



THE CHURCH...CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Truth:

- *In the letter to the Thessalonian Church, Paul spent a great deal of time looking at the wonderful future that awaits all those who know and cherish the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior.*
- *It is good and totally right that we should look forward to and wait with great anticipation of Christ's coming for His Bride (the Church).*
- *We should live our lives in this present world with our eyes on eternity.*

However, it is possible to become so preoccupied with the future that we neglect our present responsibilities.

- ✓ If we become stargazers and neglect our present duties we have completely missed the point of what the New Testament teaches about the return of Christ.
- ✓ It seems that this was something of a problem with certain people in Thessalonica and Paul gives guidelines for living in Chapter 4 and now at the end of the letter he gives more instructions – this time related to the congregation particularly.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18, *“Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

We call ourselves “THE CONGREGATION.” What are these passages of Scripture saying to us?

At first sight it might seem that these are just a random collection of instructions...but they do group together around certain issues relating to congregational life.

The Congregation and Its Leaders – v.12-13, *“Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”*

Who are these people who the congregation are to respect and hold in high regard?

Paul describes them in three (3) ways:

1. Those who work hard among you,
2. Those who are over you in the Lord and
3. Those who admonish you – (admonish = to give friendly earnest advice or encouragement to).

He is not talking about three distinct groups of people but is making general comments about those who have leadership responsibilities within the congregation.

I personally don’t think Paul is talking here about paid clergy. In other places Paul and the other apostles appointed leaders – that does not seem to be the case here. It appears that these leaders have emerged because they are working within the congregation but were not being given the recognition for their active roles in the lives of other members in the congregation...they saw to it that the needs of the congregation were met...and mentored those who were having a hard time living the Christian life...or were young Christians with very little experience as a believer.

Note: Be very careful with the word “recognition.” If the volunteer or active church member seeks recognition, chances are he/she will forfeit any “recognition” by the Lord when his/her works are tried at the Judgment Seat of Christ. His/Her glory will be recognized on earth only.

In the Greco-Roman culture of the 1st Century there were many civic and social clubs...and associations with a very strong link in these groups between wealth / status and leadership. Those with the money and title got the leadership roles.

The NT teaching on leadership cuts right across this practice – the key qualification for leadership within the Christian church is not wealth or status but giftedness for ministry. At least that is the theory; in practice it is not always so.

So what Paul is saying to them that they should recognize and respect those who are actually doing the ministry and not simply those who have money or the gift-of-the-gab and enjoy being in the limelight.

Why should the leaders in the church be recognized and acknowledged and respected? Because they are better than everyone else is? NO!

Because they are the most gifted in the congregation? NO! Because they are more spiritual? NO!

There is a little phrase we must not overlook – “in the Lord” – Everyone who is a Christian is “in the Lord” and each has been gifted by the Lord.

- ✓ If a person is gifted to lead then that is God’s sovereign gift to them. It is their God-given responsibility “in the Lord” to lead...and
- ✓ It is the congregation’s God-given responsibility to follow.

In other places like 1 Timothy and Titus Paul has clear directives for leaders BUT our Scripture today is talking to the congregation, telling them their responsibilities.

The Congregation and The Individual—v. 14-15, *“And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.”*

We find that in every church, you will have the same kind of people show up at church...those who are lazy / timid / weak / spiteful /encouraging / patient / kind / etc.

All these words use are very full of meaning – a sermon in each one – as is often the case the English word is inadequate to convey the full meaning.

Let’s check these meanings:

- **Warn the idle** – undisciplined, irresponsible, disorderly.
- **Encourage the timid** – faint-hearted, worried, fearful, inadequate, lacking in confidence, despondent, sad, and weak. There are those who because of their personalities or ongoing circumstances in life are always in this fragile state.
- **BUT even the strongest and most spiritually mature will go through times of grief, or doubt or even despair.**
- **Help the weak** – does weakness refer to moral temptation /or spiritual shortcomings /or physical weakness /or economic need?

The help could come in many forms – moral and spiritual support/or financial aid /or practical help....

- **Be patient and kind – “with everyone” – This is fruit of the Spirit –**

Galatians 5:22-23 22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **patience**, **kindness**, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (NIV)

It is these qualities that indicate our spiritual maturity and not our abilities or busyness with Church activities.

After all our goal is to become more like Jesus and reflect the character of God – Exodus 34:6b “The LORD, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,

Don't be spiteful / vengeful –Remember the Thessalonians Christians were under tremendous pressure from outside persecution – the temptation for retaliation was great, The Christian response is to “Love your enemies”. If that is how Christians are to behave towards outsiders then how much more so to fellow believers.

Paul is talking about the need of individuals – BUT note that he is addressing the whole church – NOT just the leaders. Everyone has pastoral responsibilities.

Paul's call – which echoes Jesus' call – is to be patient and kind to all. It is MY responsibility to be patient and kind irrespective of whether or not others treat me like that.

The Congregation and God – v.16 – 18, “*Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*”

To rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening AND to remain certain of God's future salvation. It requires that we have a perspective on life that is God's perspective – convinced that God is at work on behalf of his people- We can be thankful and rejoice that God will fulfill his purposes for us.

The test of our faith is not so much seen in the rejoicing and giving thanks when things are going well BUT rather when we can rejoice / pray / and give thanks in the midst of difficult and trying circumstance – like the Thessalonians under persecution.

The Question: Can anything that is trying and troubling in our lives be more important than knowing Jesus...and His great salvation given to us?

Then let us rejoice in Him and give thanks!