

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

The majority of churches in Australia are barely holding ground and many are declining, and we long for some formula that will grow churches back to the good old days, whatever they might have been. I even heard someone use those words as I sat at a meeting of the 5 neighbouring congregations this week, only one of which is growing. I hope our new pastor will take us back to where we were twenty years ago”. But there is no going back. And there is no shortage of books on how to grow churches today. My “inbox” is bombarded with invitations to attend seminars that promise to solve all the church’s problems, make it more attractive and fill it. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd says there is no magic bullet for the problems facing the economy right now and there is no magic bullet to fix the church but in today’s second reading God has something to say about the kind of church that pleases him. After all it’s his church and it’s not about what we can make work to fill our pews. We need to listen to what God through Pastor Paul says are the marks or characteristics or qualities of a God-pleasing church. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 describes a little church that had an amazing impact on its community and became known by the Christian world. So, what are the 7 qualities of a God-pleasing church?

1. A God pleasing church has leaders who thank God and pray for the church.***v2 We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.***

It’s easy to criticize the church, find fault, see its weaknesses, it’s a soft target. And it’s easy to talk about “them” and distance yourself from it and play its judge. Paul gave thanks and prayed, always and often for this and all the churches. In prayer it is easy to just ask God to change the church. Paul thanked God for it. Bonhoeffer said “If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed even where there is no great experience, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty, if we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow.”

Thessalonica was not a perfect church by any means. Some were apathetic and lazy thinking faith just meant waiting around for the end, some were worried about loved ones who died and some suspicious of Paul. Paul focused on the good and thanked God for it before he addressed their problems. Negativity and constant criticism doesn’t build up the church, prayer and thanks do.

2. A God-pleasing church is characterized by faith, hope and love.***v3 We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***

Faith hope and love are marks of a Christian and the church. Faith in Jesus who lived and died and rose for us leads to a life for Jesus, work for Jesus which may sometimes becomes toil but love keeps us toiling away at it, and we keep going, we endure because we have something so wonderful to hope for. Faith, love and hope lead to work, toil and endurance. Faith love and hope are at the heart of a God pleasing church.

3. In a God-pleasing Church the word of God is preached with conviction relying on the Holy Spirit’s power.***v 5 our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.***

In a God pleasing church the word of God is central, the source and power for everything we do. Pastors preach with conviction of its truth, and the people believe with conviction and live it with conviction. The Holy Spirit is relied on to change people with the word of God. We believe that and depend on it. It’s not about us, its about God and the power of his Spirit working through his word, convicting people and changing lives. If we are not focused on God’s word ourselves and if we don’t believe in the power of the Holy Spirit we can’t expect much to happen.

4. In a God pleasing church there is a sense of joy despite obstacles and difficulties.***v6 in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.***

God wants his church marked by joy - not a self induced artificial happiness that don't come from the heart, but a deep joy that is obvious to others that comes from the Spirit and his message about Christ. It isn't easy to remain joyful in the church. Being church wasn't easy in Thessalonica and it isn't today. Paul the evangelist preached in Thessalonica for three weeks. At the end of the three weeks he was smuggled out of town for fear of his life. People were complaining to the government that this message and its people were "turning the world upside down". That's what the Gospel does, it turns our preconceived ideas about God upside down as we discover grace. It turns what we value and strive for on its head, it turns our thinking upside down and not everyone is happy about that. Life was hard for the first christians. But Paul hears that they live with joy despite the obstacles and persecutions and challenges they faced. He saw that joy as a quality of a God pleasing Church.

5. A God pleasing church imitates God and models the Christian life

v6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, v7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

Paul imitated Jesus, this congregation imitated him, and others were now imitating them!

They didn't come to Thessalonica and ask what programs they were introducing or what their pews were like or how good the music ministry was. They heard about the things Paul mentions here, things basic to a healthy God pleasing church, emphasis on the word, dependence on the Holy Sprits power, faith active in love and enduring in hope, joy in the midst of difficulty. All because of Christ. Do you ever think of yourself as a model for others, to children, fellow members, visitors and seekers, let alone other churches? They probably didn't either, they were so busy imitating Jesus and Paul's example of following Jesus. A God pleasing church imitates God and models the Christian life.

6. A God pleasing church turns from idolatry, and serves God as it waits for Christ

v 9They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, v 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead— Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

These Christians lived in a place where people had multiple gods, they devoted themselves to all sorts of gods and idols as well as to their own passions. On becoming Christians these people devoted their lives to Christ. They gave up their idols and served God as they waited for Christ. A God pleasing church takes the first commandment seriously and turns from our own personal idolatries, the things that threaten to take the place of God in our lives, and it serves God as it waits for Christ.

7. A God pleasing church shares the Gospel outside of its walls

v8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia— your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Bad news travels fast, especially about the church and its pastors. People are quick to pass on bad vibes about a church. Paul says the good news about this church has spread all over the place, the good news about their faith and how they were living it and sharing it. **"The Lords message rang out from you"**. Wouldn't it be great to hear that said. Not just the church bell but the Lord's message rings out from us. Imagine if the President rang me and said "People are talking about you and your church" because the Lord's message is going out from us. Our faith and its life are known for the right reason and that is Christ himself. **"We don't need to say anything"** Paul says, your faith and its life are obvious to all. A God pleasing church witnesses outside its walls and people get to hear of the good news of Jesus Christ.

So there you have seven qualities of a God-pleasing church. The best thing about them is that they don't depend on a budget or a building or a program. A church that is effective for God can be any church that gives itself to Christ and his word and his Spirit, to each other and to the world.

The call to live in and live out our life in the church is not just for them but for us.

v4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you... Our life together in the church is a gift, we have been chosen to enjoy God's grace together and also to live it together as a witness to others. There is no formula for growing churches, but our call is to be faithful to God's description here for a God pleasing church, one like the Thessalonians that wasn't perfect but made St Paul smile and give thanks to God. And God blessed them for it. May God grow these qualities also in us at St Pauls and in every church..