

A MODEL REPUTATION

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, September 25, 2011

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 (1 Thess. 1:8).

Few accolades are more meaningful than to be told “well done” by a trusted and admired leader. Of all the churches to which the apostle Paul wrote his letters in the New Testament, the Thessalonians received his most enthusiastic praise. What a blessing it was to Paul, whose second missionary journey had now reached its terminus at Corinth, to receive the heartening news that his labor in that strategic city of Northern Greece had born such strong fruit. As he puts it later in this letter, “Now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord” (1 Thess. 3:8). He writes, therefore, to share his joy and to praise their faith.

Paul’s praise for the Thessalonians is also heartening to readers of this letter. Many Christians today sense that the church has lost touch with the spirit that animated the early believers. We have not lost our access, however, to record of those first Christians, so their example may still instruct and inspire us. Paul’s praise for the Thessalonians is especially important, since he sees this church, above all others, as a model for others. So fully did Paul approve of their reputation that he could respond, “we need not say anything” (1 Thess. 1:8), since their actions said enough. In the last three verses of this opening section of Paul’s letter, he notes three characteristics that made their reputation so commendable: there’s was a *gospel-spreading*, a *God-serving*, and a *Christ-awaiting* reputation. If we will follow this model, we may gain not only the praise of the Lord’s servants but also a strong assurance of Christ’s saving presence in our midst.

A GOSPEL-SPREADING REPUTATION

Paul had heard, first, about the Thessalonians' *gospel-spreading* reputation because "the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:8). Apparently, even before Timothy had returned with his report from Thessalonica, news had come to Paul down the great Egnatian Way, the main east-west corridor of the Roman Empire, that ran straight through that city. Paul had met traveling Christians like Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth who brought reports of the wider world. Since Paul says their "faith in God has gone everywhere" (1 Thess. 1:8), many such travelers would have passed on the gospel-spreading reputation of this church.

Paul says that "the gospel of the Lord sounded forth" from the Thessalonians. This means that their witness to the person and work of Christ was being heralded throughout the ancient world. Paul compares their gospel proclamation to a trumpet blast that summons people to attention. F. F. Bruce comments: "Having received the gospel, the Thessalonian Christians had no thought of keeping it to themselves; by word and life they made it known to others."¹

Paul's praise for this witness completes his threefold description of how the gospel spread in Northern Greece: the gospel came to them through the apostle's preaching (1 Thess. 1:5), the Thessalonians "received the word" (1 Thess. 1:6), and now "the word of the Lord sounded forth from you" to others (1 Thess. 1:8). God intends for the gospel to spread in this manner through every church and every Christian life. John Stott compares a gospel-spreading church to a "telecommunications satellite which first receives and then transmits messages." This is, Stott asserts, "God's simplest plan for world evangelization," and every church is to play its part.²

We should note that it was not just any witness that they gave. It was the "word of the Lord" that they received and spread. It was their belief that the gospel is the very Word of God that empowered their witness. We too must be completely persuaded about the divine

¹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 45 (Dallas, Word: 1982), 16-17.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 43.

character of the Bible if we are to have a similar impact. This is why attacks on the divine character and inerrancy of Scripture always weaken the church and its witness. Leon Morris writes: “If men think of the gospel only as another philosophy, as the result of the reflection of certain, admittedly profound, first-century thinkers on religious topics, they will never have the burning zeal which sent the first Christian preachers through the world to proclaim what God had done for man.”³ Only if we, like them, are persuaded that we have received by grace an authoritative, true Word of salvation from God will we readily suffer scorn and give without apology or permission a bold witness of gospel light into the darkness of our world. Moreover, when Paul speaks of the word “of the Lord” he is referring specifically to Jesus, so that a truly apostolic witness will not only be biblical in a general sense but will center on the biblical testimony to Jesus as God’s Son and the Savior of the world through the blood of his cross.

As word spread though Greece and beyond about the Thessalonian Christians, the news told not only of their message but also of their faith in it. When Paul says that the gospel sounded forth from them, he added, “your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything” (1 Thess. 1:8). This reputation for faith in God must have begun at home. Husbands must have been astonished at the new conduct of their wives who had converted to Christ. Friends and neighbors commented on the new priorities seen among those who embraced the gospel. So profound was the change among so many people that news of a significant event in Thessalonica began spreading. Especially when the Christians would not give up their faith in the midst of persecution, but responded to trials with a steadfast hope (1 Thess. 1:3) and the “joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:5), more and more people took notice of these believers in Jesus. Only with the testimony of faith that the Thessalonians gave, showing the power of the gospel they preached, can any Christians sound forth the word of the Lord with real credibility and integrity.

³ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 61.

This first item in the Thessalonians' reputation prompts us to ask if something similar could be said of us. As a church, would people be struck by our persuasion that the Bible is God's very Word that declares salvation through his Son Jesus? We might ask what we desire to be known for: our social standing, our cultural refinement, our trendy sophistication, or our biblical fervor and faithfulness? Here is a reputation for preachers to seek: not a reputation for humor, oratorical refinement, or good story-telling but as a bold and faithful herald of the divine truth revealed in Scripture about Jesus Christ. As individual Christians, what kind of reputation do we desire? If we would be regarded as spreaders of the gospel, then we will prayerfully seek to be Christians who enlighten, encourage, and challenge others by our living testimony to the Word of the Lord.

A GOD-SERVING REPUTATION

S econd, the Thessalonians had gained a reputation as a *God-serving* church: "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). John Stott describes this verse as presenting "the fullest account of [Christian conversion] in the New Testament."⁴

The Thessalonians' conversion began with the manner in which they received Paul and his associates. How people receive a sincere ministry of God's Word largely determines their spiritual state. Today there are churches that claim the name of Jesus but resist clear and faithful Bible teaching. Such Christians are not likely to advance far in godliness or make much real spiritual impact, however much outward success they may enjoy. Instead, humble Christians who rejoice to have God's Word opened and who respect faithful Christian leaders are most likely to make a lasting gospel impact on their times.

As Paul preached the Scriptures in Thessalonica, many who heard his message were converted to faith in Christ. Verse 9 sets forth in clear language what this conversion entailed: "you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." Notice how the early Christians understood that becoming a Christian requires a definite and radical

⁴ Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 38.

break with one's former life and lifestyle. Paul's statement indicates that a great many of the Thessalonian believers were converted out of pagan idolatry, rather than from Judaism. They realized that they could not place Christ alongside the idols of their former lives. The Thessalonians recognized that embracing Christ required a revolution in their worship and service; the early Christians saw a basic antithesis that required them to turn to God from the idolatrous culture around them and embrace a distinctive and biblical Christian approach to life, worship, and ministry.

Starting in the apostolic age, the history of Christian missions has witnessed the rejection of false and enslaving gods for the worship of "the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). With this phrase, Paul was pointing out that idols are false deities who neither possess nor can give life. Idols are themselves dead, whereas the true God is the author and giver of life. Still, idols may possess a powerful hold on the mind and heart, through superstitious habit or the bondage of fear and desire. John Stott records a letter written by a Burmese evangelist who explained what converting to Christ required among tribesmen who were formerly dominated by animist spirits:

We explained to them the pure simple gospel and Christ's lordship over the devil and all evil forces, after which they were counseled to confess and forsake their evil deeds and to receive Christ Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. With brokenness and tears and guilt they responded. Then we burned up the charms and amulets, took a wood-cutting knife, and broke down a spirit's house made of bamboo and wood, claiming the lordship of Jesus Christ, and singing Christ's victory songs, and putting all of ourselves under the blood of the Lamb of God and the rule of the Holy Spirit, and claiming God's protection.⁵

Paul's statement regarding the Thessalonians' rejection of idols is particularly poignant when we recognize that the peak of Mount Olympus, the supposed home of the Greek pantheon of gods, was visible from its location a bare fifty miles away. It is less easy, perhaps, for us to see the gods that faith in Christ requires us to renounce today. In his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller points out that while Americans will probably never encounter a shrine to

⁵ Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 40.

Athena, Aphrodite, Ares, or Artemis – some of the more prominent Greek gods – nonetheless our culture is deeply involved in the worship of the very things these idols represented. Keller explains:

Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. Each one has its shrines – whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios or stadiums – where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and ward off disaster. What are the gods of beauty, power, money, and achievement but these same things that have assumed mythic proportions in our individual lives and in our society? We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. We may not actually burn incense to Artemis, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige.⁶

An idol is anything that we trust and serve in the place of God. There is nothing wrong with desiring to be successful, but when success provides our identity, significance, and security, we have made it an idol. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with fitness and beauty, but when the focus of our lives is given to glorifying our physique and form, then we are worshiping an idol in the place of God. One of the most common forms of idolatry today is the worship of money and all that it can buy. Keller recounts a series of men in New York City who took their lives during the financial crises of 2008. Their spirits had been broken and they could see no reason to continue living without their wealth. These people despaired over their loss of money – as others despair over lost relationships, an inability to lose weight, or the career success we crave – because they had made good things into ultimate things.⁷ “An idol is something we cannot live without. We must have it, and therefore it drives us to break rules we once

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xi-xii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

honored, to harm others and even ourselves in order to get it. Idols are spiritual addictions that lead to terrible evil.”⁸

For this reason, Paul not only saw the rejection of idols as necessary to Christian conversion but also as part of the deliverance that Christ achieves in our salvation. Believing the gospel and embracing Jesus involves a change of the will from trusting, worshiping, and serving false gods to a new faith in which God is trusted, worshiped, and served through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Just like the converted animists of Burma who “turned to God from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9), we must claim the lordship of Christ, put ourselves under his blood, trust in the Holy Spirit’s power, and claim God’s Fatherly protection for our salvation.

Along with the negative movement of turning from idols, conversion to Christ involves the positive step of submitting ourselves to a life of serving God. Christ is now not only our Savior but also our Lord and Master. He called us to service, saying: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt. 11:29). Jesus also said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23). John Calvin wrote: “No one, therefore, is properly converted to God, but the man who has learned to place himself wholly under subjection to him.”⁹ The living God both gives and commands life; the true God calls his people into the service of truth. Having rejected the idols, we now are to trust, worship, and serve God above all others.

Here, again, we have a diagnostic question with which to assess ourselves. Do we have a reputation for being radically converted to God and his ways, forsaking the idols of our generation? As individuals, do those who know us see a clear rejection of worldly values and a deliberate commitment to the liberating service of God? If we have such a reputation, it will be evident in how we spend our

⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁹ *Commentaries*, 245.

time, use our money, and offer our talents and energies so that we pursue a decidedly biblical lifestyle as servants of the Lord.

A CHRIST-AWAITING REPUTATION

The third component of the Thessalonians' exemplary reputation was that they were a *Christ-awaiting* church. Paul concludes this opening section of his letter, writing that they turned to God in order "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10).

The word that Paul uses for "wait" (*anameno*) appears only here in the New Testament. It conveys the idea of patient expectation and trust. The Thessalonian Christians were gospel-spreading and God-serving believers who were persuaded that Christ would soon return to bring the fullness of the salvation for which they longed.

This waiting has a passive component, in that the early Christians did not expect to achieve salvation through their own witness and ministry. They were counting on Jesus – the same Savior who died for their sins – to return in glory to deliver them from evil. Paul writes later in this letter to assure them they have not missed the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:1ff). Although they were right to expect Christ' return to come soon, they should also realize that God's timing is not known to man (1 Thess. 5:2). With this in mind, the Thessalonians were to live with an eye on the horizon, waiting for Jesus to return and give them victory over the world.

At the same, the waiting of which Paul speaks has an important active component. While they were anticipating Jesus' return they readied themselves to greet him. William Hendriksen writes: "When you await a visitor, you have prepared everything for his coming. You have arranged the guest-room, the program of activities, your time and your other duties, and all this in such a manner that the visitor will feel perfectly at home. So also, awaiting the very Son of God who is coming out of the heavens implies the sanctified heart and life."¹⁰ As this description suggests, Christians are awaiting not merely the coming of heaven on earth but we are waiting for Christ himself, who

¹⁰ Hendriksen, 57.

is coming for us. Jesus spoke this way to the disciples before departing for the cross: “if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (Jn. 14:3). The heaven for which we wait is bound up in the person of Jesus, and our expectation is fixed on him who comes to take us not merely to heaven but to himself in glory.

Paul goes on to cite a good reason for Christians to believe in Christ’s return. He speaks of God’s Son from heaven “whom he raised from the dead” (1 Thess. 1:10). The Christian hope of the divine Son returning with salvation would be preposterous were it not joined to the doctrine of Christ’s resurrection. If the Father promised to raise his Son and fulfilled this most unlikely pledge, then God’s promise to send Jesus back is equally worthy of being believed and trusted. Moreover, Paul wrote in Romans 1:4 that the resurrection publicly declared Christ’s divine Sonship. In his sovereign omnipotence, the Son of God is able to return from heaven to bring salvation to his people forever.

To go with this reason to *believe*, Paul adds a reason for us to *hope* in Christ’s return with great joy and expectation, saying that we wait for “Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). Jesus’ first coming had the aim of redeeming us from our sins by his blood. His second coming completes that salvation by actually delivering us from the sphere and power of everything cursed by sin. Hebrews 9:28 promises: “Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

Jesus died on the cross to remove the guilt and curse of sin from his people. He returns to deliver us from the reality of God’s wrath in the final judgment. God’s wrath is not a capricious, sinful outburst of anger but rather God’s right, just, holy, and burning resolve to punish all evil. Apart from his wrath, God would be unworthy of our worship, since then he would be a deity who tolerated evil and rebellion against his sovereign rights. As sinners we tend to dread even the thought of divine wrath against sin. Trusting in Jesus, however, we face God without fear, since he has paid the penalty of our sins by bearing them on the cross and he is coming soon fully to deliver us “from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10).

With nothing to fear from God’s judgment and literally everything to gain, believers in Christ look forward to his return with a great hope. Paul therefore calls the return of Christ “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:11-13). Jesus comes to enter us into his glory, which we anticipate now with a great longing, gaining courage and strength to face this dark world. Whatever sorrows we have here, in the age to come we shall know only the peace and joy of Christ. Then, as John’s vision declared, “He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Rev. 21:3-5).

This raises a final question to diagnose ourselves as a church and as individual believers. Is it evident to those who see us that we are depending on a power that is not of this earth but comes from heaven through our faith in Christ? Are we seeking rewards and storing treasures in heaven, where our riches never fail or fade? Or are we, as C. S. Lewis put it, “making sand castles as the tide is coming in,”¹¹ expending our lives on earthly glories that will not endure the coming of Christ and the holy judgment of God? Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21). Does our lifestyle give us the reputation of people whose treasure is most truly in the world to come, so that our thoughts, passions, and longings are directed to Christ who dwells there now?

WELL DONE!

The key to the Thessalonians’ faith, which gained accolades for their gospel-spreading, God-serving, and Christ-awaiting reputation is found in verse 6: “you received the word.” If we have believed the good news of Jesus as the message of salvation for the world, then surely we must spread it. If our heavenly Father is the living and true God, then we must turn from the dead and false gods in order to serve the Lord. And if Jesus is returning soon to bring

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*.

salvation – at the time of his own choosing, but from our perspective very soon – then surely we should await his coming and prepare ourselves for the greatest moment in our entire future to come: our meeting in the flesh with the Son of God, who returns to take us to himself.

It would be a fine thing to have a reputation among the churches like that of the Thessalonians. It would be an especially high honor to receive the kind of praise this church received from no less than the apostle Paul. Yet we await the coming of one who is infinitely higher than the choicest of his human servants, who will call us to give an account of our service to him in this life.

Jesus foretold such a future interview in his parable of the talents. The Lord had given each of his servants a certain amount of talent, gifts, and opportunities and he wanted to see how his followers had been serving him. Jesus concluded that a professing believer who did nothing for him while supposedly awaiting his return could only be a false believer who does not truly belong (Mt. 25:24-28). But to those who employed vigorously the gospel resources that Christ gave them – some greater and some lesser, but all important – and sincerely offered themselves to serve Christ’s glory and kingdom, Jesus had the word of praise every Christian should be seeking to hear when he returns. “Well done, good and faithful servant,” Jesus will say to everyone who spread the gospel, served God, and awaited his return, “Enter into the joy of your master” (Mt. 25:21).

Jesus, who died and was raised for our salvation, is coming soon, and then the reputation we have gained by his grace in this world will be the beginning of an eternal legacy through which, the Bible says, “those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).