I Thessalonians 1:8-10 "Qualities of a Great Church"

I. A GREAT CHURCH IS RECEPTIVE TO GOD’S WORD

Over the years I have preached in more than a dozen different churches, and I have found different levels of receptivity to the Word of God from church to church. I believe that our guest preachers have found that our church is receptive to the Word of God, at least among the active members. The Thessalonian Church was receptive to the Word of God. I think we see several of indications of this. First of all, in v.6 it says that they “received the word….” I pointed out last week that the word translated “received” (dechomai) means “to welcome,” the way you receive a guest. Then in v.9 Paul says, “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you…..” The words “what manner of entry” (hypoios eisodos) is a literal translation. The rest of the verse describes the impact of their message that they brought to the city. The same Gk. word in found in 2:1, “For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming (eisodos) to you was not in vain.” In other words, the preaching of the apostles was empowered and effective with some wonderful results. 2:13 explains why there were such wonderful results, “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed (dechomai) it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”

This also explains why there was such receptivity on the part of the people. Paul stated in v.8 of our text that it was “the Word of the Lord” that sounded out from them. This means a word from God, not a word about God. A great church understands that the Bible is the Word of God. This Thessalonian church understood that the apostles were proclaiming God’s Word. This was very important in their success at Thessalonica. If people think of the gospel only as another philosophy, or merely the reflection of religious thinkers, they will never have the burning zeal that sent the first Christian preachers through the world to proclaim what God had done for man. A
church that does not believe in the full authority of the Bible as the Word of God will never be
great for God. The growing churches of America are primarily those churches that fully believe
that the Bible is the Word of God. We understand that when God speaks, man had better listen! In
fact, God spoke audibly very few times during the ministry of Jesus, but when He did speak He
said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7;

And so if we are going to have a great church, we must continue to give priority to the
ministry of the Word of God through preaching, teaching, and personal witnessing. We must also
be receptive to the Word. Recognize that this is God’s Word, and read it at home. When you come
to church, listen intently to it. Are you receptive to the Word of God? Do you welcome its message
into your hearts?

II. A GREAT CHURCH IS A CONVERTED CHURCH

It says in the last of v.9 that they “turned to God from idols…. “ “Turned” (epistrepheo) is a
standard term for conversion. In fact, the word translated, “turned” in v.9 is translated “converted”
on six occasions.¹ The analogy of conversion refers to a turning, a change of direction. The
Thessalonians certainly experienced a true conversion, a major about face in their lives. Their
conversion to Christ was the essential beginning point in becoming such a great church.

This point may seem unnecessary to mention, but there are many churches that do not even
believe in the necessity of a converted, born-again membership. But this is one of the fundamental
requirements of a personal relationship to God. Jesus said in John 3:3, “Most assuredly, I say to
you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus said in Mt. 18:3, “Truly I
say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom
of heaven” (NASB). Peter said in Acts 3:18, “Repent therefore, and be converted, that your sins may
be blotted out.” There must be a turning, and a real change in your life.

When God converts a man, he changes the entire person, not only the emotions, so that one
regrets his former manner of life, but also the mind and will are changed that leads to a change of
conduct. There is to be a decisive re-orientation of the whole of life. Paul wrote to the Corinthians,
“If any man be in Christ he is a new creation. Old things are passed away. Behold, all things
become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). That’s the way it was with the Thessalonians.

Have you been converted? One of the best ways we can tell that we have truly been saved is
when there has been a change in our lives. True repentance has taken place. Would I be able to tell
that you are converted? Well, the Thessalonians provide an example of the following evidences of
true conversion:

A. You Turn to God - I think it is significant that this is mentioned first. I believe that this
reflected the missionary method of the apostles. He did not go to Thessalonica preaching against
idolatry. Acts 19:37 says, “For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of
temples nor blasphemers of your goddess.” Paul preached the one true God, and Jesus Christ the
Son of God. As they turned to God, then they were able to turn away from idols.

I believe this applies to how we should minister to people who hold to other religions. You
don’t start off by attacking their religion. If you do, they will throw up their defenses and not listen
to what you have to say. Instead, present Christ! Paul said in 1 Cor. 2:2, “For I determined not to
know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” Win them to Christ, and then
they will be willing to give up their false religion. Romans 2:4 says “that the goodness of God leads

you to repentance.” Show them how good and loving God is.

I believe that turning to God implies a faith commitment. They turned to God & put their trust in Him. In fact, v.8 mentions their “faith toward God.” So a true conversion involves turning to God in faith. Notice what else is involved in a true conversion:

B. You Turn from Idols and Sin – That also was part of their conversion, according to the last of v.9. This is essentially the same thing as repentance, which is a change of mind that leads to a change of life. Repentance & faith go together. Paul mentions both in Acts 20:21. If a man doesn’t turn from his sin, it is because he hasn’t turned to Christ. So we see here that becoming a Christian involves a very definite break with non-Christian habits and your sinful past. After they turned to God, they realized that they must also turn from their idols and sin. There was no attempt to find a place for Christ alongside other gods. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. All other gods must be rejected. But only a relationship with God can help you turn from sin.

It must have been a momentous change, this turning away from the idols. Idolatry was not only found in the temples, but in government, business, amusement, labor, and social activities. The pagan world was built on the pattern of polytheism. It is not easy to reject gods which one has worshipped from the days of childhood, and one’s ancestors have worshipped. And we can well imagine that especially to the Thessalonians these deities had seemed very real, for it must be borne in mind that Mt. Olympus, whose celebrated summit was considered the home of the gods, was close by, only about 15 miles to the S.W.

Why did they turn to God from idols? They discovered that the God of the Jews was the “living & true” God. Their former gods were made of metal or stone; but He is the living God. Here “true” (alethinos) has a meaning similar to “genuine.” Its opposite is not so much “false” as “unreal.” So there is an implied contrast between the living and true God, and their former counterfeit gods. Their eyes had been opened, so that they saw that their idols were vanities. They are unreal, he is real, genuine. Paul is affirming that the converts had begun to worship a real God in contrast to the shadowy and unreal beings which had previously claimed their allegiance. Is your God real? Does He walk with you each day?

They say that the best way to spot a counterfeit is to know the real thing. Once they turned to the true God, and came to know Him, they did not have too much problem turning from idols.

Have you turned from idols? Our idols are different today. Our idols may take the form of modern conveniences, or materialism, or luxury, or public acclaim, or self-worship. An idol is something that takes the place of God in your heart, including any sin that you refuse to turn from. Have you turned from sin?

C. You Begin to Serve God – Notice in the last of v.9 that another aspect of their conversion was “to serve the living and true God.” A great church is made up of Christians who are actively serving God. A church full of pew warmers will never be a great church. And the word translated “serve” (douleuo) is actually the verb form of the word “slave.” We are to serve God by obeying His will for our lives.

Are you serving God in some ministry of the church? There are plenty of opportunities. If you are not serving in one or more of our ministries, can you say that you are serving God in some other way? If not, can you say that you are truly converted?

III. A GREAT CHURCH SOUNDS FORTH THE WORD OF GOD

V.8 says, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” Here Paul uses an illustration or analogy to describe how the
Word of God went forth from their church. The word translated “sounded forth” (execheomai) literally means “to sound out.” Here these Thessalonian Christians are compared to a sounding board that reinforces sounds and causes them to travel in various directions. The sounding-board of an acoustical guitar does not of itself create the sounds. It receives them, reinforces them, and sends them on. A horned instrument does the same thing. The sound created by the vibrating lips into a mouthpiece is very small in volume. But with the help of the horn, its sound is magnified and sent forth. [I could demonstrate with the trombone].

Even so, we do not create the message. We are simply to sound it forth to a world that needs to hear the gospel. God has spoken, but this world will not hear His Word apart from Christians serving as sounding boards! The Thessalonians were so excited about their new-found faith that they actively spread the word concerning their faith in Jesus Christ. It was not just a meek and mild reporting of something that took place, but a shouting at the top of their voices. The church is to be a trumpet declaring God’s Word to a lost world.

Furthermore, the context makes it clear that their message was backed up by the way the Gospel changed their own lives. John R. W. Stott notes, “No church can spread the gospel with any degree of integrity, let alone credibility, unless it has been visibly changed by the gospel it preaches.”

Note also the extent of their sounding forth the Word of the Lord. In v.8 Paul said that “the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” Paul was impressed concerning the extent to which the message of God’s grace had traveled. It would have been enough that the Word of the Lord had sounded forth in Greece, known then as Macedonia and Achaia. But their faith toward God had even sounded forth “in every place.” No doubt Paul used hyperbole here. But I do believe that in every other place where a Christian church had been established, namely Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor, they heard the news of what had happened in Thessalonica. This was partly due to the location of this church. Thessalonica was a populated trading center, located along an important highway that connected east & west. It also had a sea port. News could spread very quickly from that city to regions far and near. By the way, it is important to establish a church near major roads.

You may remember that the great evangelistic crusade the Apostle Paul had in Thessalonica ended in a riot (Acts 17:5). Common sense would have told these Christians, “Don’t get too excited. You’re liable to get in trouble if you don’t keep your faith quiet.” But rather than withdrawing into themselves, they boldly declared that Jesus Christ had changed their lives.

Any church that is going to be great needs to sound forth the Word of God, and not be ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16). How are we sounding forth the Word of God? We are doing that with our TV ministry. We are doing that through the Internet. But there is no better way to sound forth the Word of God than with a personal witness. Are you sharing the Word of God with others? Are you telling others what Christ has done in your life? Are you at least inviting people to church, where they will hear the Word of God?

Jim Davis and I visited yesterday to invite people to our upcoming revival. He mentioned that he and Jan were in a store where they sold vacuum cleaners. They invited the salesman to our church, and he expressed an interest. He acknowledged that he needed to find a church home.

We cannot be a great church unless we sound forth the Word of the Lord.

Finally, another quality of a great church is this:

IV. A GREAT CHURCH EAGERLY WAITS FOR THE RETURN OF JESUS

V. 10 indicates that another aspect of their conversion was that they were “to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to
come.” It seems that it was especially the teaching with reference to Christ’s return upon the clouds of heaven that had captivated the minds and hearts of the readers. I believe great and growing churches preach, sing, and talk about the return of Christ. Oh, how we ought to long for the return of Jesus. There will be no peace until the Prince of Peace reigns upon the throne of this world.

Now I want to share 4 truths about the return of Christ based on this verse of Scripture:

A. We Should Wait With Patience & Trust - The word translated “to wait” (anemeno) is found only here in the New Testament. It means “to wait for someone with patience and trust that he is coming.”

[Use illus. of a girl’s date arriving].

The church has been waiting for the return of Jesus for almost 2,000 years now. Perhaps some have given up. Unbelievers even mock the preaching of his return. But Christians still believe that Jesus is coming again, and His return may be soon. We will never doubt His promise. Notice in v.10 that God raised Jesus from the dead. He is alive and lives forevermore! He will surely come again.

B. We Should Be Prepared for His Return - When you wait for the arrival of an important visitor, you make sure everything is prepared for his coming. There is a world of difference between waiting for someone with anticipation and waiting for someone with dread. These Christians were excited about Jesus coming back again because they were prepared for His return. They were saved, and they were being sanctified.

Do you look forward to the return of Christ? You’re attitude toward the 2nd Coming implies quite a bit about your relationship to the Lord. The apostle John said, “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming” (I John 2:28; cf. 3:3). A worldly Christian is not looking for the return of Christ, because they love this world too much.

C. We Should Anticipate the Purpose of His Return – This is stated in the last of v.10. There it says that Jesus “delivers us from the wrath to come.” “Delivers” (rhoumai) means to rescue. The wrath of God is coming to this godless, sinful world, and Jesus will come and rescue us from it. Likewise, Paul said later in 1 Thess. 5:9, “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” These verses may be an example of one of the stronger arguments for the pretribulational rapture position. It’s great to know that God has saved us from wrath.

By the way, the word “delivers” is not a future tense but a present tense. It could be a prophetic present, where something in the future is so certain that it is described as already in the process of happening. On the other hand, it could be a timeless present, similar to calling Jesus the “Deliverer.” He has delivered us, He is delivering us, and He shall deliver us from God’s wrath. Jesus is the only One who can deliver you from the wrath to come, for He is the only One who died for your sins.

D. We Should Warn of the Wrath to Come - There is wrath to come. He does not deliver all from the wrath to come, but only “us” who are saved. To all else, He will execute God’s wrath. This is made more clear from 2 Thess. 1:8-9, “in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do

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2 Actually, the Greek is “out of,” from “from.”
3 However, this is true on 2 assumptions: God’s wrath is poured out during most or all of the tribulation period, and Christians are not protected from God’s wrath by any other means than rapture.
not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power....” In the book of Revelation, it is Jesus who opens the 7 seals, which ultimately leads to the outpouring of the wrath of God. The idea of God’s wrath is unwelcome to many modern people, and many attempt to get rid of the whole idea. Some try to make a contrast between the God of Wrath of the Old Testament, and the God of love in the New Testament. But wrath is explicitly linked with God many times in the New Testament as well (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18; 9:22; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; Rev. 11:18; 19:15; 14:10, 19). Are we to think of God as not caring about sin? A holy God cannot tolerate evil.

One reason people reject the notion of the wrath of God is because of the way we associate the idea with the imperfections of human wrath. Human wrath is filled with personal vindictiveness. Human wrath is emotional and capricious; you never know when it is going to flare up. But God’s wrath is a perfect wrath. It is never unjust, always right and equitable. It is His righteous judgment against sin (cf. Rom. 2:5, 8).

Notice also it is the “wrath to come.” People can sin and apparently get by with it, at least for a while. But no lost sinner will escape “the wrath to come.”

Conclusion: Folks, God’s wrath is coming to this world. Will you be saved from it? Only if you have been converted like these Thessalonian believers. Have you turned to Jesus Christ, trusting in His death on the cross for your sins? Have you turned from your sins, and any idols in your life? If not, why not do so today?

Today I have shared 4 qualities of a great church: I. A great church is receptive to God’s Word. II. A great church is a converted church. III. A great church sounds forth the Word of God. IV. A great church eagerly waits for the return of Jesus. Let’s make each statement personal. Are you receptive to God’s Word? Are you converted? Do you sound forth the Word of God? Do you eagerly wait for the return of Jesus? Are you doing your part to help us become a great church?


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