

The Things That Make A Church Great

1. Three Basics of Greatness — 1 Thessalonians 1:3

The Church at Thessalonica was extraordinary. As best we can tell, Paul was only with them for six months on his initial visit, during which the Church was founded. Yet this fledgling group became an outstanding example of what happens when people respond appropriately to the Gospel.

As Paul reflected on them at this writing, three things came to mind that he mentioned in verse 3:

Their work of faith — Their labor of love — Their steadfastness of hope

We know that everyone works, but when the work is anchored in faith, it's different. As you know, faith means "seeing and obeying God's point of view." It's possible to work very hard and try real hard to do God's work, but it may be misplaced effort if it is not founded in faith. When people move in faith, God decides what they do, when they do it, and where. Discovering His point of view and timing before embarking on a project will make it profitable for the Kingdom.

It's not always fun to hear God's direction because it may be different from our plans and ideas. Faith means submitting to Him no matter what. This is part of the foundation of a great Church. If we do things our way instead of in submission to God, the power is forfeited and religion will replace reality.

A closer look at this Thessalonian congregation reveals that they carried out their labor in love. Perhaps the "work" relates to a broad view of their overall structure and endeavor, while "labor" focuses on the details necessary to get the job done. A carpenter may refer to houses he builds as his "work", but his "labor" involves every piece of lumber, drywall, roofing, etc. that it takes to complete a house. When it came to the nitty-gritty, this Church went about it in love. And it was God-love (*agape*), the love that flowed from Him into them and then out to everyone around. Have you ever labored from some platform other than God-love? Fatigue, resentment, and burn-out usually happen in that circumstance. It is so important to have an intimate fellowship with Jesus so that He and His supply works in and through us.

The third thing about this amazing Church was their steadfastness of hope. Hope in Jesus in the presence of God is what kept them going. You know, many things compete for our hope. The world is filled with things and potential experiences that promise great reward. It is possible to be side tracked from Jesus and begin to hope in someone or something less than Him. The placement of our hope will ultimately determine our direction. We really should have one hope above all and that is to be pleasing to Jesus. When all is said and done, will He be glad for what we have done? Will we discover that what we did was truly for Him and His Kingdom and not something less?

This Church was great because it steadfastly hoped in Jesus. The people sought fulfillment nowhere else than in Him and that kept everything else in balance and on course. Anytime a believer decides to find fulfillment in the world, frustration sets in and that produces conflict in the Church. When believers come together frustrated by negative experiences in their personal lives, they end up fighting because they are already agitated by unfulfilled desires. On the other hand, when we come together enjoying the fulfillment that only Jesus can give, our fellowship is real and satisfying. It's also attractive to people who may not yet know our Savior. Yes, great Churches are anchored in faith, love and hope.

This verse calls for action on our part. God is calling us to agree with these principles, commit to them, and live out our years in faithfulness. Let's not ignore Him, but draw near and let Him evaluate our lives and focus. Then, let Him change anything He wants to because the results will be so worth it!

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2. Gospel Presentation — 1 Thessalonians 1:5,6

We are interested in learning what made the Thessalonian Church so dynamic and influential. Their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope put them in a distinct category and we look for insights to explain what happened to produce this kind of Church. The answer is found largely in 1:5 & 6:

The way the Gospel was presented and the way the Gospel was received

Paul reminded them that he had presented the Gospel in a five-fold package. He said,

"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."

The first part of the presentation was *verbal*. That's pivotal in evangelism. The Gospel has to be spoken. Nobody gets saved if nobody tells them how. Well, Paul came telling them how and he backed his words up in four ways. The words were wrapped in *power* — *dunamis* — *ability, efficiency, and might*. This is the same word that Jesus used in Acts 1:8 when He told the Apostles they would be witnesses when the Holy Spirit delivered power into their lives. By his statement, Paul indicated that he had received this anointing and did his ministry by its enabling.

The whole presentation was carried out in the *Holy Spirit*. This means that Paul fully relied on the Spirit for every detail of his ministry — its timing, sequence, content, opportunities and results. He never assaulted people with the truth, he simply presented it and relied on the Holy Spirit to take it home to hearts. He was certainly results oriented, but he knew the results were in God's hands. He knew that his job was inputs, but God's job was outcomes.

He carried out his work in the passion of *full conviction*. Nothing half-hearted about Paul! He was pretty much an all or nothing sort of guy. That's what it takes to penetrate the darkness and get the job done. He could confidently say that his entire being was devoted to the task and his life on the line. His amazing life and ministry were marked by great difficulties and set-backs that somehow all resulted in great victory and progress for the Gospel. His total commitment was certainly not an insignificant factor.

The ultimate support for Paul's message at Thessalonica was his *lifestyle*. He asserts that he had proved to be a certain type of man while among them. They had the chance to watch him and interact over time and they discovered that he lived what he spoke. The lack of duplicity further endorsed what the Spirit was doing and made the message more credible than ever.

The second half of the equation was the way the Gospel was received. In verse 6 he observes:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit

These people received the Word! They received it amid much difficulty, but with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The result was imitation of Paul and the Lord. They quickly learned to live in two worlds at once. In the natural they had much tribulation, but in the spiritual, much joy of the Holy Spirit. The beauty was that they took the Word to heart, immediately imitating Paul's life and Jesus' as well.

Things haven't changed much over the years. Anytime the Gospel goes out in these ways today, the impact is great. There still must be receptivity for the loop to close and the job be complete. I think we all are on both sides of the table as we go along. We must be good receivers and presenters for God to do all He desires. Let's do it!

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3. Missionary Outreach — 1 Thessalonians 1:7,8

Historical and biblical records seem to indicate that Paul was only at Thessalonica for six months, but in that brief time of ministry he enjoyed immeasurably great success. The church he started thrived from its birth. We are seeking to understand the things that made this true. Recall that the way he presented the Gospel and the way the people received it provided the foundation for everything. Out of this flowed a work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope that marked the people's lives. Their reception of the Word even in persecution made them exemplary in the Body of Christ. This resulted in missionary outreach that further explains the amazing strength of this local church.

Missionary outreach made the Thessalonian church great

Paul recounted the effectiveness of their outreach:

*"... you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia 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."*

Their example of faith and obedience first impacted believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Encouragement and exhortation touched the lives of people who heard about these faithful folks. This happened as a result of the Word sounding forth from them. That is, they boldly spoke the Word and apparently sent people out to preach as they went.

Macedonia and Achaia were the first recipients of this missionary effort, but it didn't stop there. Paul discovered further regions of the frontier where he expected to introduce people to Christ only to find out they had already heard and believed the Word of God.

The Thessalonian outreach was [encouraging](#) to fellow believers. It was [rich in content](#), literally the Word of God. It was [verbally declared](#) – people could hear and receive it. And, it was [complete](#), so complete that Paul didn't have to add anything to it as he established churches everywhere.

There aren't any more important qualities to a missionary effort than these. A great church is always encouraging to all believers who know of it. They are blessed by the power manifested in all of its ministries. They are blessed by its labor, love, and hope. But it's the content of the outreach that makes it valuable in time and eternity. Social effort is fine and needed, but the preaching of the Word of God brings healing to body, soul, and spirit as it delivers the Gospel and brings folks to the cross. The content is made effective by the verbal declaration. Christians can talk all about anything and amuse, entertain, or in some way encourage people, but it's the direct speaking of the complete Gospel that results in salvation. And complete is the key idea. Telling people about heaven, hell, sin, the blood of Jesus, repentance, and faith results in genuine conversion. Lesser talk doesn't!

A great church has the Word of God completely, accurately, and authoritatively delivered to it. A great church receives that Word with faith, surrender, and commitment. A great church exhibits the work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope that gets it through everything, good or bad. A great church then reaches out from its doorstep to the furthest corner of the world with the encouraging, content-filled, verbally declared, complete Word of God that brings salvation and results in new churches being established.

Don't you want there to someday be a book about your Church?

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4. Gospel Reception — 1 Thessalonians 1:9,10

The Thessalonian believers made four turns in their lives and the turns made all the difference. Paul commended them in 1:9,10:

*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,
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.*

Paul measured the effectiveness of his ministry with them by the change in their lives which was observable to the people in Macedonia and Achaia. The word was out that something wonderful had happened and Paul gave the reasons.

First, they turned to God

That's where everything good always starts. No human effort or religion can do for a man what simply turning to God can do. Self-reformation can have a short lived effect in a life, but genuine spiritual power is needed to free a man from the guilt, power, and ultimate presence of sin. The foundation of faith in God can sustain a Christian life marked with victory and purpose.

Second, they turned from idols

Trusting Christ as Savior puts a person in a brand new position — a new life begins at the moment of salvation. In practice, however, the old ways are still hanging around and often calling for allegiance. It is vital that a new believer turn from the idols of the past and give God all of his focus, attention and worship. Allowing the former life to linger only creates conflict that leads to compromise that leads to a wasted life.

Third, they turned to serve

Do you see how these steps build on each other to make these folks the dynamic body of believers they were? Any person who turns to God, and then turns from idols is staged to move out in kingdom work. Many believers stop right here and wonder what happened to their initial joy and sense of fulfillment. God doesn't save people to be spectators and a person who stops short of service will become one with little or no usefulness to the work of Christ. These people found ways to get involved in actions and ministries that attached ever increasing value to their lives and resulted in the expanding impact they had all around them.

Fourth, they turned to wait

You know, it's one thing to start and quite another to finish. Waiting is the key to a realm we don't automatically enjoy. It's the idea of patiently, faithfully abiding no matter the circumstance, no matter the apparent outcome, no matter the passing of time, no matter anything — just keeping on keeping on. It's done by looking to Jesus, being devoted to Him, while trusting Him completely with the outcome. Perseverance is pivotal to ultimate accomplishment and the Thessalonians had it.

So, turning has a real place in the work of God. A little self-evaluation couldn't hurt — have I made all the turns these people made? It's pretty easy to tell as you look at them one by one. If your life has the Gospel-spreading quality of theirs, you know you're on track. If you're stagnated at some point, face it, ID it, repent, re-commit and move on up. Let's let God make us a modern day Church at Thessalonica!

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5. Leadership Fundamentals — 1 Thessalonians 2:1-6

So many sayings revolve around leadership, and that's because everything rises or falls at that point. As Paul continued his observations about the greatness of the Thessalonian Church, he emphasized the role of great leadership:

2:1 For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. 3 For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. 5 For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness – 6 nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

This lengthy list of attitudes and actions could be taken as self-congratulatory, but that isn't where Paul was coming from. He was speaking frankly and honestly about what's involved in getting the job done. The qualities of leadership that can be identified out of this testimony are pivotal for anyone whom God is going to use to accomplish the task.

The first thing is purposefulness. His coming wasn't a random, pointless event, but achieved the purpose of God. I am sure that the suffering that happened in Philippi made a good contribution. There is nothing like the purifying fire of trials and trouble to get a person on track. Dross can be skimmed when the gold has been melted and that is where ever-increasing value comes from.

Boldness makes all the difference and Paul had plenty of that. He found the strength in God and it empowered him to speak the gospel of God even when opposed.

Now that's the difference in leaders and others. A leader gets it done even when opposed! Others retreat, retract, rethink, re-something and leave the task abandoned. Some may have come to Thessalonica and started out proclaiming the gospel, but when trouble flared, given up — not Paul — oh no, he just moved on ahead and right through it to accomplish the task. LEADERSHIP!

Another component in greatness is content. If the strong words were built on error, impurity or deceit, he would have had reason to collapse. Like some of these lying politicians with the teary eyed stories that turn out to be less than the truth — casts a dark shadow over all they do and say. No, the veracity of Paul's message meant he carried the divine seal of approval and thus could be a steward of the gospel. Source is another key in leading. If the leader knows everything is God's and coming from God, he moves in calm confidence, not worrying about pleasing people, but God. Keen awareness of accountability to God determines everything.

Now, this added up to proper speech and presentation in Paul's ministry. No flattery, no greed, no glory seeking, not even any asserting of appropriate authority. All those things add up to manipulation. Smoke and mirrors have no place in real leadership. True blue through and through is what counts, and no games. No duplicity, no self-serving, just honest, hard work before the God of the universe.

So are you a leader or something else? Actually, everyone is a leader on some level. Someone is looking to you - you may not realize it, but they are, and they are following your steps. Let's be people whose way leads home, by way of the cross. Let God do the things in you that He did in Paul, then stand back and marvel at the great things He'll accomplish in your life. Things that will last for time and eternity. Let's be a great Church!

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6. Loving Leadership — 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

We have all encountered a few people in our lives who have profoundly influenced us. In thinking about them, we likely will perceive some commonalities of character, personality, attitude, etc. that made them impactful. Probably some similar traits to those Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 2:

*7 But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.
8 Having so fond an 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. 9 For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; 11 just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, 12 so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*

The fond affection of the leader toward his followers is foundational. It's pretty obvious that if the leader doesn't like those he is working with they will sense that and be less than enthused to follow. In fact, a lack of affection can put limits on the leader's service. Fond affection made Paul well-pleased to impart the Gospel of God and with it, his own life. This involved labor and hardship 24/7 so as not to be a burden and to get the message across.

To lead, a person must find a way to love — not just surface, back slapping stuff, but real, deep, unconditional, endlessly passionate feelings. Paul had this. How? From other of his writings we learn it was not by working it up, but by surrender to the Christ in him Who could love this way through him. He described this *agape* (God) love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 as *patient, kind, not jealous, not bragging, not arrogant, not acting improperly, not self-seeking, not provoked, not keeping score, not rejoicing in what's wrong, but in what's right, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things, and never failing*. This kind of love is supernatural. Natural love is the *phileo* kind that is always conditional and unpredictable. It does not provide what it takes to make it in leadership. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:29 *For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me*.

When the leader's labor is founded in God's power mightily working in him, his striving is effective. It enables the devout, upright, blameless behavior given toward the Thessalonians. Out of this passionate heart, Paul exhorted, encouraged, and implored each person as if he were their father.

Now, the focus of the leadership. What was the objective here, why the intensity? Paul did and said all that he did for one reason: to produce a worthy walk in the believers. He saw everything against the backdrop of God's awesome person and work and therefore was concerned that the people live up to Who He is and what He does. God's amazing holiness, righteousness, omniscience, immutability, faithfulness, love and mean that those who say they know Him should be living in a way that measures up to His splendor.

It's further a response to God's purpose and call. Being saved and in relationship with God is far more about Him than us. He doesn't come to live in us so that we can have a good time with all the things we want, but so He can conform us to Himself and make us fit for His Kingdom and sharers in His glory. Do you yet know that it's not easy to get there? That there are many temptations and options along the way? Do you know that it takes leadership to get us from here to there?

Two questions come up: 1. Are you following this kind of leader? 2. Are you becoming this kind of leader? Life is short, eternity sure, let's make our time count!

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7. Followership — 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

Paul had a uniquely amazing ministry in Thessalonica. Remember, he was only there a few months, but in that time saw God establish a Church like none other. We have observed the various qualities that he exhibited as he led the people to Christ and on to maturity in Him. But, we can not overlook the people's response in 1 Thessalonians 2:

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, 15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. 17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while – in person, not in spirit – were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. 18 For we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, more than once – and yet Satan hindered us. 19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

They had a remarkable reception of the Word of God. They didn't take it lightly as if it were from a man. They didn't take it improperly as if Paul were the one to be revered. No, they took it for what it was — the authoritative, inspired, powerful Word of God. That starts everything. No one goes anywhere in the God side of the spiritual realm without understanding and believing that the Bible is the absolute Word of God. Paul didn't have a Bible. He had the Law and Prophets and the Word of God was being given to him as he went along. So why did people receive it when they did (which wasn't always). Because of the last of verse 13: *it performs its work in you*. They experienced something as they interacted with the Word! Don't be afraid of that — good experience always flows out of a good encounter with the Word.

They next became imitators of the established Churches of God. Sometimes people want to launch out on their own, discarding traditions and everyone who has gone before. Foolishness! God has been at work a long time with a lot of people who have learned many things. It is good to respect the historical aspect of our faith. The people haven't been perfect every time, but the Word has. Anyway, the Thessalonians imitated to the point of sharing in severe persecution. The same kind of persecution that resulted in Jesus' death and much hindrance to the Gospel. Paul encouraged them that judgment would fall where appropriate, not to worry.

Don't you think, though, that a key factor in their amazing faith and all, was Paul's huge heart of love and compassion for them? He lamented their separation, assuring everyone that it might be physical, but could never be spiritual. He went on describing his deep desire to be with them and pointed out that satan had something to do with the delay. More than once he hindered what Paul sought. Why all this love?

An eternal point of view is all that can explain it. Paul's eye was on the day that Jesus would come for the Bride and he knew that group would include these young believers in whom he had invested so much. He was transported as he thought of the moment when they would all stand before the Savior. So his question (Who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?) has only one answer: IT'S YOU! And not just you, but you in the presence of the Lord Jesus at His coming. You are our glory and joy.

You know, God has given every believer a ministry that is like this on some level. Does your love for the people He has given you consume you, motivate you, produce longings in you, so that you keep going, no matter what? Do you care for your neighbors, community, and world like this? Come on, let Jesus put constraining love in your entire being, OK?

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8. Spiritual Warfare — 1 Thessalonians 2:17,18

There is a biblical principle that echoes throughout Scripture: When anyone or anything means evil to one of God's people, He means it and makes it to result in good. One of the earlier mentions of the concept was from Joseph as he comforted his bad brothers after Jacob's death. "You meant it for evil," he told them, "but, God meant it for good." **Genesis 50:19-21** Jesus told Peter, many years later, that Satan had demanded permission to sift him like wheat — but recovery would happen with the result that Peter would be able to strengthen his brethren Luke 22:31,21. Paul assured the people in Romans 8:28 that *"God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him"*. When it comes to the Church encountering the evil one, the same truth holds fast along with Jesus' declaration in Matthew 16:18 —

I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

His promise means that the work is done, the victory is sure, but there will still be a fight. The gates of hell won't fail to overpower for lack of trying, but Jesus said they would have no successful active or passive resistance against the Church.

So here is Paul, a few years later, going about his apostolic ministry, enjoying great fellowship, experiencing powerful victory and suddenly he can't get where he really wants to be. He tried more than once to make the trip, but experienced satanic interference. "Hindered" was his word. Satan does many different things to hinder (thwart, prevent). He seems to have access to the human mind where he whispers lies that discourage or constrain. He also has the ability to influence the behavior of people so they become a hindrance. Paul knew much about both of these attacks. He experienced great mental/emotional struggle throughout his ministry and often found relief only through the ministry of others to himself 2 Corinthians 7:6. Then, he had crowds of people oppose him in many different locations, often following him from one city to another inciting others to riot as well. His statement in 1 Thessalonians 2 reflects great sincerity along with some level of frustration:

*17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while –
in person, not in spirit – were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.
18 For we wanted to come to you — I, Paul, more than once – and yet Satan hindered us.*

Yet there is good couched in this conflict. Paul had written to the Corinthians 2 Corinthians 12:7 about a messenger of Satan, a thorn in the flesh that buffeted his body. He didn't like it, prayed three times for deliverance, but God ultimately explained that sufficient grace and not deliverance would be the key to his victory. Which do you suppose is better — physical strength or sufficient grace?

You see, there is something about bodily suffering that makes a saint more saintly. Suffering (any perceived lack) in the flesh helps a person abandon sinning and commit more completely to following the Savior 1 Peter 4:1-3. That is true on a personal and corporate level. When the Church is persecuted good things always happen and the Gospel and the Kingdom are advanced Philippians 1:12-30.

But there is one other high note in all this — if the devil takes the time to hinder, attack, discourage, etc. It's always because he is feeling threatened and is trying to strike the first blow. That means the Church or individual believer is in the right place, doing the right things and attracting a little attention from the dark side.

Don't get discouraged when trouble comes – God isn't shocked or unprepared to get you through it. Rejoice that you are worthy to suffer with a long list who have gone on before. Rejoice that you are enough of a threat to deserve an attack. Then look to Jesus, hunker in tight and wait for Him to bring you out as an overwhelming conqueror. Remember, greater is **HE** who is in you than **he** who is in the world **1 John 4:4**.

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9. Passionate Leadership Care — 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

You will need to read the first ten verses of the chapter in your Bible, as I don't have room for them here. They are a window into the heart of a very troubled man who ended up with more joy than he started out. Paul was certainly one of the most courageous men who ever lived. And his ministry record speaks for itself even as it distinguishes him from most everyone else in the church. Yet, he had a tender, emotional side that often overflowed with concern for the well-being of the churches he founded and their attitude toward him. He didn't have the communication tools available that we have so even when he was less than 200 miles from people he cared about, it would take a lot of time to get any information. Thus he would begin getting concerned about their faith in the midst of persecution (his or their's), or the influence of the tempter to turn away from Jesus.

In this chapter Paul seems to be thinking back to when he was in Athens and unable to personally check on the Thessalonians. In his place he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them, plus to determine the strength of their faith, and one last thing — to find out their attitude toward Paul. I don't want to make too much or too little of Paul's personal struggles, but suffice it to say that he was human, and anyone in a ministry position experiences similar thoughts and second thoughts.

Well, when Timothy came back with a positive report, Paul was thrilled! Great, everything and everyone is OK, you all still like me and are going on in the Christian life. WOW! He was so emphatic about his concern that he declared, "...for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." That's the kind of passionate leadership care that makes the difference. Lesser leaders have an ambivalence about them so they don't rise and fall on the success or failure of those they claim to lead. Not a truly committed leader. Paul is inter-twined with each individual believer, visualizing them in the presence of Christ for eternity. With that focus in mind, he then strained to make every last investment in their moment-by-moment success. The intensity of desire was such that he prayed around the clock that he would be able to see them again and complete anything lacking in their faith.

Now put yourself in Paul's sandals if you can. You are consumed with these passions and desires. You have made a huge investment that, according to the latest report, is paying off. But you still know there is more work to be done – more teaching, encouraging, explaining, exhorting – yet you can't get there. You can't make a DVD and send it, or an e-mail, not even a phone call. What do you do?

Pray. That's right, you turn to God in the ministry of intercession, calling on Him to . . . well, here's his prayer:

*Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;
and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people,
just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness
before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. vss. 11-13*

Look how he called on God to personally (along with Jesus) direct his way to them. But then he also called for the Lord to cause some increasing, and abounding in love for everyone. This so that God would establish their hearts without blame in holiness at Jesus' coming. At this point the passionate leadership care went a step higher. Intercessory prayer is the most powerful ministry tool available to any of us. The Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus are already constantly interceding for believers. When we join in, praying for people's spiritual progress, we are joining a winning team. God will get it done and there will one day be a huge celebration. And focus on that is what keeps a passionate leader passionate.

So what do we have? Deep, emotional concern, great desire to be together, sending the best soldier available, rejoicing in the report and then praying everyone and everything into completion. God is still using this kind of leaders today.

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10. Moral Freedom — 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7

1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. 8 So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

Sexuality is an omnipresent topic in our culture, but that's nothing new; the Roman Empire was defined by immorality and sensual behavior. So as Paul addressed the matter of a believer's personal responsibility for the stewardship of his body, he was touching on a potentially volatile subject. Once again the authority of the Lord Jesus and the Word of God were the basis for all he had to say.

Pleasing God in your walk was the focus of his message — And not just getting by, but excelling more all the time. This is the difference between a great church and a lukewarm Laodecian church. Sometimes Christians get comfortable with their salvation and become indifferent to excellence in life and ministry. Ho-humness settles in and dilutes their passion as they lie back and watch what goes on. This leads to a lackadaisical attitude toward things eventually they are allowing and participating in things that a little while ago they wouldn't have allowed anywhere near their life.

Paul said that on Jesus' authority he gave commandments that revealed the will of God for their lives — sanctification. That is, being set apart and made holy in position and practice. That entails abstaining from sexual immorality in its many forms. God gave the gift of sexuality to us and it's a wonderful gift when expressed in its biblical context: one man with one woman married for life, enjoying sexual intimacy as part of total marital intimacy. Any other sexual expression is immoral and forbidden and to be rejected by a believer. In the stewardship of your body you are to live out your sanctification with honor and turn from lustful passion (having a stronger sexual drive than spiritual drive) or defrauding (arousing a sexual desire in another person that they cannot righteously satisfy) remembering that the Lord will avenge the violator. Behave modestly toward everyone in how you dress, speak and act.

God hasn't saved us so that we can go right on living impure lives, but rather that we constantly increase in being set apart unto Him, ever growing in holiness and sharing His glory. This is a difficult area of life because the temptations are always a mouse click or a magazine or TV show away. Interacting with the temptation provides a mental/emotional/physical stimulation that feels good. Of course it is followed by guilt and shame, but feels good enough that it's very hard to stay away from it.

This is where the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" comes in. This is the Romans 8:1-7 teaching that says Jesus is more powerful than sin and our weak flesh. When the temptation comes act on the law and call on Jesus to respond to it for you. If you try to defeat temptation with your mind, emotions and will you will succumb. But if you call on Jesus to deal with it He'll set you free by His sanctifying power.

The most important thing is to agree with teaching because it is from God, not man, and is compatible with His Holy Spirit who indwells every born again believer. Moral freedom is so much better than moral bondage . . .

The Things That Make A Church Great

11. Excelling at Love — 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, 12 so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

Over the years I've learned to be a little cautious with people who tell of their great love when we're barely acquainted. Several of those have ended up not being very loving. The loud "I love you" with the spine-splitting pat on the back may not actually mean very much.

1 John 3:16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

Real love is made real by laying down your life for the one you love. "Laying down your life" means "denying my claim to my right to myself" according to Oswald Chambers. Words are one thing, action is quite another. Love is when your life is laid down and you are giving something tangible to someone in need. Don't let your expression of love stop with words, go on into deed and truth.

Paul was encouraged to hear of the love that existed in the Thessalonian church. He gave God credit for teaching them to love and they passed it on to each other as well as all the brethren in Macedonia. A great church is a loving church. Then Paul said, "Do more", excel at loving. Ideally love happens when a person gets close to God (Who is love) and the love of God fills him so he can then pass it on to others. What he passes along won't be selfish, self-seeking or any other of the negative traits mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13. Rather, patient, kind, non-judgmental, etc. God love comes from your spirit and has nothing to do with human likes and dislikes, preferences, or the like. It's an unconditional, pure, satisfying love that builds up and establishes anyone it touches.

According to verses eleven and twelve it can be expressed in the most non-romantic or emotional ways:

- 3 lead a quiet life
- 3 mind your own business
- 3 work with your hands
- 3 behave properly toward outsiders

These are just mundane attitudes and actions, but they reflect God's love being fleshed out in your life and then share with others.

1 Corinthians 13:4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails . . .

The Things That Make A Church Great

12. Living in Hope — 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 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 with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

God didn't create man for him to die; He put Adam and Eve in a perfect, sinless environment. Theoretically they could have eaten of the Tree of Life and locked sin out and lived in the garden forever. But instead, sin came and with it came death. And with death comes great sorrow, pain, confusion, and even resentment. Jesus is the only One to cross back and forth between the eternal and natural, the only One to of His own will rise from the dead. Personal faith in Him brings immortality to the believer, people outside of Christ will live forever, but in the condition the Bible calls the second death, that is separation from God in the Lake of Fire. Thus they have no hope and life without hope doesn't work too well.

So Paul provided of paragraph of teaching on death and the Rapture which he intended to be the means of great hope for the believers. This is the second specific mention of the Rapture, the first being in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. This event is distinct from the Second Coming of Christ in which He will come to the earth with the Church and establish a 1000 Year Kingdom on earth. In the Rapture Jesus comes in a cloud and catches all believers up to be with Him in the air. The Second Coming is preceded by various signs Jesus told about in Matthew 24 and Luke 24, but the Rapture has no signs and come happen at any second. We call it "imminent".

In the Rapture, the archangel will shout, God's trumpet will blast, Jesus will descend in a cloud and the bodies of the believers who have died (slept) will be resurrected and taken up first. A split second later all living believers will be caught up off the earth and join them with Jesus. From then on we will always be with the Lord. Wow, what a future!

Paul spoke of it to Titus:

2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, 14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

John wrote:

1 John 2:28 Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. 29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him. 3:1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

It's interesting to note that this wonderful hope for time and eternity brings with it the motivation to holy living. It also introduces a calm understanding about death that makes the sorrow bearable and that helps make a church great. If you are Christian and your loved one who has passed is a Christian you will meet again in the cloud with Jesus. Maybe today will be the day!

The Things That Make A Church Great

13. Living in Light of Prophecy — 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. 7 For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. 9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

The term Day of the Lord refers to a time period that begins with the Rapture, includes the Tribulation Period, Jesus' Second Coming and His 1000 year reign on the earth. To an unbeliever it will come like a thief in the night. People will be finding false hope in social/political events that they will think indicate peace and safety. Instead the Church will suddenly be missing and Tribulation events begin to happen. Believers are people of the light and the day, so there is no darkness about them in which a thief could sneak up. They don't live in fear and interpret world events in light of God's prophecy. In a way, the worse things get, the better because it means the Day of Lord is closer all the time.

For instance, America seems to be being lead down the path of socialism and weakness. Well, if there is going to be one world government America has to fall at least to the point of submitting to the Anti-Christ. We don't like this direction for the country we love and are proud of, but we like the plan and purpose of God more. So we seek right and seek doing right and seek revival, yet we are calm as we trust God as He sums up everything in Christ and carries out His perfect plan.

It isn't a laid back carefree life however. Being children of light means being alert and sober, clad in faith, love, and the hope of salvation. We are confident that our future is salvation through Jesus and whatever happens we will live together with Him. There is a rugged disciple's life to which we are called. We don't have the luxury of participating in the ways of the world. Their sensuality, drunkenness, rebellion, and indifference to God ought not come anywhere near the household of faith. We are to come out from among them and be separated unto God because we don't own ourselves, we are His possession paid for with the blood of Jesus.

So instead of partying and spending what God has given us on worldly lusts, we must be sober and focused, looking for every opportunity to bring people to Jesus even as we constantly encourage and build up each other in the faith.

Jude spoke of the need for caution and commitment in light of the infiltration of apostates who seek through sensuality to tear the church apart:

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some, who are doubting; 23 save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. 24 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

The future is great and bright, walk in the light of your hope!

The Things That Make A Church Great

14. Life's Basics — 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

12 But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 14 We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. 16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

Now a little encouragement in family matters. As Paul approached the conclusion of his letter he put down some reminders about the practicalities of living in the Spirit. Some people come to a level of understanding that gives them a vocabulary of spirituality, but in reality they are still living according to the flesh. The teaching here indicates how believers relate when they are actually surrendered to the Holy Spirit and Jesus is truly their life.

First, attitude toward pastors or elders. These are men whom God has called to be servant leaders among His people. They have a stewardship for which they will give an accounting one day. Their leadership should be respected, appreciated, loved, and followed. They are not autocrats, but under-shepherds who must serve with gentleness and humility. 1 Corinthians 3 explains the purifying fire that will try the works of pastors. They are accountable for everything that goes on in the church and the fire will prove the value of what happened while they were in their position.

Some day to day instructions include living in peace with each other. This is a choice — you can at any moment with anyone go down the path of peace or the path of conflict and those who do the latter need to be admonished. A “chip on the shoulder” attitude doesn’t come from God, honor God, or accomplish His purpose.

Some people need special and extra encouragement because they are fainthearted. They have enough character to commit but not always enough to see it through to the end. The church needs some Barnabases to come along side and comfort and strengthen the weak. And whether a person is weak or strong they need to be handled with patience — an attitude that expresses calm support while someone makes their journey.

Two more things: never repay evil for evil, but always seek the good for each other and everyone. People make mistakes and say and do things that really hurt. It’s how you react that determines the final outcome. Giving someone and their behavior to God so that He can do the right thing will result in good. Taking revenge or spreading slander and gossip will harm the work of Christ.

The personal, private life instructions call for constant joy, prayer and thanksgiving because these are God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. The wording makes it clear that these all come from Him. Your soul may feel anything but joyful, or like praying, and especially giving thanks at some moment, yet if you surrender to the Holy Spirit and call on Jesus to live through you, you will suddenly have joy that fills and flows in and through you. You have the faith you need to pray and the appreciation you feel to give thanks.

So don’t quench the Spirit. That means don’t resist, argue, belittle, or ignore the Spirit’s work in you, instead cooperate and yield yourself to Him so that He can do His perfect work in you. Then what comes out of your mouth will be sweet and will build up the people who hear you speak.

Be ready to receive preaching and teaching as you look to God to give you something you need to take your next step with Him. Be sure to stay alert as you listen — compare what you are hearing with the Word of God and grab hold of the good stuff. Just as you are taking many things put every form of evil out. Don’t make the mistake of mixing good and evil, but let the Holy Spirit guide you into all the truth and away from all temptation. It is so blunting to have sin in your life. You feel distant from God, ashamed and weak. Come to the cross and let Jesus wash you clean. Then put the sin out of reach so you don’t fall again.

Galatians 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

The Things That Make A Church Great

15. The Guaranteed Conclusion — 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. 25 Brethren, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. 27 I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Verses twenty three and twenty four are the foundational hope of every Christians, but especially those who preach, teach, and lead in the church. Sometimes people in these positions become discouraged at the response of people. You can read the statements of pastors and leaders from any time period and hear almost identical complaints about disobedience, disinterest, unfaithfulness, etc. If a man submits to his feelings about such things he may give up and quit. The statistics say that 1500 pastors leave the ministry every month for causes ranging from moral failure to depression. Probably many of these men could have found the strength and hope that they needed right here.

Verse twenty three is a prayer: *May You, Yourself God totally sanctify every person in my ministry to where they are preserved complete in body, soul, and spirit so that they are without blame at the coming of Jesus.* When that prayer is answered all complaints are settled because everyone will be living a great Christian life. Total sanctification is achievable only in heaven, but it's possible to get real close while still here. Being blameless when Jesus comes speaks of a good level of achievement. This is what every person needs to pray over the people they minister to. There's no need sinking into depression and feeling like a failure. Believe God for what He can do.

Verse twenty four is the hope connected to the request. Paul said, *"I know this is going to happen because God is faithful and He will bring my prayer to pass!"* He told the church, you can be human and have your up's and down's but in the end you are going to be saints in practicality and then in permanence. That's a good word for all church-related relationships. Spouses need to look at each other in this hopeful way, parents view their children and children their parents, people in the church see each other this way and a lot of frustration and friction can be put to rest. Keep the big picture — the end is guaranteed.

So greet each other, read this letter to each other and live in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Don't forget that grace is: *The super-abundant supply of God Himself to you for the need of the moment.* Humble yourself, receive grace and walk in strength. Blessings!