers in your Home Group.

1: Describe what you believe should constitute the perfect church - the type of church worth belonging to. Does Emmanuel church share any of those attributes? If not, what would you most like to see in place?

2: Is it true to say that all Christians believe in a 'supernatural' God? Suggest reasons as to why this may, or may not, be the case.

3: How does it make you feel when you consider the amazing fact that God 'chose' you to be a child of His?

4: Paul (the apostle) suggested that the Thessalonians were a 'persuaded' community. Is persuasion enough? What other factors (if any) might be needed to bring someone to a saving faith in Jesus?

5: Paul (the rector) spoke about the Thessalonian church being an 'enthusiastic' community because of their faith, love and hope. What hinders you (as an individual) and us (as a church) from enthusiastically sharing the good news of Jesus with others? What could be put in place to actively increase, and/or improve, this area of our church life?

6: Paul (the rector) spoke a lot about 'transformed' lives being a great evidence of a life touched by the Spirit of God. He also talked about how people are either turned off, or on, by other Christians. Share examples of a Christian whose lifestyle has had both a positive and negative impact on your life (no names need to be mentioned!).

7: Paul (the rector) suggests that it is not only individual Christians that need to model the new life, whole Christian communities need to do so as well. The American writer Richard Neuhaus lays down the challenge in this way: *'The church best serves the world when it is most distinctively and unapologetically the church ... when the church dares to be different, it models for the world what God calls the world to become. The church models what it means to be a community of caring and a community of character.'* Suggest ways in which this could apply to Emmanuel church.

8: How would you describe the reputation of Emmanuel church within the community of Billericay?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



### Looking Inwards - *Caring for each other* (15 mins)

Is there anything you would like to share with the group:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for help from the group?

*(Reflect with the Lord on your life at the moment and think if there is anything you would like to share and which you feel is appropriate. This is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however - 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!')*



### Looking Outwards - *Concern for others* (15 mins)

Is there anything concerning someone in: church; family; friends; or neighbours which you would like to share:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for possible action by the group?

*(Please be careful not to pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared).*

