

10. Church Life (3Q 2012—1 and 2 Thessalonians)

Biblical material: 1 Thess. 5:12–28, Matt. 5:43–48, Gal. 5:22, Phil. 4:4, John 15:4–6.

Quotes

- We don't *go* to church; we *are* the church. *Ernest Southcott*
- Church isn't where you meet. Church isn't a building. Church is what you do. Church is who you are. Church is the human outworking of the person of Jesus Christ. Let's not go to Church, let's be the Church. *Bridget Willard*
- The church is nothing but Christ displayed. *William Gurnall*
- Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God. *Lenny Bruce*
- The Christian church is not just a 'doctrine club'. *Paul Helm*
- There is a sense in which the people of the Lord are a people apart, belonging to each other in a sense in which they don't belong to anyone else. *A.W. Tozer*
- The saints are the walking pictures of God. *Thomas Watson*

Questions

Why is "living right" so important? Is it a question of meeting standards or what? How do we see this fitting into "church life"? What is "church life" anyway? How is this life different today compared to two thousand years ago? What does this mean to us individually? How can we view this from a bigger perspective? What is God looking for from us? How can we truly demonstrate the God we love in the kind of people we are?

Bible summary

1 Thess. 5:12-28 may be summarized very briefly by "do what's right!" Coming to the end of his letter Paul is concerned to fit in as much as possible or practical advice on how to live to the believers in Thessalonica. He wants them to experience the wonderful joy of a true Christian experience so he gives these rapid instructions like one-liners on what is important. Much more than "self-help," this is through the God of peace, the faithfulness of Jesus, and the fire of the Spirit. Jesus also provides a summary of how to live when he says, "Love your enemies!" (Matt. 5:43–48). Our "perfection" is summed up in the love that we have for those who are against us. For "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness." (Gal. 5:22 NIV). Our attitude is to be one of joy (Phil. 4:4), as we remain in Jesus as the branch remains in the vine (John 15:4-6).

Comment

When we think of "church" we think of a building. However in the New Testament "church" meant a community of believers. They had no church buildings—in fact for the first three hundred years, "church" was a persecuted group that met in homes. The word for "church" in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which simply meant some kind of gathering. It had no special religious significance. For example, in Acts 19:41 the mob that attacked Paul's friends in Ephesus is referred to as an *ekklesia* by the magistrate, and two verses earlier the same magistrate uses the same word *ekklesia* to refer to the legal assembly or council.

So in its original meaning it is simply an assembly or association of people, in this case of those who had common convictions about the gospel of Jesus. It is those who have assembled—have been “called out”—for a particular purpose. In this case it refers to the community of Christians, or as they were originally called, “followers of the Way.”

So to talk about “church life” for those early Christians would not have referred to what you did in a church building—it would have meant how you lived your Christian life in community with other fellow believers. This is what Paul is focussing on here as he writes to the Thessalonians. He is concerned to emphasize the positive aspects of how we live as followers of Jesus, doing what is right. Yes, we need to avoid the wrong, but it is not the negative things that predominate here. He wants a living, growing, enthusiastic community of believers, dedicated to the good: “Always be full of joy, never stop praying, be thankful in every situation—because this is what God in Christ Jesus wants you to do.” (1 Thess. 5:16-18 FBV).

In the same way Jesus himself gave advice on how to live: “So don’t worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ These are all the things that the heathen chase after, but your heavenly Father knows everything you need. Seek his kingdom first, and his way of doing right, and everything will be given to you. So don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow can worry about itself. There’s already enough evil in every day. Matthew 6:31-34 FBV. Wouldn’t that really be liberating—if we could truly live like that!

So what *does* God want? “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” Isaiah 1:16, 17 NIV. Instead of relying on some ritualistic system, *do right!* Instead of “taking care of sin” in some legal way, God tells his people to learn and accept the ways of *right doing* and *right being*.

Instead of a preoccupation with legal status, what is far more important in God’s eyes is a life that is lived right. He would far rather you spend time in doing right for others than in fulfilling what you believe are significant religious niceties. For you can be wholly wrong even as you try to observe the religious laws. How? Because of the way you are thinking.

What God is looking for is a meaningful relationship. He identifies what he really wants:

“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” Isaiah 66:2 NIV. Respect, honor, acceptance—a serious attitude that is thinking Godwards; not a blind following of the rules that will “fix” any problems with this demanding deity.

Some while ago we spent much time thinking about covenants in the Bible. Again, it is supremely significant to consider what kind of meaning we give to words like covenant. Is our relationship to God contractually-based, or is it more a question of principles?

Covenants are especially helpful for suspicious people. It provides some kind of guarantee, rather than simply trusting others to do the right and honorable thing. Trouble is, if we are doubtful or suspicious of God, and so want the covenant, what does that say about us and our relationship with God? Perhaps it is simply better to use the meaning of covenant as promises so that we do not become sidetracked by the contractual obligations concept.

A new kind of covenant is described by Jesus, and the same terminology is found in Hebrews 8. Here the quote is from Jeremiah 31:31-34—which in itself is interesting, for it shows that the “new” covenant is not so new after all! And what is the intent of this new covenant? It is clearly defined as *not* being like the previous covenant. It is to be based not on legal formulations and prescriptions, but on laws in minds and hearts—in other words, a relational covenant based on doing right because it is right, and is so recognized and accepted by thinking people. The intent, says God, is “that they will all know me.” This is not some ceremonial relationship, but one of individual, personal trust.

The way to live right is to stay close to God—to spend time with your heavenly Father, to think about the implications of the truth about God in your own personal life. If your thoughts about God and his loving grace do not make a difference in the way you live, what is the point? As the apostle John wrote, “Everyone who does what is right has been born of God.” (1 John 2:29 FBV.)

And if you need a summary, Jesus explained the law as love for God and love for your neighbor. James comments on this by saying: “If you really observe the royal law of Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” then you do well. (James 2:8 FBV.) This is Paul’s advice to the believers there in Thessalonica.

Ellen White Comments

Should not Christ have our first and highest consideration? Should He not demand this token of our respect and loyalty? These very things underlie our heart life, in the home circle, and in the church life. If the heart, the soul, the strength, the life, is surrendered wholly to God, if the affection is given wholly to Him, you will make God supreme in all your service. The result will be that you will have a sense of what it means to be a partner with Jesus Christ in the sacred firm. {CS 260.2}

Prayer is needed in the home life, in the church life, in the missionary life. The efficiency of earnest prayer is but feebly understood. Were the church faithful in prayer, she would not be found remiss in so many things; for faithfulness in calling upon God will bring rich returns. {1SM 116}

Who will be true to Him? Who will stand on guard day and night, maintaining a vital connection with God? The underlying principle of heart-life and home-life and church-life is supreme love to God and love to our neighbors.—Letter 77, 1897. {4BIO 313}

It makes every difference how we do service for God. The boy who drudges through his lessons because he must learn will never become a real student. The man who claims to keep the commandments of God because he thinks he must do it will never enter into the enjoyment of obedience. The essence and flavor of all obedience is the outworking of a principle within—the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer, doing right because it is right. When the Word of God is a burden because it cuts directly across human inclinations, then the religious life is not a Christian life, but a tug and a strain, an enforced obedience. All the purity and godliness of religion are set aside. But adoption into the family of God makes us children, not slaves. {TMK 118}

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