Gospel Power - 1 Thess 1

“Jesus, yes. Church, no” I reckon many Aussies would say a big amen to that. The church is seen as irrelevant and oppressive. It seems to make the headlines for all the wrong reasons. Spirituality is hot, religion is not. Community is hip, the church is lame.

Over the next five Sundays we’ll be looking at Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica. One of the first churches planted in Europe. A church that made the headlines for the right reasons. And we’ll draw five gospel lessons for a local church. Lessons that will make prevent us from becoming lame and irrelevant. But instead make us a living, authentic, and effective church. My prayer is that as we look at this letter together, we experience gospel renewal as a church.

Let’s see how this church started. How did Paul come to write this letter? If you travelled to Greece today you’d find the city of Thessaloniki. It’s alive and well. And 2000 years ago the Apostle Paul conducted a 3 week mission in Thessaloniki. Notice how he starts the letter: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians. This was Paul’s second missionary journey. You can read about it in Acts 17. Paul chose Silas as his companion. And Timothy joined later. And they sailed across the Aegean Sea to the city of Thessalonica. The city was founded in 4BC by Cassandra who was an official of Alexander the Great. And he named the city after his wife. It was a centre for trade. It was a thriving port. At the time it was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. So it was in a very important location.

Luke tells us in Acts 17 that there was a Synagogue in Thessaloniki. And Paul spent three consecutive weeks preaching. What was his message? He reasoned from the Scriptures that the Christ would suffer and rise again. And then he proclaimed Jesus to them. And then he put both these together. The Christ of the Scriptures is the Jesus of history. In short he preached the gospel, and people were converted. Jews as well as Gentiles.

Now Paul would have like it to have been a longer mission but he had to run for his life. Gospel success always comes with gospel opposition. The KJV tells us they were chased out of town by “Certain lewd fellows of the baser sort.” Or some bad characters from the market place. These trouble makers couldn’t find Paul so they ended up attacking Paul’s host, Jason. And we’re told in 1 Thess 3 that Paul sent Timothy back to check up on the new converts. And the report was this little church was thriving.

And so Paul is writing to encourage them to keep at it. This is one of the earliest NT letters. Written within 20 years of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The theme of the letter is the gospel and the church. The gospel creates the church, the church spreads the gospel. The gospel shapes the church. So let’s look at chapter 1.

Paul begins by describing the church of God which the gospel created. And the gospel of God which the church welcomed and is spreading. Let’s look at it under those two heading:

1. The Church of God (vv. 1-4)

2. The Gospel of God (vv. 5-10)

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So this church is only a few months old. It’s made up of fresh converts who are forming their Christian convictions. You think it would be a wobbly church. You think it would be insecure. But Paul has great confidence in them. How? Because it’s God’s church. The word for church is *ecclesia*. Which means a gathering of people. A community. What’s distinctive about it? What’s marks an authentic church? There’s three things here.

1. ***the church is a community living in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***. It’s there in verse 1. Already within twenty years of Jesus dying and rising again, Jesus is coupled with God the Father. In one breath Paul speaks of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Mentioning God the Father and the Lord Jesus is a common way start most of the NT letters. But what’s different is the little preposition ‘in’: IN God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Why does Paul say it like this? He could have said it like he does to the Corinthians, “The church of God in Corinth.” But he says, “The church of the Thessalonians in God…” Why? Because every church has two homes. We live in Charlestown but also in God. Maybe it was because he knew their insecurities. They were being persecuted. And he’s letting them know they are in the safest place on earth. The church was brought into being by God and derives all life from Him.
2. **The church is a community marked out by faith, hope and love.** Check out verse 2, Paul let’s the church know he’s praying for them. And he’s constantly thinking about their work of faith, labour of love and steadfastness hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith, hope and love - the trifecta! The trifecta sums up the Christian life. Every Christian is a believer, a lover and a hoper. These re-orientate our lives: Upward. Outward. Onward. The new birth doesn’t means much if it doesn’t pull us out of ourselves. Out of our introversion towards God and one another. Notice these are all productive? Faith is living. Love leads to action. Hope produces endurance. Upward to Christ, Outward in love, onward to glory.
3. ***The church is a community loved and chosen by God.*** Notice in verse 4? “For we know, brothers loved by God that He has chosen you.” No explanation is given for God’s election except God’s love. This goes all the way back to Deuteronomy 7. The Lord says he chose Israel not because they were the best and brightest. But because he loved them. Why did he love them? Because he loved them. Not because they were loveable but because of his love. It’s the same for you and I. This is an amazing truth. Imagine if your husband or wife said, “I love you because you’re funny.” Then you would always feel the need to be funny. If you weren’t funny you feel they don’t love you. Or if they said, “I love you because of your good looks.” And then as soon as you start to lose them you’d be in trouble. God’s love isn’t dependent on us. It’s doesn’t love the loveable like we do. It’s Sovereign love flowing from the eternal heart of God.

And how does Paul know God has elected them? Check out verse 5: Through the preaching of the gospel God’s secret purposes are made known. ***Paul moves from the church to the gospel because he can’t conceive of one without the other.*** So much for those who say the doctrine of election rules out the need for evangelism! It’s the opposite really. It’s by evangelism that God’s election is realised. So we’re on to our second point:

2. The Gospel of God (vv. 5-10)

In the rest of chapter 1 we see how the gospel came in, how it was welcomed, and how it went out.

1. **The gospel comes in:** Did it parachute down from heaven? Before Paul and his buddies turned up there was no church in Thessalonica. When they left, a church had been planted. What happened? The preaching of the gospel happened. How did come?
   * + - * **with words**…not only with words. But it did come with words. Words matter. Some people say “preach the gospel and use words if necessary.” But that’s stupid. Because the gospel has specific content (Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 15). It has to be articulated. It has to be verbalised. Facts need interpretation. Jesus died - fact. Jesus died for your sins - interpretation. The gospel is called the Word. The Word of the Lord. The word of God. So it came with words but not only with words..
         * …**with power…and with full conviction…and the Holy Spirit.** Words are not enough. Human words are weak on by themselves. People can’t hear them. Or don’t understand them. They can go in one ear and out the other. Sadly a lot of preaching is like that. A crucial reminder for us (and me) that the word needs the Spirit. The Spirit without the word is weaponless, the word without the Spirit is powerless. In 1955 Billy Graham was invited to speak at Cambridge University. And on the first two nights he spoke to packed out crowds of around 2000 students. **And something incredible happened: nothing**. Nothing was happening. Billy realised his messages were too academic. He was trying to impress his audience. On the third night he decided to preach a message on the need for the blood of Christ and cleansing from sin. And that night something incredible happened. 400 young men and women gave their lives to Christ. And many went on to be greatly used by God. So here in 1 Thess 1:5 we have the marks of authentic gospel preaching: Truth, conviction and power. All come from the Holy Spirit. And when the Spirit swings the sword of the word, things happen.

(B) **The gospel is welcomed.** Notice in verse 6? The Thessalonians became imitators of the the apostles and the Lord. In other words, their lives were changed. To receive the gospel isn’t an intellectual exercise but a changed life. The Holy Spirit is working at both ends: In the preacher and in the hearers. The same Spirit that gives power to the preacher, gives joy to the hearer. And real joy makes itself known, NOT when everything is a bed of roses, But when troubles comes. Paul says they received the word and had joy in the middle of trouble. The gospel brings opposition. At least it should. One bishop said, “When the Apostle Paul came to town there were riots, but when I come to town, they get out the tea and bickies.” What’s going on? Are we watering down the message? Authentic gospel preaching always brings opposition. Why? Because it challenges human pride, selfishness, autonomy. And there’s an evil one who hates the gospel message more than anything. But although there’s always opposition the gospel still goes out with success. It did for the Thessalonians.

(C) **The gospel goes out**. Check verse 8: Paul says the word of the Lord sounded out from them. That word in the Greek is ***Exechetai.*** It’s where we get our word ‘echo’ from. In the LXX the word is used for trumpets and other loud noises. The gospel reverberated through the hills and valleys of Greece. How did that happen? They didn’t have social media. How did they get in the headlines? It was their conversion that echoed. A changed life is the most effective way to spread the good news of Jesus. Holy gossip. Businesses still use it don’t they? Jenny Craig ads with the before and after shot. Or that silly thing you put in your mouth and chew it and it turns back the ageing process. They use before and after shots to prove the thing is effective.

And in verse 9-10 we have the before and after shot of the Thessalonians. What happened to them? There are three things that mark out **authentic conversion**: turning, serving and waiting. Notice they turned from idols. The Greco-Roman world was full of idol worship. It was a massive part of their culture and identity. And so to all of a sudden drop it was a huge deal. It spoke volumes. When you turn from an idol, you are turning from the power that has controlled your life. You need a power encounter for this to happen. A personal and powerful encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. But we don’t have idols today do we, or do we? We do. What are the powers that control people’s lives today? Workaholic, sexaholic, alcoholic, sportsaholic, surfaholic. Money, power, fame, beauty, these things dominate us in the West don’t they?

Jesus Christ liberates us from idolatry. Dr. Alan Tippet was a missionary to the Fiji Islands for over 20 years. And he said about evangelism, ‘the only real and effective way of proving the power of our faith was to demonstrate that the old religion had lost its power and fear. And that idolatry vanishes at Jesus’ name.” Can people see from our lives that the idols of our day have no power over us? That money, work, leisure, sex, alcohol, don’t control our lives? Or do we need to turn? These things aren’t evil in and of themselves. But when they are what we live for, what we day dream about, what we sacrifice our times for? Then we have ourselves an idol. As Bob Dylan sung, “You gotta serve somebody”. Everybody is **serving something**. A Christian is someone who’s turned from idols. Turned to where? To serve the living and true God. There’s only one God, the God of the Bible, our Creator and our Redeemer. We’ve been set free…set free to serve. The new slavery is the true freedom. You’re not truly a Christian unless you place yourself in service to God.

And while we’re working we’re also waiting. Check out verse 10, “…and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath.” Working and waiting go together. We need both. Because our Lord is coming back soon we don’t sit on our hands and stare at the sky. We serve. But we don’t serve as though we are building God’s kingdom. We don’t serve thinking it all depends on us. We’ll never set up utopia on earth. We’ll never live in a state of perfection in this age. We serve, while waiting.

Waiting for the coming of Christ. The consummation of all things. When we will be rescued. What from? From ourselves? From the bad guys? No from God’s wrath. His righteous anger that will be poured out on sinners. His judgment that we deserve but Jesus took on the cross. Jesus rescues us. And is rescuing us - present tense.

So let me sum this up for you. The gospel and the church are inseparable. The gospel creates the church. The church spreads the gospel. And in the first chapter we see God’s simple plan for evangelism. The local church embodies the gospel. People need to hear it and see it. The local church is the place where the power of the gospel is seen. The gospel won’t spread unless we are visibly changed by it. We need to look like what we’re talking about. Let’s pray we would be experiencing gospel renewal at Charlestown.