

More than Just a “Howdy!”

1 Thessalonians 1:1

I cannot imagine what your reaction might be when you turn your bulletin over and see a sermon title. Some titles can give us a sense of what to expect. Some do not. But, there are lines I would never cross. You have my word; the following are titles you will not see printed in this bulletin.

- The Road to Hell and Who You’ll See There
- Sin and Our Congregation: Who Did What
- Cute Stories About My Grandkids Which I Will Use to Moralize at You
- The Funniest Confessions I’ve Ever Heard
- Existentialism & Nihilism: In Depth.
- Jesus is Most Definitely Returning on December 19th - Sell Everything You Own Now!

All today’s title means is that what I expected to be a one verse greeting quickly to be passed over in route to some “meat” turned into a four point message. It is more than just a greeting.

¹Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace and peace to you.

This morning’s message covers one verse of 1 Thessalonians. I will assure you in advance that however many weeks we spend in Thessalonians, I know I must do better than one verse per pop if I want to be finished by Christmas – even Christmas 2011. Still, this single verse fascinated me as I never anticipated that it could. It is brief compared to greetings in Paul’s other letters. It is not complex in its structure. But, it is from the first letter that Paul wrote that made the grade of Holy Scripture. It reveals what Paul was proclaiming from the earliest point that can be known.

Christianity today has become a woefully vague term. Are we speaking of a world religion? Are we speaking of a cultural influence? Are we speaking of a body of ethics? Are we speaking of something that is Roman Catholic *versus* Protestant, liberal *versus* evangelical, social *versus* spiritual? What does the earliest writing of Paul teach us about the essence of the Christian faith at that moment in time? Does it hold up? And, can we see value in asking God to help us to recapture these most primitive dimensions of our faith and life together?

I. A Humble Author

¹Paul, Silas and Timothy ...

A. “Paul” Reflects a Turning from the Past

If you are familiar with the book of Acts, you know that Paul was known as Saul before he ventured into the Gentile world. Whether Paul was a name by which the Apostle was already known in certain circles or a name he took upon himself cannot be determined with certainty. Still, providentially, and perhaps, according to Paul’s own choice, he became known by a Roman name that was as removed from his former Hebrew name as his life was now removed from his former life.

Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, was named for the original Saul of Benjamin, Israel’s first king. The name would remind him of his Hebrew pedigree, his self-satisfied Pharisaism and his zeal as one who had once persecuted Christians. Paul meant “little.” Oddly, one impressive credential of King Saul was that he was a head taller than everyone else. Perhaps, Paul was so-called because he was small, but Augustine speculated that he might have named himself Paul to remind himself that he was the least of God’s apostles, something he called himself for having persecuted so many of God’s people. In any event, the name change providentially paints a vivid contrast between Saul, the zealous persecutor of Jesus and Paul, the humble Apostle of Christ.

Whether or not Paul had an active role in changing his own name, there was something vividly different between “the before and after” of this man, and that change must always be a staple of our own Christian faith. Jesus has no use for any haughtiness derived from any circumstance of your birth or from any accomplishment on your resume. To come to God through Christ demands repentance, brokenness and the desire to become what He desires to make of you.

B. Paul Does Not Assert His Credentials

Paul wrote thirteen epistles. Only in the two written to the Thessalonians and in *Philippians* does he not assert that he is an “apostle”. Another common denominator in those three letters is that they are filled with language evidencing a strong mutual affection between Paul and those believers. They loved Paul. They owed their souls to his efforts. It never dawned on them to question his credentials, so it never dawned on Paul to assert them. And, not only does Paul not play the apostle card, he includes in the greeting the names of two friends they would know. Silas planted the church with Paul. Paul sent Timothy to them to check on their well-being.

Isn't that what community ought to feel like? Affection reigns above polity. Lines of love are more evident on hearts than lines of authority are on charts. Paul had a role of divine authority, but he never had to wield his clout like a club on this bunch because they loved him, he loved them and they all revered Jesus. Timothy did report back to Paul with some concerns that prompted the writing of this letter. Some were still flirting with worldliness. Some needed comfort due to hostile enemies. Some had become a little fanatic, quitting their jobs so as to wait for the return of Jesus. Still, when Paul did have to call them to greater responsibility here or greater holiness there, he was able to do so in gentle and affirming tones. Now, if that is Christianity at its most primitive, then, give me that old-time religion any day of the week.

II. A Hallowed Assembly

To the church of the Thessalonians ...

A. This Church Was Conspicuously Born of God

After Paul's first missionary tour, he parted ways with his old partner Barnabas and ventured forth with Silas to strengthen some of the churches he had planted on that first trip. He was inclined to venture to the cities due west, but in some way not disclosed to us, he was not allowed. When he tried to enter a region to the north, the Spirit stopped him again, so he headed due west to Troas. There, he received a sense of what the Spirit had in mind:

... ⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. – Acts 16:9, 10

Paul planted a church in Philippi and, then, when opposition arose, he headed to Thessalonica. He preached on three Sabbaths at the synagogue there, but the Jews grew hostile, so he built a fellowship with some Jews, many truth-seeking Greeks and a good number of well-to-do women. In no time, Thessalonica became a strong church with a good reputation that extended well beyond its immediate surroundings. Paul was willing to preach at any town in his path, but God chose Thessalonica and Philippi as beachheads in Macedonia for the rapid advance of the Gospel. Philippi was a Roman colony. Thessalonica was situated on two major trade routes.

A few centuries earlier, Macedonia was the home of and the launching point for Alexander the Great's campaign to conquer the world. In fact, Philippi was named for his daddy and Thessalonica for his half-sister. But, Alexander was driven by more than naked imperialism. He saw himself as divinely called to bring peace and unity to the whole world. His conquests aside, Alexander never accomplished his higher sense of calling. Without bloodshed, besides his own, Paul was part of a movement that will. Though maligned and ridiculed, and often sidetracked by its own people, the ancient Christian faith will finish its work of bringing peace and unity to all of creation.

B. Every Church Is Born of the Genius of God

Not every church fellowship can trace such a strategic, cosmic, kingdom rationale for its existence as could Thessalonica, but we do know that every true community of faith, no matter how large or how small, has the potential to reflect the genius of our God.

When Paul speaks of the body of Christ in *1 Corinthians*, he is speaking of a unity of diverse parts that together, and under the headship of Christ, has power to change neighborhoods, cities and nations exponentially beyond what the sum of the individual parts can accomplish. He is speaking of a community that does not see itself as whole and healthy if one part is hurting. When he speaks of God's household in *Ephesians*, he is speaking of a fellowship of unity and peace in the midst of a bitterly divided world where the walls that separate us according to race, class, gender and generation are destroyed to the degree that Christ is revered and obeyed.

And, throughout his letters, Paul described the church as a place where mutual relationships of love, sharing, edification, affirmation, encouragement, correction and accountability must abound. Paul well knew that the believer was never intended to live in isolation. Not one of us has the strength or the tools to become like Christ on our own. We need the church.

A cartoon some years back depicted a couple greeting the pastor after church: "Toni and I met during this morning's 'Greet Your Neighbor' time. We'd like you to marry us." Before his death, U.S. Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson shared a more substantial thought on church fellowship:

"In the beginning, the church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives on the living Christ ... It transformed them and the world around them.

Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Later it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. Finally it moved to the United States, where it became an enterprise.

"We've got far too many churches and so few fellowships."

III. A Holy Atmosphere

... in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Paul structures his language so as to draw an equivalency between these two Persons of the Godhead. Through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Father and Son together are the atmosphere by which any church lives and breaths.

A. The Father and Son Are Equivalent in Purpose

The church was envisioned by the Father. It was in God's plans from eternity past to serve as the vehicle by which He would restore a shattered creation to perfect wholeness as it communicates Christ:

... ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms ... - *Ephesians 3:10*

This same church was secured by and is still being built by the Son. When Peter confessed, as representative of the whole band of Apostles, that he believed that Jesus was God's anointed Son, the *Messiah* of prophecy come to rescue His people, Jesus affirmed his confession saying: "... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

Apart from Father and Son, there is no true church. It was envisioned by the Father and secured by the Son. It was "called out" ("church" means "called out") from the world and purchased back to God at the cost of the Son's shed blood. The church was created by the Father. Now, it is ruled by the Son.

B. The Father and Son Are Equivalent in Nature

Every once in a while, I hear some scholar or critic suggest that the idea that Jesus is divine evolved in the first few decades and centuries of the early church and that it was not something that the most primitive Christians believed. So, it is worth noting that a letter written within the first fifteen to twenty years of the life of the church affirms the deity of Jesus. As I said, Paul creates a grammatical equivalency between "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," but beyond that, it is important to consider all that is implied by the tag itself, "Lord Jesus Christ."

"Jesus" – His name meant Savior, but many little Jewish boys were named for Joshua of old. This was the name of a man of history, a carpenter from Nazareth, inexplicably raised from the dead. Somehow, amazingly to Saul of Tarsus, Jesus generated a following of disciples that undermined traditional Judaism. Saul made it his business to stamp out the movement.

"Christ" – This was the Greek equivalent of *Messiah*, that anointed prophet, priest and king from Old Testament prophecy, who was popularly conceived as the One Who would come and restore Israel to its Golden age. Perhaps, it was this claim that the early followers of Jesus made about Him, that He was *Messiah*, which elevated Saul's rage to near psychotic proportions.

"Lord" – Generically, the word could refer to any person in authority such as a nobleman or a slave's master, but in Jewish religious writings, it typically referred to *JEHOVAH*. Throughout the Roman Empire, "Lord" was the title of divinity that the current Roman emperor Claudius and his successors appropriated when they began to demand worship. It was the insistence that "Jesus is Lord" by those who refused to speak the words, "Caesar is Lord" that would account for the violent deaths of many Christians in the decades that would follow. In Thessalonica, "Lord Jesus Christ" was provocative enough that the Jews who opposed Paul could incite violence against him by whispering to the authorities, "He's proclaiming another Lord other than Caesar."

No church is truly God's church that is not "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ":

"... living in his life, holy in his holiness, strong in his strength, glorious in his glory ... The Church is 'in Christ;' its members must strive to realize the blessedness of that holy fellowship in their own individual souls. Outward membership will not avail for our salvation, unless we abide in living spiritual communion with the Lord."

- B.C. Caffin, *Pulpit Commentary*

IV. A Heavenly Aspiration

Grace and peace to you.

A. The Greeting Anticipates a Union of Worlds

Paul combines the typical greeting of a Greek letter with the usual way that Jews welcomed one another. The Greek greeting of “Grace” wished a reader joy, pleasure, brightness and beauty. Jews welcomed one another with a greeting of “Peace,” which wished a man more than just the absence of external strife, but everything that that would lead to his well-being and highest good. This joined greeting reflected Paul’s vision of a church that was neither Jewish nor Greek, but one new nation. “Grace and peace” are not wishes, but expectations based on the work of Christ.

B. Grace Anticipates the Generosity of God

Paul actually uses a distinct form of the word for “grace” that suggested a gift that brought joy, pleasure, brightness and beauty. Thus, his teachings on grace took the concept to whole new heights. God’s grace is a gift. We do not deserve it. For some reason – it had to be love – God was inclined to give it to us. By grace, a sinner is forgiven of His sins and made a child of God. By grace, the child of God continues to be the recipient of divine favor and forgiveness even though he is not always faithful to live up to the calling that grace extends to him.

Sometimes, we speak of grace as an attitude of joyful thankfulness for all that we have received from God. We “say grace” before meals, but effectively, anytime we express our thankfulness to God. Sometimes, Paul speaks of “grace” to describe a quality of character that should always be present in a believer as he interacts with fellow-Christians and with the world around him:

... ⁶ Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. – Colossians 4:6

Not only does Paul expect that his readers will continue to receive grace from God, he also aspired for them and for us that we will develop thankfulness as well as an authentic and God-like charm and beauty in our lives that reflect Jesus as we continue to pass our days with Him,

C. Peace Anticipates the Victory of God

From the moment sin entered the world, cracks in the creation have undermined our pursuits of peace. Many have wished for it, but Christ won it. Paul knew this as he greeted his beloved friends in Thessalonica. “Peace” was Jesus’ promise to His disciples on the night before he died:

... ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. – John 14:27

And, of course, “Peace be with you” was the greeting of the risen Lord to His disciples on at least three occasions after He was raised to life and victory over sin and death had been won. Now, even as hostility from the Jews swirled all around the Thessalonians, peace was theirs.

I’m still scratching my head at how four points of a sermon leapt from a single verse. But, the ancient truths affirmed in the “Howdy” of Paul’s earliest letter remain worthy of cherishing:

- The character of Jesus reproduced in us must be marked by humility.
- The Lord’s church has a hallowed origin. It was born in the heart and mind of God.
- The church is a holy community. It abides “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
- We can expect even now a taste of the heavenly; God’s grace and a peace only Jesus secures.