

Help For The Thessalonians

I wonder why we call the inhabitants of Thessalonica *Thessalonians* instead of *Thessalonians*!

Paul was just getting started with his successful evangelism in Thessalonica when opposition was aroused. He was asked to leave town abruptly. The scriptures do not tell us all about how he tried to help them after that, but I have come upon some of that previously unknown information. It is new to you, for I am just now telling about it! ☺ .

Before sharing this new information, let us review the circumstances of Paul's work among the Thessalonians. On his second tour he came "over into Macedonia" to Philippi with Silas, Luke, and probably Timothy. After being jailed there, Paul was asked to leave. So he went to Thessalonica (Acts 17) a large city of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. Teaching in the synagogue for three weeks, he converted *some Jews, a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women*. In the few weeks of his work there he received some support from Philippi and did manual labor to supplement his income.

Unbelieving Jews stirred up a crowd against them so that Paul and Silas were sent away to Beroea. When the mob failed to find Paul, they attacked the house of Jason where he had been staying, dragged Jason before the officials who arrested him and others, then released them after bail was made. Paul went on from Beroea to Athens and to Corinth where he was joined by his companions. Timothy brought a report about the disciples in Thessalonica. That is when Paul wrote to them, however, he had already written several letters in their behalf.

He had written a letter to Jerusalem telling of the great success he had in converting those in Thessalonica. He explained how he had to leave them as helpless spiritual babes so soon after their conversion. Now, to help save that new congregation, he pled with the Judean brethren to send money to help them build a building. They would have no place to meet and no visibility without a building. Due to the culture of the city, it should be a structure that would impress the citizens and give an appearance of permanence. So please send help immediately.

To Antioch Paul wrote a very urgent letter. He explained how he had been forced to leave the infant congregation and how fragile their situation was with no preacher to take care of them. Besides, it was such a fertile field of a cosmopolitan nature with Romans, Greeks, and Jews willing to hear the message. So he urged the disciples in Antioch to send them a preacher. Yes, he understood that such an expenditure was not in their budget, but they should be willing to sell their jewelry and other property and give unselfishly to save these people. They could not excuse themselves before God if they failed to send them a preacher.

The church in Antioch was further exhorted to support the man liberally so that he could live in the style of success, a thing of importance in the culture of Thessalonica. Paul told them that he himself had been forced to make tents while there. He tried to keep that hidden from them for it would seem that his mission was of little importance if no one sponsored him in it. How could he present himself to them as an apostle – the apostle to the Gentiles – when he had to pay his own way? We must become all things to all men, he explained, for the sake of winning souls to Christ. So send a preacher immediately and support him well.

Paul also wrote to those admirable disciples in Philippi. He told them of a young man, Urbanus, among the new converts in Thessalonica who had a strong desire to preach to the people in Persia. He aspired to attend the School of Preaching in Antioch to learn to preach, but he had no finances. Paul made an emotional appeal to those in Philippi to support Urbanus with his wife and three children for two years of training in Antioch. There his skills would be developed and he would be taught all the true doctrines that would insure his right direction as a preacher for the church of Christ. Then he could be a great influence among the Gentiles in Persia.

Then Paul wrote his letter to those whom he had left in Thessalonica in spiritual infancy. He urged them to study their Bibles every day to learn and follow the simple New Testament pattern in everything they did. They were to be sure that every one of them assembled every first day of every week to partake of the Lord's Supper and to lay by in store of their income. He emphasized that the fruit of the vine be unfermented, red grape juice and the cracker – uh, the bread -- be unleavened. They were cautioned that the public leadership in the assembly was to be by males only with all things done in a decorous manner that allowed no uplifting of hands, loud praises, clapping of hands in approval, or singing that involved less than the whole congregation. And this most serious pitfall must be avoided at all costs: there should be no instrumental accompaniment to the singing. All who might disregard any of these things mentioned should be admonished quickly and severely. If any persisted in this abandonment of practice of the true church of Christ, they should be publicly rejected from the fellowship. The true pattern must be followed even at the cost of division. Any deviation from these authorized things would bring eternal damnation to the whole congregation. Those were the things Jesus died to institute.

My indirect style in the above writing is not even subtle enough to veil my points. My bluntness might be offensive to you. If I have aroused your disfavor, however, it is likely because you see that I am focusing on traditional misconceptions under which you still labor. In all sincerity, we have developed a misdirected system of religion with emphasis on wrong things. If we really knew the truth about it all, we might learn that the believers continued to meet in the synagogue as usual, the biggest difference being that they began to interpret all the Scriptures as being fulfilled in Christ. If they did not have access to the synagogue, their usual format was probably followed and adapted to Christian thought. Unfortunately, they had no Texas or Tennessee churches to use as models! ☺

Although the early disciples prayed, sang, taught, ministered to the needy, and communed together, there is no indication anywhere that these actions were all done in assemblies alone as parts of a system of worship. They became exercises shared in life situations whether in the home, social associations, or religious gatherings.

The Need of Professionals

In our time a congregation without a professional pulpiter, teacher, and servant is thought to be on the endangered list. Never mind that many in the group might have been disciples for many years, they still must have a professional to teach and direct them. Chances are that by the end of three years, they will want a change of preachers, but still they must have another for any hope of success.

Paul mentioned no need of those new converts having a trained professional. By this we are not concluding that teaching is not needed but we are reevaluating the matter in view of Paul's priorities for those new converts. We do not know how many congregations he left there, but he did convert many people, and **Paul left them in charge of their own affairs!**

Even though there is no record in the Scriptures of a church owning a building, we put most of our money into structures (and ministers' salaries) while claiming to do "*all things according to the pattern*" and observing "*the law of silence.*" According to our traditions, buildings are deemed necessary and to be one of the first needs of a congregation.

Our methods have not been modeled after those of the apostle. Even though the souls of all persons are equal before God, Paul did not stop to preach to those at the dock or in the fields along the way. He went among responsible and reputable leaders with his message. Because of that, when he went from them, they did not have to be nurtured and overseen as a *mission church* by a *sponsoring (mother) church*.

Are we saying that schooling is not of value for a preacher? Hardly. But what is the nature of the schooling? Is it to drill the student in all of *our* doctrinal positions so he can convert others to our set of doctrines? Or is it to help him learn how to present the grace of God through Jesus in an understandable and convincing manner? Yes, teaching about Jesus is doctrine, but there is no example of an evangelist teaching most of our identifying doctrines to a person before conversion. And they never got around later to teaching those things that we have emphasized that separate us from all other believers.

If Urbanus learned enough from Paul's preaching to become a disciple, then he knew enough to proclaim it to others. And he could start in Thessalonica rather than having to go to Persia. Are we promoting a Person or a system of religion so complicated that only a trained and scholarly professional can educate us in it properly?

Are we contending that assembling as a body is unimportant? Hardly. But what is the purpose of those meetings? Are they to keep commandments that show we are faithful to the Lord, or are they support groups to build and sustain our faith? There is a vast difference. We will ask it another way. Are they efforts to be righteous by works in keeping rituals, or are they efforts to sustain the faith through which we are accounted righteous as a gift? The restrictive and negative atmosphere often sponsored makes assemblies a burdensome effort to please God through right rituals. The free and joyous expression of worship and reaching out to one another make assemblies a source of encouragement.

Have you ever really looked at Paul's letter to that infant church to see what he emphasized? Such an investigation may be surprising. Here we will call attention to only a few references indicating the thrust of his letter. Remember, Paul and his companions had left them due to persecution. Later, out of anxiety for them, Paul had sent Timothy back to check on their welfare. Timothy's report thrilled Paul. So he wrote his letter.

"And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with **joy** inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became **an example** to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the **word of the Lord sounded forth from you** in Macedonia and Achaia, but your **faith in God has gone**

forth everywhere, **so that we need not say anything**” (1:7f). They could take care of their own affairs!

“But concerning love of the brethren, **you have no need to have any one write to you**, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed **you do love all the brethren** throughout Macedonia. But we exhort you, brethren, **to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody**” (4:9-12). Earlier in the chapter he urged them to live **moral, holy lives**. In 3:3 he exhorted “that no one be moved by these **afflictions**.”

The discouragement of the apostle gave way to joy at the news concerning those new converts. He almost shouts with his pen, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy” (2:19).

Need I elaborate on the difference in Paul’s methods and those commonly thought to be necessary today? Can you not agree that we have based our church identity on erroneous over-emphasis of certain points? Have we not developed a system of religion that overshadows the personal relationship with God?

Perhaps you like to watch the Portland Trailblazers play basketball or the Dallas Cowboys play football. But those athletes are not *playing*! They are *working*! Kids *play* these games in the back yard or at school. They play for the and personal involvement and enjoyment. But the sports industry has become big business demanding rigid organization, much money, and professional workers, and thereby the essence of *play* is lost in the process. Our participation in sports becomes dependent upon, first, a rigid organization (business), then a stadium, professional players (workers), and paying spectators whose support is greatly determined by the win/loss record of the business.

Does that sound a bit like our participation in religion? If I let you make your own applications of the foregoing, you cannot be upset with me! So there you have it! []