

THE GOD-DRIVEN CHURCH

—DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON —

Man can build a booming church, but only God can build a biblical church.

Contrary to popular belief, a dichotomy often exists between the two. The former, a man-built church, seeks to accomplish man's goals, using man's means, and strives, whether consciously or not, for man's glory. However, the latter, a God-built church, has the Spirit of God as its energy, the Word of God as its most precious jewel, and the glory of God as its supreme goal.

All around us, we see the effects of the man-built ministry. Many churches have become nothing more than entertainment centers, giving slick performances to growing numbers of memorized, but unproductive churchgoers. Such devices may bring people into the church, but are unable to do anything with them once they arrive. Sad to say, many today are seeking to "redefine" church as though this is an option. By looking to the world for its signals, the modern day church is suffering from an identity crisis of monumental proportions.

Some see the effective church as being *consumer driven*. They say, we should survey our "target market," discover what they want, and then give it to them. They'll "pack the pews" wanting what we have to offer. This is tantamount, quite frankly, to the patient writing the prescription for himself, all the while oblivious to his real illness, thus never finding a cure.

Others see the church as *culture driven*. A slight variation of the previously mentioned model, this approach seeks to bring the world's forms of entertainment into the church in order to stimulate outreach and growth. Take the culture's forms of amusement, add society's latest trends, put a spiritual "spin" on it, and you'll win the world. People should see little, if any, difference between the latest rock video, a night club ensemble, an off-Broadway production, and their church's worship service. Use the world to reach the world is this strategy, they say.

Still others envision the church as being *felt needs driven*. In other words, address the apparent, surface needs of people. Tell them how to find self-esteem, psychological significance, and personal success. Don't bore them with long discourses on the Bible.

And, whatever you do, never mention the "s" word (sin) or the "h" word (hell). After all, who wants to hear the negative?

And others, with good intentions, want to be *purpose driven*. Draft your church's vision statement, determine your objectives, define your long-term strategies, target a consumer group, develop a marketing plan, and you're in business. This Fortune 500-like approach to church, lifted from the boardrooms of corporate America, says the church must be strategic, slick, and well-run if it is to be successful.

Granted, there are elements of each of these approaches worth implementing. After all, the church should be sensitive to personal needs, address the issues of the day, relate truth to people where they are, and be on-target with its mission. Who would argue with this? Any secular organization, from the local bank to the latest blue chip company, even the church, wants to be people sensitive, market savvy, and a driving force. But, the main problem with each of these approaches to the church is that they do not go deep enough. On the surface, they sound fine. But, unfortunately, that's where they remain – on the surface.

Such radical shifts in the direction of the church is, I believe, the result of a current identity crisis which is shaking the very foundation of the church. Rather than seeking to become as much like heaven as we can be, we are, instead, striving to become like the world. Rather than pursuing spirituality and substance, many churches have become enamored with style and size. The sizzle rather than the steak has become the main entrée. Gospel light is being replaced with gospel lite, preaching with performance, exposition with entertainment, sound doctrine with sound checks, the upper room with the supper room, and the unfolding drama of redemption with, well, just plain drama.

What sets the church apart is that she is doing Christ's business, not man's, and, therefore, is to be focused on a *different* bottom line that can only be reached through *different* means. By His Word, God Himself must equip, enable, energize, and empower the church if she is to be what He desires her to be. Ultimately, God must be the driving force of the church, bringing His glorious presence and all-sufficient power to bear upon the life of His people if she is to be what He desires her to be. Her success belongs, as Solomon says, not in more horses or better chariots, but with the Lord Himself (Prov. 21:30-31).

The God-driven church is one built by God Himself and, thus, is not a corporation, but a congregation, not a business, but a body, not a factory, but a family. In such a church, God is working primarily, not through hyped events, programs, entertainment, or even strategically designed plans per se, but through His Word and by His Spirit in the converted, changed lives of His people. Let us never forget, God anoints *people*, not plans. He indwells *believers*, not buildings. He fills *preachers*, not performances. Not that plans, buildings, or some performances are intrinsically wrong, because they are not. But when they become the church's chief pursuit and confidence, they are spiritual *cul-de-sacs* leading nowhere, a cheap substitute for the real presence and supernatural power of God among His people.

As we search the Scripture for God's design for the church, I can think of no better place to look than the early church at Thessalonica. Founded by the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9), this was a congregation built upon the pure teaching of sound doctrine and nurtured with much pastoral love and devotion (1 Thes. 2:1-11). Although comprised by people who were less than perfect, it was, nevertheless, a place in which God's Spirit was mightily at work. In short, it was a God-driven church.

So, what does a God-centered church look like? What are the hallmarks of a God-glorifying church? What are the characteristics of a God-built church?

We need to look no further than the opening chapter of First Thessalonians in which Paul gives an overview of the commendable qualities of this vibrant congregation. Making no mention of their numerical size, ministry style, or long-term strategies, the apostle instead focuses upon their internal substance and genuine spirituality. We would, I believe, do well to revisit Paul's description of these people because herein lies the marks of a God-pleasing, God-built, God-driven church. As we consider this first chapter, I want to identify nine marks of this first-century church which are timeless and should characterize every church which desires to be godly. Here are the necessary components of the church in which God is powerfully at work. Let us now begin our investigation of this model church with the first mark being:

I. CONVERTED HEARTS

Doubtlessly, the first mark that identifies any church which honors Christ is that it is comprised predominantly of truly converted people. Without its members being born from above, any church will be nothing more than a glorified religious country club. But, the miracle of the new birth places all believers into union with God, causing them to be a true spiritual entity which is alive unto God. Such was the case with the church in Thessalonica. The apostle describes them as:

“Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace” (verse 1).

Possessing a vital spiritual union with the Godhead, this church was identified as being “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This small preposition “in” is of paramount importance. To be “in” God means they have entered into a personal relationship with God through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Through the sovereign work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, every redeemed sinner instantly becomes united with God, being baptized into Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). This oneness results in a dynamic fusion between each believer and the living God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the church is more than a mere organization, but a *living organism* through which the life of God flows.

This infusion of divine life into regenerated hearts is precisely what occurred in Thessalonica when Paul preached the gospel there (Acts 17:1-9). Upon entering this city, the apostle went into the synagogue and “reasoned with them from the Scriptures explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead” (verses 2-3). After this powerful presentation of the gospel, a great number were “persuaded” and believed upon Christ (verse 4). Because of the purity of the truth preached by Paul and the blowing of the Spirit like the wind, this church was truly built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-11), placing them “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Unfortunately, this reality is far from true in vast numbers of our congregations today. Many, if not most, churches are filled with fine, upstanding, “religious” people who have never been born again. They *profess* to know Christ, but do not *possess* Him. They have *facts* about the gospel, but not *faith* in it. They know the *plan* of salvation, but not the *Man* of salvation. They have walked an aisle, raised a hand, been baptized, joined the church, and even become involved in ministry, but the sad reality is, they have never been regenerated. They may have *outwardly reformed*, but have never been *inwardly reborn*. They have turned over a *new leaf*, but have never received a *new life*. They may know *the Word of God*, but not *the God of the Word*. And, as a result, they attend church in an unconverted state, self-deceived into falsely thinking they are saved when, in reality, they are not.

In many cases, this sad state of unconverted church members is only perpetuated because the message of the cross has been watered down in order to not offend people and to “grow” a larger church. Ears are tickled, backs scratched, palms greased, and egos pampered, all the while to attract bulging numbers, careful never to ostracize anyone. But with this all-inclusive approach to ministry, untold multitudes of well-meaning people have never been confronted with, nor convicted by, the depravity of their own hearts before a holy God. Blinded to their sinful bankruptcy, they have never come to Christ in brokenness, humility, repentance, and faith (Mt. 5:3-12). Self-deceived, countless numbers of false professors are lulled to sleep in their unconverted state, all the while comfortable with their easy-believism, assuming they are going to heaven when, in reality, they are not (Mt. 7:13, 21-23, 26-27).

In summary, we see that, first and foremost, the God-driven church is comprised, primarily, of *converted hearts*. Admittedly, tares will always be sown among the wheat. But God will work most powerfully through the congregation in which the great majority of its members are truly regenerated. It matters not how strategic the church’s plans are, nor how well organized its people are, if its membership does not know Christ personally. Such converted hearts will, in turn, lead to:

II. CHANGED LIVES

Truly converted hearts will always give evidence of itself through changed lives. The two are inseparably bound together. Salvation is the root, sanctification the fruit. Paul continues:

“We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father” (verses 2-3).

With an overflowing heart of gratitude, the apostle offers thanks to God, not for their buildings and facilities, nor for their well-structured programs and elaborate productions, but for what really matters most—the reality of their spirituality in the Lord. Succinctly, summarizing God’s sanctifying grace in their lives, Paul is constantly offering thanksgiving for their faith, love, and hope. These three spiritual virtues provide clear evidence of their genuine, saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. An authentic commitment to Christ will *always* manifest itself in a changed life that bears, to one degree or another, this cluster of fruit. While the Bible does not teach a works-salvation, it does affirm a salvation that works. (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; Col. 1:21-23; Jam. 2:14-26; 2 Pet. 1:3-11; 1 Jn. 1:6-10; 2:3-5, 9-10, 15-17, 19-20, 29; 3:6-10, 14-15, 19; 4:7-8, 13; 5:18). Let’s consider these three virtues – *faith*, *love*, and *hope*:

First, Paul commends their “work of faith,” meaning he recognizes that it was their personal faith in Jesus Christ which was activating their service for God. That is to say, their work *for* Christ was empowered by their faith *in* Him. True faith always produces good works. “Faith without works is dead” (Jam. 2:26). Because they were genuinely converted, God’s all-sufficient grace pulsed through their regenerated soul, energizing them in their service for Christ and one another. For this, Paul was grateful.

In addition, the apostle affirms their “labor of love,” meaning their labor in the gospel was prompted by their love for the Lord. This word “labor” (*kopov*) means “wearisome toil,” “extraordinary effort,” or “expending oneself to the point of fatigue and exhaustion.” This is how they served one another in the Lord, laboring hard in reaching out to one another, sacrificially giving of themselves until they were ready to collapse. Make no mistake about it, their love for Jesus Christ is what generated their love for one another, and, in turn, it was their love for one another which produced their labor for others. The more they loved Christ, the more they served Him. So it is with us.

Furthermore, Paul praises their “steadfastness of hope”, meaning it was their steadfastness in the Christian life which was inspired by their hope in Christ. The word “hope” means “absolute confidence”, or “unwavering certainty in something or someone.” Because they were absolutely sure about the unchanging promises of God regarding Christ and their future, their lives were anchored with a resilient spirit of steadfastness. So gripped were they with a positive hope in Christ that they were compelled to be ever pressing ahead to overcome all obstacles and endure all opposition. Their strong hope in the Lord regarding His ability to perform what He promised to do generated an undaunted determination in their lives to serve Christ.

Suffice to say, these three powerful forces—faith, love, and hope—were the dynamic results of their personal relationship with God. It was their position in God and Christ (verse 1) that empowered their work, love, and steadfastness (verse 3). Clearly, God was

real in their lives, both working and willing for His good pleasure (Phil 2:13). Like an electrical current surging through their souls, the Holy Spirit was releasing His abundant power in them, enabling them to do God's work.

A.J. Gordon, one of the founders of Gordon Conwell Divinity School, told of attending the World's Fair in Chicago years ago when he saw an impressive sight. On the midway, he saw what looked like a man furiously pumping the handle of a water pump. As Gordon watched, the man continued to pump at a tremendous rate. He seemed absolutely tireless, pumping on and on, up and down, without slowing down in the slightest.

Truly it was a remarkable sight. But as Gordon walked toward it, he made a remarkable discovery. As he drew closer, he could see it was not a man at the pump. Rather, it was a wooden figure painted to look like a man. The arm that was pumping so rapidly was hinged at the elbow and the hand was wired to the pump handle. The energy was being exerted, not because the figure was pumping the well, but on the contrary, an underground artesian well was pumping the man!

The point is very clear. Whenever you see someone who is doing a great work for God, understand it is not the person who is "pumping it up" that produces the results. Not if it is of God. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who is mightily working through such a person. All he has to do – and all you and I have to do—is keep our hand on the handle and allow God to work through us. This was the church at Thessalonica, laboring fervently in God's work, all the while relying only upon God's grace (I Cor. 15:9-10).

So it is in the God-driven church. Rather than resorting to fleshly recruiting gimmicks and base human motivations to mobilize its membership, the Spirit-wrought virtues of faith, love, and hope will be filling their lives, producing their work, labor, and steadfastness as they serve God.

III. CLEAR CONVICTIONS

This work of God's saving grace, so powerfully active in the Thessalonians' lives, could be traced back to eternity past when God first chose them to be His own. Long before the Thessalonians ever believed in God, He had already sovereignly selected them to be His people. As a matter of common knowledge, this they all knew very well. Thus, the apostle writes:

“knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you” (verse 4)

Here, spoken in unmistakable terms, is the humbling doctrine of election. Please note three vital words which Paul uses here—*knowing*, *His*, *choice*. Each word is critically important if we are to grasp this tremendous truth of divine sovereignty in salvation. As did the Thessalonians, so must we have clear convictions about this foundational truth which gives immeasurable glory to God and is the means of unending blessing to our lives.

The first key word, “knowing,” indicates that this doctrine of God’s sovereign choice of individual sinners unto salvation from before the foundation of the world was a well-known truth held by the entire congregation. The doctrine of election was not subscribed by a few, but a glorious teaching embraced by all in this church. This is important to note because, occasionally, people will say, “I don’t think we should talk about election on Sunday morning. Not everybody is ready to hear it.” But this was certainly not the case in Thessalonica. The truth of God’s sovereign choice was common knowledge, affirmed by the whole church.

The second key word is “choice” (*heloge*) which means “to choose out from among.” The main verb (*legomai*), meaning “to choose”, is joined with the prefix (*ek*), meaning “out of, out from.” It means to choose certain people or things out from among many possibilities, such as when young David chose five stones for his slingshot out of the brook (1 Sam. 17:40). Certainly, there were more than five stones in the brook, but he selected out these specific ones from the many which best suited his purposes. So it is with God’s choice of us. He chose us, His “beloved,” out of many possibilities to become the bride of Christ. When Paul says, “his choice of you”, he is referring to God’s intentional choice of individual sinners (Rom. 9:10-13) unto salvation (II Tim. 1:9) before time began (Eph 1:4). Even so, God has chosen a bride for His Son, His church, out of a lost world that is in hostile rebellion against Him to be His own.

The third key word is the personal pronoun “His.” Salvation originates with *His* choice of us, not *our* choice of Him. Our choice of Him is, quite simply, the *result* of His choice of us, not vice versa. Jesus Himself said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). The reason that we have chosen Him *within* time is simply because *He* first chose us *before* time. With unmistakable language, Paul states, “*He* chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:4). Not based upon any foreseen human faith, nor good works, God’s choice is the exercise of *His* own sovereign will, selecting those whom He would save. Because there are none who seek after God (Rom. 3:10), God Himself must take the initiative in salvation and choose us, His beloved, because in our fallen state, we would never choose Him. Only God’s choice of us makes possible, as well as certain, our choice of Him.

Admittedly, this tremendous truth causes some to be perplexed and others to be frightened. But whatever Scripture affirms, we must embrace, even with many questions left unanswered. What is darkness to our mind is sunshine to our hearts. It is not our place to question God’s right to choose and do as He pleases. As the psalmist notes, “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3). This truth of divine election may run contrary to our human logic, disturb our emotions, and cut against the grain of our American democratic mindset, but it is, nevertheless, clearly taught throughout Scripture.

Clearly, the God-driven church has a very high view of God. It clearly understands that God is working out His eternal purpose within time through the lives of His chosen ones who are being called out of the world by the Holy Spirit. No truth so elevates God and

humbles man than “knowing, brethren, beloved of God, His choice of you.” And no truth so inspires confidence in God to build His church through the God-ordained means in the power of God’s Spirit than this grand doctrine. But where this truth is missing, a man-centered, man-driven ministry will eventually result, employing man-designed means, often manipulating people into the church, but failing to bring them to Christ.

IV. CONVICTING PREACHING

Foundational to the spiritual success of the church at Thessalonica – and, for that matter, any church – is the primacy of the preaching of the Word of God. Before there can be converted hearts, changed lives, and clear convictions, there must be, first, convicting preaching. Paul continues:

“for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (verse 5).

As the pulpit is central to the church, so the gospel of Christ is central to the pulpit. The word “gospel” (*euangellon*) means “the announcement of good news”, specifically the truth that Christ died for sinners upon the cross, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day (1 Cor. 14:3-4). In one way or another, every truth within the full counsel of God is intimately connected to this core truth. Essential to the faithful proclamation of the gospel are four components which Paul describes in this verse.

First, the gospel must be preached *intelligently*. As the apostle writes “for our gospel did not come to you in word only,” the word “only” signifies that, in fact, the gospel was, carefully articulated to them through the instrumentality of human words. The apostle communicated the gospel to these people through an intelligent, factual, cognitive, straightforward, verbal presentation of gospel truth. Preaching must appeal to the entire person – mind, emotion, and will. It must inform the mind, inspire the hear, and invite the will. But, before the heart and will can be properly engaged, the mind must be taught divine truth. Doctrinal truth, well explained and practically applied, is the first order of preaching. Paul instructed the young Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teachings; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16).

Second, the gospel must be preached *powerfully*. The apostle testifies that the gospel came not in word only, “but also in power.” Convicting preaching is not boring rhetoric, nor endless chatter, but the dynamic power of God displayed through His chosen messenger. This word “power” (*dynamei*) refers to the divine power with which the apostle Paul was energized as he delivered his message. It was this power of the Holy Spirit released in Paul in he preached that governed his mind, activated his zeal, impassioned his heart, and directed his presentation of the truth to the listener.

Third, the gospel must be preached *confidently*. Paul's preaching was not only powerful, but confident in its delivery. He was sure of the truthfulness and relevance of his message and, consequently, was bold in proclaiming it. Yet this confidence and courage is what many modern preachers seem to lack. This assurance is not some conjured up "positive thinking" that is self-generated. Rather, it is a God-given certainty, fortified in the preacher's heart by the Holy Spirit, as a result of saturating his life with prayer and the Word of God. After all, how can one preach with confidence until he has experienced the authority and power of the message himself?

Fourth, the gospel must be preached *incarnationally*. That is to say, the preacher must model the message. There must be a consistency between what he preaches and what he lives. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." Humbly pointing to his own life as an authentication of the message he brought, the apostle, as well as every preacher, must model the message if there is to be power in the pulpit. Paul continues, "But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children, having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thes. 2:7-8). The preacher's message and life cannot be separated.

What a departure this is from much contemporary preaching which is based upon, not the preacher modeling the message, but the self-disclosure of his own faults and weaknesses in order to identify with his audience. Granted, it is necessary to express that one has "not arrived," but preaching nevertheless will have power only to the extent that one has personally obeyed the message, not neglected it. Sad to say, many preachers today want their congregation to identify with them by repeatedly sharing their "struggles" when, in reality, much of it is sheer disobedience which should be confessed, not showcased. Such transparency in the pulpit may yield sympathy in the pew, but not spirituality.

Despite all the modern technological advances, God is *still* pleased to use the foolishness of preaching as the primary means to build His kingdom. A holy man who is gifted to preach the Word of God by the Spirit of God has no equal in a powerful presentation of the truth. All other means of propagating the faith are subordinate, even inferior, to gospel preaching. Various other mediums of presenting the gospel may have their place—i.e. drama, musicals, pageants, films, and the like-- but they will never compensate for a lack of power in the pulpit.

A timeless truth that transcends the centuries, the God-driven church has a God-anointed, God-empowered man in the pulpit. His preaching must be biblical, articulate, powerful, compelling, bold, confident, and personally modeled. Where there is a strong pulpit, a strong church can be expected to grow.

V. CHRISTLIKE WALK

Flowing out of a biblical pulpit is the direct influence of the preacher's life upon the congregation. He so embodies the message that to follow him is, in actuality, to follow

the Lord. His whole life is engaged in living what he preaches, influencing his congregation to pursue a Christlike walk. Thus, Paul commends them:

“You also became imitators of us and the Lord” (6a).

In this verse, the word “also” is very important —“you *also* became imitators of us— because it connects everything that preceded with this phrase. In other words, *all* who are converted (verse 1), changed (verse 3), and chosen (verse 4), will become Christlike (verse 6). Election, conversion, and sanctification are inseparably bound together. As golden links on the chain of salvation that cannot be broken, each one inseparably forged together by God Himself upon the anvil of His eternal decree (Rom. 8:29-30).

The word “imitators” is a Greek word (*minetes*) from which comes our English word mimic. Upon being converted to Christ, the Thessalonians became mimics of Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, and, ultimately, Christ Himself. As he writes, “You also became imitators of us and the Lord,” the apostle was commending their humble emulation of him as he followed the Lord. That is to say, they followed Paul as he followed the Lord. To the Corinthians, he would later write, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

We are all subject to the influences of people brought to bear upon our lives, whether they be for good or otherwise. Thus, it is critically important that we allow ourselves to be shaped and molded by those who are in closest pursuit of Christ Himself. In the case of the Thessalonians, they were imitators of the apostle Paul himself, mimicking his walk in Christ. Subject to his godly example, the early believers in this church were being brought into Christlikeness through the reality of what they saw modeled in Paul’s life.

God’s eternal purpose for every believer is Christlikeness. So certain is this purpose, Paul writes, that our sovereign Lord is causing all things to work together for our good, specifically our conformity to Christlikeness (Rom. 8:28-29). Consequently, the chief pursuit of every true Christian must be to become like Christ. This *is* God’s master plan for all believers. The apostle John adds, “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 Jn. 2:6). Christ is the original, pastors are the models, and all believers are the copies, each being shaped into the image of Christ.

The point is, a God-driven church has godly leaders whose personal lives are worth emulating and following. Jesus said, “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). With the no table exception of Judas, this was certainly true with the original Twelve. They became like Him as they were under His influence. And it was true with the church in Thessalonica. As they followed Paul’s example of personal godliness, they grew in the grace and knowledge of Christ. So it will be true in our churches as well. To the extent that there exists holiness in the spiritual leadership, there will be holiness in the people.

VI. COURAGEOUS COMMITMENT

Receiving God's Word is never without conflict. Paul notes, "Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). So it was in Thessalonica. Describing the persecution that accompanies faith, the apostle notes the high cost of following Christ when he writes:

"having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (verse 6b).

The word for "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) means, literally, "to crush, compress, or squeeze," as grapes would be squashed in a winepress. Symbolically, it refers to our being caught in the crunch of the enormous opposition that comes upon us for the sake of the gospel. Such was their painful experience as they received the gospel. When they renounced their empty pagan religion, and turned their back upon the evil world system to enter Christ's kingdom, those in the world rose up in unholy indignation to bring about persecute and harm. This was no small fury they faced. But suffering for the gospel is to be expected for every believer's life.

Knowing Christ always involves partnership in His suffering (Phil. 3:10). "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). Jesus Himself said, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than its master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you'" (Jn. 15:18-20). As, faithful believers, we must expect persecution and suffering at the hands of a Christ-rejecting world.

Regarding those who enter His kingdom, Jesus promised, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10:12). "Blessed" (*markarios*) means a deep inner happiness, contentment, and peace. Such is ours, even in the midst of persecution.

Salvation and suffering are a package deal, the former always producing the latter. In fact, tribulation we suffer for Christ's sake becomes a confirming mark of one's salvation in Christ. The one who has been granted faith by God to believe has also been granted persecution for believing (Phil. 1:29). Yet, amid great opposition to the gospel, these early believers found a deep joy in Him. Such joy in the midst of great tribulation can only come from the Holy Spirit. The One who works in "power" and "full conviction" through the preaching to bring us to Christ (verse 5) is the One who provides abundant joy for us who believe (verse 6). In the midst of our suffering, God gives a greater grace, leading to a deeper experience of joy in the Lord.

All, this is to say, the God-driven church will always provoke the antagonism of the world. Rather than be at peace with the world, the God-built church will be a lightning rod drawing the fire of unbelievers as a result of believing, living, and spreading the gospel. Such opposition is to be expected. Because the world is hostile toward God, it will be hostile toward the church which God is building.

VII. CONTAGIOUS FAITH

Regardless of this mounting persecution, these first believers remained faithful in their witness for Christ. In spite of the opposition they faced, they could not be silenced. They *had* to share the gospel wherever they went. Paul notes:

“So that you became an example to all the believers in Macadamia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything” (verse 7-8).

As faithful witnesses, the gospel message “sounded forth” from them loud and clear. This word (*exechatai*), means literally, to blow a trumpet. More than a muffled whisper, they trumpeted a clear, clarion note of the good news to the world. Not only did they live it, they also proclaimed it far and wide. This word “sounded forth” also was used of an echo, such as when one shouts into a cave and the same noise reverberates out. This is how the Thessalonians lived. Whatever was taught them by Paul, they, in turn, passed it on to the world. More than mere receivers of God’s Word, they were transmitters of the greatest message ever heard – the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It should be noted, their clear convictions about election (verse 4) were in no way a hindrance to their contagious faith in evangelism (verse 8). In fact it was just the opposite. Sometimes, a person will object to the doctrine of election because they see it hindering evangelism. But, quite frankly, such a straw man argument was certainly not a problem with the apostle Paul, nor with the Thessalonians. These who believed in God’s sovereign election (verse 4) “sounded forth” their witness “in every place” (verse 8), so much so that their witnessing “became an example” to all (verse 7). In like manner, we should imitate these early believers, affirming both election and evangelism. God’s sovereignty and man’s soulwinning are to be inseparably bound together.

The greatest of all Baptist preachers, Charles H. Spurgeon, was once asked, “How do you reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility?” Spurgeon replied, “I never have to reconcile friends. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility have never had a falling out with each other. I do not need to reconcile what God has joined together.” Neither do we. Both are taught in Scripture and we must live with the tension.

This divine mystery between divine sovereignty and human responsibility has been pictured as a man approaching a door over which is a sign, “Whosoever Will May Come.” This person, knowing he needs to be saved, responds to this free and open invitation to all and takes a step of faith, coming through the door of salvation. But once

inside, he turns around and looks at the backside of the door. There, he discovers another sign reading, “Chosen in Christ before the Foundation of the World.” This simple illustration makes a clear point. We are to preach the gospel to all men everywhere, proclaiming “Whosoever will may come,” at the same time, knowing that those who are chosen will respond and come to Christ. As D.L. Moody once said, The “whosoever wills” are the elect, and the “whosoever wont’s” are the non-elect.

Remember, a successful witness is sharing Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, leaving the results with God. That’s what we are called to do. We are to share Christ with everyone, knowing that the Holy Spirit will certainly bring God’s elect to Christ. In actuality, sovereign election guarantees the success of our witnessing, encouraging our greater confidence to spread the gospel message, believing God has His people in every place who will believe.

Thus, the God-driven church is ever sharing Christ with the world, boldly proclaiming Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such soulwinning passion marks the God-driven church. Neither timid nor shy, it is godly people who share the gospel with other, leaving the results to Christ, never resorting to fleshly gimmicks to win the lost.

VIII. COMPLETE REPENTANCE

Inseparably bound to saving faith is genuine repentance. Wherever there is a turning *to* Christ, there will be a turning *away from* idols. Repentance and faith are the heads and tails of the same coin. Wherever you find one, you will always find the other. The apostle writes:

“For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God”
(verse 9).

Located about fifty miles to the south, the Thessalonians could actually see the celebrated summit of Mount Olympus, the supposed home of the Greek gods. It was there that Zeus and other mythological deities dwelt and the worship of these gods was a heavy influence upon this city. Idol-worship affected every aspect of life in Thessalonica. Yet, when Paul preached the gospel there, those who believed immediately turned from these dead idols to believe in the true, living God and serve Him. This repentance was so dramatic that it was well known by all. There was no need for Paul to report it to others because this news had already spread far and wide.

Clearly, when the Thessalonians believed upon Christ, they simultaneously abandoned their previous allegiance to false gods. When they enthroned their new King, Jesus Christ, necessitated they impeached the old one, false idols. The gospel is an all or nothing proposition, requiring commitment of all that we are to all that He is. In reality, their conversion was a coronation, the enthroning of a new king – Jesus Christ. In any true conversion, there must be a renouncing of all other chief alliances, whether they be

with pagan gods, worldly desires, family loyalties, or self-centered ambitions in order to receive Christ when the Thessalonians turned to God, they, also, turned their backs to their idols.

True saving faith *always* involves turning from dead idols. That is to say, believing always involves repentance. You cannot have one without the other. The word “repentance” means “a change of mind.” But, biblically, it encompasses more than that. As laid out in the breadth of Scripture, repentance includes three necessary components -- a change of mind, a change of heart, and a change of will -- leading to a change of life and eternal destiny. Reversing the effects of human depravity, repentance is a deep work of God’s Spirit which turns the heart *away from* all false gods, false beliefs, and false hopes in order to exercise faith in the finished work of Christ alone.

So, it is with the God-driven church. No longer married to the world, a sudden divorce has occurred with all one’s idols, separating those who believe from previous allegiances, whether they be religious, secular, material, or otherwise. In genuine conversion, Christ becomes one’s newly recognized Lord who allows no rival loyalties or divided affections. Such radical repentance ushers in a complete commitment to Christ of those who genuinely belong to Him.

IX. CONFIDENT HOPE

Finally, these early believers in Thessalonica were a Second Coming church. Not looking to the passing trends of this world, they were waiting for the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Such hope set their hearts ablaze, ever doing God’s work while there was still opportunity. Paul notes:

“and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (verse 10).

With the resolve of faith, the Thessalonians were expecting the appearing of Christ at any moment. They believed, this same Jesus who was raised from the dead would return from heaven and rescue them from the final outpouring of His own wrath. At any moment, He could burst upon the scene and come back to deliver them from the divine retribution to come. Thus, they were greatly challenged and comforted to press on in their Christian life(1 Thes. 4:18).

Throughout the centuries, this glorious return of Christ has been the blessed hope of the church (Tit. 2:13). Paul writes, “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the arch angel and with the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be “(1 Thes. 4:16-17). It was the triumphant appearing of Christ that dominated the lives of the Thessalonian believers constantly.

No matter how demanding and difficult the days, the Thessalonians knew that God would make everything right in the end. Despite the persecution they were receiving from the world, they knew that their reward would come from heaven. Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming quickly and My reward is with Me to give to every man according to His work" (Rev. 22:12). It was *this* hope which gave these early believers steadfastness and endurance in serving God. How much more should this blessed hope be burning brightly in our hearts! If they looked for Christ's return two thousand years ago, how much closer must we be today to His glorious appearing? God's original plan, clearly modeled in the early church two thousand years ago, is timeless, and should always be the desire of every body of believers.

As we bring to conclusion this look at the church at Thessalonica, my prayer is that we see such churches raised up in our day. May God build churches like this today, churches that are truly God-driven, not man-built. There is a difference, you know. May we see churches established by God that cannot be explained apart from His supernatural presence of in their midst.

Make no mistake, as we have clearly seen, such churches will be marked by converted hearts and changed lives, clear convictions and convicting preaching, a Christlike walk and courageous commitment, as well as contagious faith, complete repentance, and a confident hope. A congregation like this can only be constructed only by building upon God's Word in the power of God's Spirit with the sole purpose to magnify God's glory. The temptation will always exist to cave in to the pressure of the world and resort to man-centered ways to see the church built. But we must remain true to the God-ordained means of carrying out God's work. God's way for God's glory.

Man can build a booming church, but only God can build a biblical church.