

Do we acknowledge his death and resurrection as the only basis of our salvation?

Are his life and teachings the model by which we live, or have we (consciously or unconsciously) imported into our life and thinking some other model or values?

Do we seek to minister as his disciples?

Do we genuinely believe that the future will be defined by his return in glory?

Is he the Lord of all creation (Philippians 2.10 – 11), or do we view him as merely one more prophet or exalted master or spiritual guide of some sort?

**Are we a community empowered by the Holy Spirit?**

Are the power and gifts of the Spirit evident in our preaching, our evangelism, our ministering?

Are the joy and other fruits of the Spirit apparent in our fellowship?

Are we open to the leading of the Spirit?

It is important to note that the answer to this question is not as simple as charismatic versus non-charismatic, as if the exercise of a few particular spiritual gifts, or their corresponding absence, can indicate whether we are open to the power and leading of the Spirit.

It is just as possible for a church that exalts speaking in tongues and prophecy to miss the leading of the Spirit as it is for a church that thinks all the “sign” gifts ceased in the first century.

A more reliable indicator is the presence of the *fruit of the Spirit* and the exercise of those spiritual gifts intended for the building up of the body of Christ.

**Are we a community that bears witness to the gospel?**

Some congregations pride themselves on the way they consistently proclaim the gospel, but they undercut their witness by failing to live it as well.



**DO WE LIVE UP TO THE (OUR) NAME: COMMUNITY?**

1 Thessalonians chapter 1 is an amazing little section of Scripture about an amazing little church. In this chapter, the apostle Paul defines what community looks like, acts like, and thinks like. My question is, since “community” is part of our name, do we live up to this definition? Let’s review:

**It was a community rooted in God’s grace, love, and election..** Paul established this point in 1.1 (“in God the Father” and “grace”). Here he promotes God’s love and election. Election, as Bible scholar Klyne Snodgrass reminds us, is primarily about God. It is God’s grace, love, and mercy in action.

It demonstrates how much God values human beings and reminds us that God is in control. The church exists because God wants it to.

**It was a community committed to Jesus Christ.**

Jesus’ death and resurrection is the foundation upon which the church is based; he is the focus of our faith (1 Thessalonians 1.3); his life is the model by which the church now lives (1.6); and his coming from heaven (1.10) defines the future for which the church waits.

**It was a community empowered by the Holy Spirit.**

It was due to the evident power of the Holy Spirit in the preaching and lives

of the missionaries (1.5) that the Thessalonians became convinced that the gospel was not merely a human message, but was in fact what “it actually is, the word of God” (2.13).

In turn, the same Spirit is at work in the Thessalonians, giving them (even in the midst of difficult circumstances) joy (1.6) and empowering their own witness to others (7 – 8).

### **It was a community that bore witness to the gospel.**

There is no doubt the Thessalonian congregation was actively sharing the gospel they had received (1.8). What is important to notice is both *what* they were sharing and *how* they were doing it. Paul notes that not only the “Lord’s message” — that is, the good news about Jesus — had “sounded forth,” but also the Thessalonians’ “faith in God” — their response to the good news — had “*become known*.” In short, they were sharing both the good news about Jesus and the impact of that good news on their own lives. As for the “how,” Paul notes (1.9) that others were talking about what

the Thessalonians *did*: They turned from idols and served the true God. That means their behavior was consistent with, and testified to the reality of, their message. Following the example of Jesus (1.6) and the missionaries (1.5–6), they practiced what they preached. They walked the talk.

### **It was a community characterized by faith, love, and hope.**

Paul was not the only one impressed by the Thessalonians’ active faith (expressing their trust in what God has done), hard-working love (responding to what the Holy Spirit was doing), and patient, enduring hope (looking forward to what Jesus would do) (1.3). He specifically mentions that others (1.9) also were talking about their faith in God and their expectation of Jesus’ coming (1.8 – 10), and it seems likely that their love for the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia (4.10) was discussed as well.

### **It was a community clearly differentiated from other religions.**

By turning away from idols (1.9), the Thessalonian church was obviously

different from paganism. By proclaiming its allegiance to Jesus as resurrected Messiah, Lord, and Son of God (1.3, 6, 10), it distinguished itself from Judaism.

None of these characteristics appear to be in any way unique or limited to the Thessalonian congregation. This suggests that they may offer a yardstick or set of guidelines against which to evaluate our own church today. Even Paul himself observes in 1.7 that the Thessalonians had become a model for others.

One way to apply this passage to our situation is to take the observations about the Thessalonian congregation and turn them into a set of questions to ask about our church (and, for that matter, ourselves).

### **Are we a community rooted in God’s grace, love, and election?**

This question has implications in two directions. On the one hand, the fact that God loved us so much that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5.8) reminds us how highly God loves and values his church and

the believers who comprise it, despite our sin and failures.

This rules out, on the congregational level, “defeatist attitudes,” and on an individual level, “negative self-perceptions.” We have worth and value because God loves us. On the other hand, the fact that the church is rooted in God’s grace reminds us that the church does not even exist, and certainly has no life, apart from God and his saving work in Christ.

*This leaves no room for arrogance or pride, because grace is entirely God’s doing.* We had nothing to do with it, and have nothing for which to take credit or boast; all we can do is offer praise, glory, and thanks to God for what he has done.

### **Are we a community committed to Jesus Christ?**

Have we counted up the cost of following Jesus and decided that it really is worth bearing the cross (i.e. suffering) in order to be his disciple (see Luke 14.25 – 33)?

Others say they evangelize by the way they live the gospel, but they undercut their witness by failing to identify what is it they believe in and live for.

Here it is not a matter of *either-or*, but of *both-and*. The Thessalonians are our model in this regard: They were sharing both the good news about Jesus and also demonstrating the impact of that good news in their own lives. As 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.*”

At the same time, a congregation that claims that living the gospel excuses them from needing to proclaim it verbally runs the risk of being confused with other non-Christian groups that have similar lifestyles (e.g. the Mormons).

As the Heaven’s Gate cult mass suicide at Easter 1997 revealed, our neighbors—for that is what those people, who came from ordinary backgrounds and states across the United States, were—are desperate for

hope, so desperate that they are willing to believe virtually anything in order to get it.

We who have found a real hope in Jesus **must** share that hope with our desperately seeking neighbors, both by what we say and by how we live.

If all this is not happening in our church and in the lives of each member, then we need to figure out why it isn’t happening.

So, how are *we* doing?

How are *you* doing?

Let me know...

*Jack*



The Word of Truth

- April 5      ***Do you have: An Unquenchable Commitment to Sexual Purity?***      1 Thessalonians 4.1-12
- April 12     ***Do you have: An Unquenchable Hope for the Future?***      1 Thessalonians 4.13-18
- April 19     ***Do you have: An Unquenchable Passion for Changing Our Culture?***      1 Thessalonians 8.1-8
- April 26     ***Do you have: Unquenchable Encouragement?***      1 Thessalonians 5.9-28
- May 3        ***Do you have: An Unquenchable Determination to Persevere?***      2 Thessalonians 1.1-12
- May 10      ***Do you have: An Unquenchable Love for the Truth?***      2 Thessalonians 2.1-3.5
- May 17      ***Do you have: An Unquenchable Commitment to God’s Work?***      2 Thessalonians 3.6-18