

# The God Driven Church!

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Steve Lawson

Well, these are greatly encouraging days and I think what encourages my heart the most is just to be with like-minded men and like-minded women who hold in common not only the Lord Jesus Christ but same core values, and as we have gathered for these days, I pray it's an encouragement to your heart as well. As we serve the Lord in the vineyard the Lord has placed us, sometimes it's easy to be discouraged and to think that I'm the only one and when we come together in times like this and we look around and we see so many other men of God, it just breathes encouragement into our hearts, and I trust that you're encouraged as I have been encouraged and my prayer for this time is that this will be more than merely a conference but that it will be a movement, a movement of God among our hearts to call us together to be greatly refortified in the work to which the Lord has called us.

Well, I want you to take God's word and be finding the book of 1 Thessalonians 1 and tonight I want to preach to you a message that I've entitled "The God Driven Church." 1 Thessalonians 1, I want to begin reading in verse 1. God's word says,

1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and

Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

There are many forces that are seeking to drive the church in these days and unfortunately much of it is man-centered and man-contrived. Some see the church as being consumer driven, in other words, survey the target market, find out what the consumer wants out there and then give it to them. People will pack the pews because you are giving them exactly what they want, but this is tantamount to the patient writing his own prescription, all the while oblivious to his own real illness thus never finding the true cure for his soul which is sin. Others see the church as culture driven, this is to say we should bring the world's thinking and the world's entertainment into the church so that the world will feel at home in the church. This approach to ministry takes the culture's latest forms of amusement, puts a spiritual spin on it, and thus, they say, you will reach the world, in other words, use the world to reach the world all the while ignoring this simple fact that that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Still others envision the church as being felt needs driven. This says scratch the surface needs of people, make them feel good about themselves, tickle their ears, stroke their egos, give them self-esteem, personal success, psychological significance and don't give them long, weighty Bible messages and for heaven's sake, don't use the "s" word, sin, or the "h" word, hell. But this is like putting a Band-Aid on cancer. Yet others want the church to be purpose driven. The key here, they say, is to be strategic: draft your vision statement, determined your objectives, set your goals, define your strategies, target a consumer group, develop a marketing plan and you're in business with God. But the church is not run by business principles, it's run by biblical principles. The church is a flock, not a factory. The church is a congregation, not a corporation. Instead, the church must be God driven. A God driven church is one that is God-centered, God-focused, God-exalting and God-passionate. A God driven church is one that seeks to do God's work, God's way, for God's glory. A God driven church is one in which the word of God is the plumb-line, not culture. The Spirit of God is the power, not human personality. And the glory of God is its passion, not human ego.

So where can we find a model for a God driven church? I believe that we need to look no further than this passage which we have read already tonight, the church at Thessalonica, and specifically in this first chapter, and as I have looked at this chapter in the big picture as well as in its parts, what strikes me about this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians is that, really, this is more of a chapter about God than it is with the believers at Thessalonica. As we look at this chapter, I want to draw your attention the many references to God in relationship to this church. Allow your eye to look at the text with me again as we walk through this passage.

In verse 1, they are said to be in God the Father and his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 2, Paul offers thanks to God for their changed lives. In verse 3, their faith, love and hope

are in God's Son who, in turn, is in the presence of God himself. In verse 4, they are chosen by God. In verse 5, it is the Spirit of God who brought power to the preaching. In verse 6, they were imitators of God's Son. In verse 6, they had joy in God's Spirit. In verse 8, the word of God sounded forth from them. And in verse 8, they had faith in God. In verse 9, they turn to God to serve God. And in verse 9, they were waiting for God's Son. That's 14 references to God in but these 10 verses, 7 references to God the Father, 5 references to God the Son, 2 references to God the Spirit. Again I want to say, first and foremost, this is a chapter about God, God electing them, God embracing them, God empowering them, God energizing them. This was a God-centered, God built, God driven, God glorifying church.

So what are the marks of a God driven church? What are the distinctives of the church that God builds? So much could be said from this chapter but I want to draw to your attention some critically important distinctives of the God driven church.

1. Mark 1, I want you to see in verse 1, spiritual conversions. Look at verse 1 again. The first mark of a God driven church is the spiritual regeneration of its memberships whereby they have been genuinely converted to God through Jesus Christ. Verse 1, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians," now watch this, "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The key word here is the little preposition "in." We know that by and large they were regenerated by the Spirit because they are in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ, not merely in church, not merely in Bible study, but in God. You know, you can be in church but not be in God and the fact that they are in God means that they have a vital personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ. John Stott writes of this little word "in." We should paraphrase the preposition "in" as meaning "living in; rooted in; drawing its life from." This church was living in the sphere of God and God was their source. They lived in God spiritually, supernaturally because they were born again by the Spirit of God.

Beloved, not all churches are in God and in Jesus Christ. Many churches, if not most churches, are filled with vast untold multitudes of people who are religious but lost. Vast multitudes have walked an aisle, raised a hand, been baptized, have been joined to the church but have never been regenerated by the Spirit of God from above. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven. Many are on the broad path, few are on the narrow path."

Now I live in Mobile, Alabama and in Mobile, Alabama everyone is saved. You laugh. We are the buckle of the Bible Belt. The people in my church were born in church, I think literally. One lady told me, she said, "I started coming to this church nine months before I was born." Maybe you can relate to that. And in the deep South where I am, people have been John 3:16 to death. And this is why it's incumbent upon us to preach a Gospel that calls for repentance from sin, a Gospel which calls for commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a Gospel that calls for obedience, a Gospel that calls for denying self, taking up a cross and following after Jesus Christ, and I have found in my ministry the more that I preach a full-orbed Gospel that calls for repentance, that calls for obedience, that underscores and magnifies the Lordship of Jesus Christ, people are saved

and come to faith in Jesus Christ. And I want to encourage you and tell you that in a God-called, God driven church, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is continually being sounded forth and calling people to repentance and to commitment to Jesus Christ.

This is where it begins, a God driven church begins with the spiritual conversion of its membership. George Whitefield, the great evangelist, loved to preach on John 3, "You must be born again." He preached it over and over and over. One time a person came up to him and said, "Why do you keep preaching you must be born again?" To which he replied, "Because you must be born again." Men, preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now second, the second mark in verse 2 I want you to see, sacrificial ministry. The second mark of a God driven church is the sacrificial ministry of its membership. Verse 2, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." And what he is about to say in verse 3, he offers thanks for it in verse 2, that indicates to us that God is the author of their sanctification and their growth and maturity in Christ is flowing from God the Father.

Now verse 3, "constantly bearing in mind," - excuse me, when I get north of the Mason-Dixon line or west of the Mississippi River, sometimes my voice goes which is sometimes an answer to prayer in our home church. "Constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." This is the first time chronologically that the Apostle Paul makes mention of this threefold triad of virtues, faith, hope and love, but the emphasis in reality is actually upon their work, their labor and their steadfastness. Actually their faith, their love and their hope are modifiers and what this is saying is that this church was working, laboring with steadfastness in their sacrificial service to the Lord with a work inspired by their faith in Christ, with a labor generated by their love for Christ with a steadfastness produced by their hope in Christ and the key is, it was God producing this in them. God was energizing their work. God was empowering their labor. God was effecting their steadfastness. And here is the point that I want to make right here: the more faith they had in God, the more they worked for God. The more love they had for God, the more they labored for God. The more hope they had in God, the more steadfast they were for God. Thus in reality God himself was energizing this church through their love, their faith and their hope.

I think this speaks volumes to us as pastors. If we want our churches to be energetic in our ministries for God, then we need to deepen the hearts of our people for God. We need to deepen their faith in God. We need to deepen their love for God. We need to deepen their hope in God. And rather than twisting their arms to serve God and rather than resorting to fleshly techniques of human manipulation to get them to serve the Lord, in reality a God driven church is one in which God is driving the sacrificial service for him. Our role as pastors is to drive our people to God and God will then drive them in service for him. The more we lift high God, the more they will be inspired to love him, to have faith in him, to have hope in him, and God will expand their hearts in service for him.

Now there's a third mark that I want you to see. Not only their spiritual conversions, verse 1, and their sacrificial ministry, verses 2 and 3, but third, I want you to see

theological fiber in verse 4. The third mark of a God driven church is a high regard for the God-exalting truth of his sovereignty. Look at verse 4, he says, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." Paul states here that he knows that by and large these members of the Thessalonian church are God's chosen ones. The way that he knows this is that he hears of their confession of Christ but he also sees the transformation of their lives. This was a church he had great confidence in that was chosen by God, but what strikes me most of all is that Paul could begin this letter to the Thessalonians speaking of such an exalted truth on the front end of this letter. Obviously the truth of the sovereignty of God was common knowledge in this church. For Paul to be able to introduce this subject so quickly on the front end of this letter underscores how deeply rooted they were in the sovereignty of Almighty God.

Edmond Hebert writes, quote, "The word 'election' denotes the act of picking out or choosing someone. It implies a selection of some from among others who are not selected. The term appears six times in the New Testament and always appears to denote an act of divine selection taking effect upon human objects so as to bring them into special and saving relations with God." A God driven church is one that is fed a steady diet of a high view of God and the crown jewel upon the head of God is the diadem of his sovereignty, that God rules in the heavens, he reigns over all, that God does absolutely as he pleases, and when we understand this glorious truth of the sovereignty of God, it changes everything about our perspective of ministry, of ourselves, in fact, it is the worldview. We see all of life through the grid of the sovereignty of God.

Recently I had a man tell me that I ought not to preach on divine election. He was perhaps the most influential man in our church. He is perhaps the most influential man in Mobile, Alabama. And when I preached this truth, it came at a great price just a couple of months ago, but I shared with him that no truth so honors the great and glorious name of God as the truth of the supremacy and the sovereignty of God. R. C. Sproul has said that this truth of the sovereignty of God is God's favorite doctrine and he said it would be your favorite doctrine if you were God. No truth so elevates God and no truth so humbles man than this truth that God rules over all, and the honor of God is at stake and in a God driven church there is unashamedly the proclamation of the absolute sovereignty of God.

I want to tell you what Mr. Spurgeon had to say on this subject. I trust you've heard of Charles Spurgeon. Some of you have never preached on election since you were ordained. These things, you say, are offensive and so would you rather offend God than man? But you reply these things will not be practical. I do think that the climax of all man's blasphemy is centered in that utterance. Tell me that God put a thing in the Bible that I am not to preach? You are finding fault with my God. But you say it will be dangerous. What, God's truth dangerous? I would not like to stand in your shoes when you have to face your Maker on the day of judgment. Men, a God driven church is one that magnifies, declares and teaches the absolute unrivaled sovereignty of Almighty God in all matters of creation, salvation, redemption and providence.

Now there's a fourth mark in verse 5, not only theological fiber but powerful preaching. A God centered church has a God-anointed, God-appointed man in the pulpit who

proclaims the word. Look at verse 5, "for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you." A God driven church is a church in which the word of God in the Gospel is preached in great power in the Holy Spirit.

There are four things that I want to draw to your attention about powerful preaching. 1. This preaching was articulate. Notice he says, "for our gospel did not come to you in word only." It did come in word. It was not a feeling driven pulpit. It was a doctrinal driven pulpit. The preaching was intelligent, it was cognitive, it was articulate, it was cogent, it was biblical, it was theological as it informed the mind. People were not having to check their brains at the door of the church as they came in. The word of God was being taught in truth. It reminds me of what one man said, a country deacon, when he heard the new preacher come, he said, "Now there are two kinds of preaching, there's topical and there is suppository." I have a follow-up line that I will not give you. My wife would tell me to come up and confess my sin if I gave you the follow-up line.

It was preaching that was articulate. Second, the preaching was powerful. It says that the word came not in word only but also "in power and in the Holy Spirit." Paul was energized by the Holy Spirit of God as he delivered this message. He was a vessel through which the power of God was delivered.

Then, third, it was confident. This preaching was confident. He says, "and with full conviction." This refers not to the conviction so much in the heart of the listener but conviction in the heart of the preacher as he preaches the word. Paul was deeply sure of the truthfulness and relevance of his message. He was gripped with a God-given certainty of the truthfulness that he preached.

And then fourth, this preaching was incarnational. At the end of verse 5 we read, "just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." What he is saying here is we lived the message that we brought to you. We did not preach one thing and live another way. There was the incarnation of the message in the preacher.

This kind of preaching that is articulate, theological, doctrinal, powerful, confident and incarnational is sorely lacking today. There seems to be no room for this kind of preaching in the average church and thus – now listen to this – theology is being replaced with theatrics, exposition is being replaced with entertainment, sound doctrine is being replaced with sound checks, and the unfolding drama of redemption is being replaced with just plain drama. When this occurs, you are left with a man-centered church that pampers the flesh and is powerless to convert from sin.

Verse 6 gives us the reception of this powerful preaching, God works both sides of the aisle, "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." The Thessalonians were literally saved in riot as great chaos broke out as Paul preached, but they welcomed the word into their hearts because God the Holy Spirit had prepared their hearts to receive this word. A God

driven church is a church in which the Gospel is preached in word, in power, in the Holy Spirit and in reality of life.

Mark 5 in verses 7 and 8, personal evangelism. Paul continues, "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." The Thessalonian believers made a deep impact upon the other believers in the larger region of what is Greece. This word "example" was used to describe a seal that marked wax. In other words, they were leaving their imprint and their impact upon the other believers. What did they do that left such an impact? Next verse, "For," here comes the explanation, "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything." God was so real, God was so real in their hearts that they could not contain their enthusiasm for God. They did not have to be programmed. They didn't have to be pointed. They simply were so full of God that no matter where they went, no matter what they did, they sounded forth the glorious truth of God himself and his grace that had so radically saved them. I'm gonna move on.

Mark 6 in verse 9, radical repentance. The God driven church is comprised of believers who have made a decisive break from sin. Verse 9, "And they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." Paul is in Corinth at this time and travelers are arriving at Corinth who are bringing a report to him of what is going on in this church in Thessalonica, this report is in the present tense, in other words, he is continually receiving reports again and again and again of the work of God in their hearts and how they turned to God from idols. This is repentance. They turned, this word "turned" is a regular word for conversion in the New Testament and it marks the radical change that comes into the lives of the Thessalonian believers when they turned away from their sin and turned to the true God.

This word for "turned" was used in Mark 5:30 when Jesus was walking through the crowd and a woman reached out to touch the hem of his garment and he stopped and he turned completely around to face the other direction and he asked, "Who touched Me?" The very same word is used here of these Thessalonian now believers who once were going according to the course of this world, who once were walking the path of sin, and when the Gospel came to them in the power of the Holy Spirit, how God turned their hearts around completely, how God granted them repentance, and how they turned from their sin, how they turned from their idols, how they made a clean break with a life of sin in order to turn to God. This preposition "to God, pros Theon," means that they turned to be face-to-face with God as they entered into a personal relationship with this God through Jesus Christ.

J. C. Ryle defines repentance this way, quote, "True repentance begins with the knowledge of sin. It goes on to work sorrow for sin. It leads to confession of sin before God. It shows itself before man by a thorough breaking off from sin. It results in producing a habit of deep hatred for all sin." John Murray says, "It is impossible to disentangle faith and repentance. Saving faith is permeated with repentance and

repentance is permeated with faith." A. W. Tozer writes, quote, "Repentance is primarily a change of moral purpose, a sudden and often violent reversal of the soul's direction."

In a God driven church, there is the preaching of repentance that calls sinners to forsake their sin, to forsake the world and to turn completely to the living God and in commitment of faith to embrace him through his Son Jesus Christ. Now there's one last mark that I want you to see and as Henry VIII said to his fourth wife, "I won't be keeping you much longer."

The seventh mark is eternal hope. Look at verse 10, "and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." The God driven church is a church that ever has its focus upon heaven, setting our minds on things above and not on things of this earth. The God driven church is a church that ever serves the Lord, ever looking to the return of Jesus Christ, believing that at any moment he could burst upon the scene, poring ourselves into service for him knowing with urgency that what we do for Christ must be done today because the Lord is coming and when he returns, he shall usher in a great and glorious new eternity for us as we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and this world will enter into the Great Tribulation. He will break open those seals of judgment and he will blow those trumpet judgments and he will pour out those vials of wrath upon this world, but he is coming back to rescue us out of that hour of tribulation and he will catch us up to meet him in the air and thus we shall always be with him.

I believe that there are some churches that would actually be disappointed for Christ to come back. They have not finished their building program. They have not yet made their Holy Land trip. They have not yet finished their 10 year plan. But beloved, the God driven church longs for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, longs for the rapture of the church that we would be caught up to be with him, and as we serve the Lord with our shoulder to the plow knowing that he is soon to return. This is the kind of church that we must be committed to seeing God build, a God driven church. Not a man built church but a God driven church and I want to call upon you as I call upon my own heart, to give ourselves afresh as never before, to be mighty men of faith who will commit ourselves to see God's work done God's way for God's glory.

That Saturday in Memphis, Tennessee, John, when I ran into you at breakfast, you said something the night before. Stephen Olford was preaching, Adrian Rogers was preaching, and Dr. MacArthur was preaching. In the middle of his message, he said something that leaped into my heart. It was one sentence and I went to Dr. MacArthur the next day and I said, "Would you please write this in my Bible?" He was so kind and gracious to write it in my Bible. God had written it in my heart. This is what he said, "Now is the time for the strongest men to preach the strongest message in the context of the strongest ministry." I want to be one of those men and would to God that all of us here tonight could purpose in our heart for God to inscribe this upon the tablet of our heart, "Now is the time for the strongest men to preach the strongest message in the context of the strongest ministry," and may we see God build his church through our lives and may it be a God driven church.



Let's pray.

*Father, I don't know why my voice has struggled so much tonight, but it has caused me to feel my utter helplessness and dependency upon You in serving You. And Father, apart from You I can do nothing. It is in You that we live and move and have our being. All of our days were written in Your book when as yet there was not one of them. You are the God who opens a door that no man can close and who closes a door that no man can open. And Father, in this moment, in this hour, we do humble ourselves before Your mighty right hand and ask that You would exalt us in due time knowing that You care for us. Father, I pray for my brother pastors, my fellow servants here tonight, that You would encourage them and strengthen their faith, that as they labor for You these very simple truths that we looked at tonight might in some way be a benchmark, might be a target towards which we would point our hearts. And God, I pray that as we put our faith in You and as we grow in our love for You and as we become more singular in our hope for You, that God, You would inspire great work and great labor and great steadfastness within us. And Father, we are very weak in and of ourselves, and so we cast ourselves upon You and we abide in Your Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and I pray that in our reliance upon You and in the submission of our very being to Your sovereignty, that You would produce within us great energy to serve You, that You would do this work within our hearts and within our souls, that You would enlarge our steadfastness, that You would build up our endurance that we would not lose heart and give up hope, and I pray, God, that our love for You would produce great labor in our lives. So Father, draw us unto Yourself even tonight that You might then deepen the very fabric and the very depth of our soul that we would be thrust out to serve You. Father, I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*