

Introduction

Churches have reputations. Sometimes that reputation is accurate; sometimes it is unfair. Sometimes that reputation is earned; sometimes it is given.

What reputation should a church have? Many churches put a lot of thought into that question and still come up with unbiblical solutions.

Today, we celebrate 135 years of God's blessings on Bethlehem. It is important for a church to look **back** so that we may acknowledge that **every good thing comes from God** ([James 1:17](#)). It is also important for a church to look **forward**. *How can we better live as Christ's church?*

Today, we will read [1 Thessalonians 1](#), a letter written to a young church with a great reputation. Their reputation was not that they were a trendy, inclusive, affirming, or entertaining church. They were **a church of men and women who were transformed by the blood of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.**

What reputation should a church have? **The church should be known by lives changed by the gospel of Jesus.**

Faith, love, and hope

Many churches today are chasing trends. *How can we be relevant? How can we be seeker-sensitive?* [1 Thess 1:1-3](#) celebrates the **eternal qualities of the church**, not its trendy qualities.

Context

What is the context of this letter? [1 Thessalonians 1:1](#) "1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace." This was an apostolic letter, written to a young church who knew God.

In [Acts 17:1-9](#), Paul, Silas (Silvanus), and Timothy traveled to Thessalonica in the region of Macedonia to share the gospel of Jesus. These missionaries could only remain for a **few weeks** ([Acts 17:2](#)) before fleeing to Berea ([Acts 17:10](#)) to escape the heavy persecution in Thessalonica. Even among persecution, a church was established.

Prayers for the church

Notice in verse 2 that the missionaries continued to pray for the church. [1 Thessalonians 1:2](#) "2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,"

Verse 3 shows that the content of their prayer was thanksgiving for the lives of the church in Thessalonica. *Who did they thank for changed lives - the church, the pastors, themselves?*

Notice in verse 2 that they **gave thanks to God**. Pastors, missionaries, and churches **never** receive credit for changed lives. **God alone changes hearts and lives** ([1 Cor 3:5-9](#)).

Faith, love, and hope

What was the evidence of changed lives? [1 Thessalonians 1:3](#) “3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The life of the church demonstrated their **faith, love, and hope**.

According to [1 Corinthians 13](#), many of the gifts of the Spirit were intended to be temporary, such as speaking in tongues and prophecy. *What gifts of the Spirit are lasting (not temporary)?* [1 Corinthians 13:13](#) “13 So now faith, hope, and love [endure], these three ...”

A church should have a reputation of faith, love, and hope. All of these include setting our eyes on Christ. This church was known for working in faith, laboring in love, and remaining steadfast in their hope in Christ.

It is unfortunate that so many churches pursue **charismatic gifts** that Scripture says are passing away. It is unfortunate that so many churches pursue a reputation for **cultural relevancy**. A church should not be known by relevancy or temporary gifts. A church should be known for changed lives; lives marked by eternal qualities of faith, love, and hope.

Synthesis

Will this church be known for its programs, its pastors, its events? All of these things are temporary. Faith, hope, and love endure. I pray that we are known for enduring things.

The gospel

How does this kind of transformation happen? Is it through great teaching? The missionaries were only there for a couple of weeks. *Is it through personal discipline?* Discipline is beneficial, but not miraculous. [1 Thess 1:4-7](#) points to **the gospel as the means of transformed lives**.

Adoption

Notice in verse 4 that the transformation of the believers in Thessalonica is described in relational terms. [1 Thessalonians 1:4](#) “4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.” **The church is a family**.

Paul calls the church his **brothers**. They are **loved by God**. They are **chosen by God**. The church is not a public organization; the church is not an event. The church is a **family** of men and women who are adopted by God ([Eph 1:5](#); [Rom 8:15-17](#)). Christians who move from

church to church do not understand the church. **If I abandoned my wife and kids** when relationships became strained, life became overwhelming, or I didn't like their actions, you would rightly condemn me. Yet, modern Christians think nothing of moving from church to church. We are a family of believers who are adopted by God.

Holy Spirit Power

How does a person come to know God (to be adopted by God)? [1 Thessalonians 1:5](#) “5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ...” **We know God because the Holy Spirit transforms us through the gospel.**

The gospel was preached to the Thessalonians in **word**. No one comes to know God without **hearing** the word of God, the gospel. [Romans 10:17](#) “17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (cf. [Rom 10:13-17](#)).

However, the gospel did not come to them **only in word** ([1 Thess 1:5](#)). The gospel came in **power, the Holy Spirit, and conviction (assurance)**. I don't think this is a list of three different things; rather, it is three different descriptions of the same thing. The Holy Spirit miraculously transformed those who heard the gospel, convicting of sin, enabling faith, and making them alive.

People do not come to faith by **persuasion**; they come to faith by the **power** of the Holy Spirit. [1 Corinthians 2:1-5](#) “1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with **lofty speech or wisdom**. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in **plausible words of wisdom**, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” **You and I cannot persuade people to faith.** I can present the gospel faithfully. I can plead with people to accept it. But I cannot change your heart; **only the Holy Spirit can lead people to faith** in the gospel.

Joy

It is significant that this church responded to the gospel in unpleasant circumstances. [1 Thessalonians 1:5-7](#) “... You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” **Suffering does not remove the joy of the gospel.**

Notice that they came to faith in **affliction** (tribulation). [Acts 17:5](#) “5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.” These

Christians were arrested, dragged into court, and had money taken from them. Remember, all of these things happened **in just a few weeks**.

How do people profess faith when the gospel is proclaimed amid persecution? For some, persecution convinces them that they want nothing to do with the gospel ([Mark 4:16-17](#)).

Notice how the Thessalonians responded to the gospel. [1 Thessalonians 1:6](#) "... for you received the word in much affliction, with the **joy of the Holy Spirit**." Joy that comes from faith in the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit does not depend on **circumstances**.

Synthesis

Will this church be known for the gospel? We should be known as men and women who are **changed by the gospel**. We should be known as a church who **faithfully proclaims the gospel** in our assembly, but also in our daily lives. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation ([Rom 1:16](#)).

Faith and repentance

[1 Thess 1:8-10](#) points out that a church's reputation should point to Christ. The church at Thessalonica was known beyond their city for their faith. That is, **their transformation did not point to themselves; it pointed to Christ**.

The Word of the Lord

How did other cities & regions know about their faith? These Christians **proclaimed their faith**, even amid persecution. [1 Thessalonians 1:8](#) "8 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."

After conquering Greece, the Romans divided Greece into two provinces - Macedonia (Thessalonica and Philippi) and Achaia (Corinth). The Thessalonians **did not remain quiet** about their faith in the gospel. Although they faced persecution, they proclaimed the word of the Lord throughout all of Greece. **A church cannot be faithful to the Great Commission and be silent about the gospel** ([Rom 10:13-17](#)).

Repentance

Their reputation in Greece was that they were a church of **repentance**. [1 Thessalonians 1:9](#) "9 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."

Many of you may have been raised in church. Many of you may have been raised in households that encouraged moral living. You may not come from homes like the Thessalonians, worshipping false gods. But make no mistake, **all people, no matter how**

perceivably good, are sinners. True faith is always demonstrated by repentance from sin ([1 John 1:5-10](#)).

When I first had the opportunity to share the gospel in **Peru**, I was amazed at how often people responded with a profession of faith. Later, I learned that **syncretism** was common in Peru. That is, they were willing to profess faith in Jesus, but not willing to leave behind their worship of other gods (idols). *Is Christianity any different in the United States?* We do not have idols (statues) in our homes, but many Christians today treat a profession of faith in Jesus as something **added** to their life. We want the benefits of knowing Jesus, but do not want to sacrifice anything to follow Him. **True repentance and faith is marked by abandoning our idols and our sin.**

Eternal focus

Verse 10 contradicts the goals of many modern churches. The church should be known as foreigners on earth. [1 Thessalonians 1:10](#) “10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

How does that fit in the seeker-sensitive approach of modern Christianity? Modern churches strive to be **relevant**. We see this in **music** that is focused on performance, rather than congregational unity. We see this in **preaching** that is encouraging, but not challenging.

In response, let me say first, Scripture is **always relevant**, but rarely accepted. Second, the church is not meant to fit in. [Philippians 3:20](#) “20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” [Hebrews 11:13](#) says that people of faith “[acknowledge] that they [are] strangers and exiles on the earth.” We should live as citizens of heaven, not citizens of the United States.

Synthesis

Will this church be known for being different? Habits can be changed without the gospel. Minds can be changed without the Holy Spirit. Human **lives cannot be changed without the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel.** It is only in the Spirit, that we become new creations who proclaim our faith, repent of sin, and live as citizens of heaven.

Conclusion

Jesus promised that the church would never be overcome by the gates of hell. The church will continue forever. That does not mean that **this church** will continue forever. Bethlehem has been a church for 135 years by God’s grace. **We will only be a church next year by God’s grace.**

I pray that God is patient with us as we pursue His word and pursue His will. We will regularly fail as a church, but I pray that we keep our eyes on Christ. If we trade God's word for cultural relevancy, then I pray that God would remove us and replace us with a church that honors Him.

I will ask again, *what kind of reputation should a church have?* Too many churches are concerned with what the world thinks about them and too few are concerned with what God thinks about them. This is not our church; this is **Christ's church**. If our reputation reflects Christ and His gospel, then we have the reputation that matters. **A church should be known by lives changed by the gospel of Jesus.**

Closing Scripture: [2 Corinthians 5:17-21](#) "17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."