

Giving Thanks for the Church?!

What are your thoughts about church? Yes, I know it is a general question, but I would guess that there are many who would not answer this question in a very positive way. I base this guess on the fact that so many people do not go to church. Some may be indifferent to the church, but others are quite vocal in their opinion that the church is old fashioned, hypocritical or holds on to outdated ideas. I would also guess that if you would ask why people are negative about the church, many of the reasons have to do with the people who make up the membership of the church. It may be because church people have caused them hurt or they see an obvious hypocrisy in the lives of church members. I surely do not want to justify unchristian behavior. Nor do I want to suggest that the church is made up of people who are better than others. On the contrary, church members are sinners too. Yet, I would like to challenge this negative perception of the church, using what we read in 1 Thessalonians 1 :1-3.

Paul and his helpers are very positive about the church in Thessalonica and its members. They make this clear in the way they open this letter. They mention how they pray for the Thessalonians and say “We always give thanks to God for all of you.” Isn’t that a positive approach; giving thanks to God for the church! Would you do that? Why would Paul and his helpers do this? Aren’t they aware that these members of the church at Thessalonica are sinners? Oh they are, but they do this because they see the church as the result of God’s work of grace in the lives of sinners.

Let's have a closer look at these verses. "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers." Who are these "you"? They are the members of the church at Thessalonica. This congregation is described in the opening words of this letter: "To the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Yes, this church is made up of people of flesh and blood, citizens of Thessalonica. But at the same time, this congregation, this gathering of believers is "*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" The preposition "in" points to a very close relationship between this congregation and God the Father. These words indicate that this congregation finds its origin in God. They are the result of God's work. This congregation can exist because of this close relationship. The life-line of this congregation is the bond with God the Father. A bond made possible through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why He is mentioned in this sentence as well. Without Christ, the church cannot have fellowship with God. But because Christ Jesus died for his people, he makes it possible for sinners to have fellowship with God. That is the amazing reality of the church, the church that lives from Christ and his Word.

Paul, Silas and Timothy worked in Thessalonica during Paul's second missionary journey. You can read about it in Acts 17. Paul had to leave the city earlier than he wanted due to unrest stirred up by those who were opposed to the gospel. Being unable to get back to the church after the unrest had settled down, Paul had sent his helper Timothy to find out how things were in the church at Thessalonica. Timothy had come back with wonderful news: the church in Thessalonica is still alive. Yes, they are facing hardship and opposition, however, in spite of this, the church is functioning well. Paul is very thankful when he hears that. He sees this as the work of God and he gives thanks to God. For note that Paul does not say:

“Congratulations people, you are doing amazingly well.” He is not attributing the existence of the church to human effort, but to the faithfulness of God. “We thank our God for all of you.”

For the church to be really church it has to be grounded in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And to understand what the church is all about we have to know what God is doing in Christ. The existence of the church is not the result of human efforts. In fact as soon as humans take the credit for the church and start to trust in their own efforts, the church loses its strength. But when we see it as the evidence of God’s work then we can give thanks when we see that his work continues.

Earlier I mentioned that the opinion of many people about the church is based on the members of the church, what they may have done, what they currently do or fail to do. We have seen that the Bible teaches us that the church is God’s work in Jesus Christ. But that does not leave the members and how they live out of view. The members of the church cannot live as they deem fit. On the contrary, they have to reflect the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have to give evidence that their existence is in God. The Bible makes this clear as well. We see when we pay attention to what Paul and his helpers give thanks for when they pray for the Thessalonians. We read in verse 3 “We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope.”

You will recognize in this sentence three familiar terms, which the Bible uses more often to describe the life of the believers: faith, love and hope. They are not always mentioned in the same order, but all three together describe the life of the members of the

church. Note, however, that in this verse something is added to these three terms. Paul and his helpers thank God for the work produced by faith, the labour prompted by love and the endurance inspired by hope. You see, that means faith, love and hope are active ingredients in the lives of believers. It is as if Paul says “In your work, in what you do, I see the source of it, namely your faith. Your labour, I know is prompted by love. The fact you can endure hardship is because of your hope.”

Faith to be true can never be unproductive. No, it makes a believer active. These Thessalonians had come to faith recently, and many things had changed in their lives. That was not easy. But they did it and that was the fruit of their faith. Their faith was active and it showed in their daily activities, in their work and in their family lives. In addition, as a result of their conversion they were living in new relationships, the spiritual family of the church. This also means to be a hand a foot to each other, to show love. To do this involves labour. But that labour is pushed or motivated by love, by the commitment to one another. And then there were the hardships the disappointments and the opposition. Why not give up? No, they persevered. What inspired their endurance? The hope of the gospel.

What a wonderful testimony of these believers. But is Paul not too optimistic? Oh he knows they are sinners, he will have to admonish them as well in this letter. But he can say this and thank God for it, because of the last words of verse 3: in our Lord Jesus Christ. Their faith, love and hope are the result of a living bond with the Lord Jesus Christ. Without a connection to Christ Jesus our Lord, it is impossible to have them. Why? Because of his work and his power. For he not only paid for the sins of his people, he also makes them live again as new people. By his Word and Holy Spirit he changes

hearts. I am a sinner and my faith falters, my love wanes and my hope can lose its shine. In Christ I know that my sins and shortcomings are covered by his obedience. He helps me to live a new life. That my faith is producing works, that my love is prompting my labour, that my hope inspires endurance in me, is his work in me. And that is why Paul gives thanks.

Do you give thanks for the church? True, when you look at the church from the point of view of people, you will be disappointed. But the Bible opens our eyes for God's work. Not only give thanks for it, be part of it! Why not come to church. You ask why? To be part of this work of God, to enjoy the blessings of his work for sinners like you and I. To be changed into faithful servants of the Lord.