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# The Marks of a Spiritual Church

## 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul's favorite phrase to refer to believers together in the church is *brethren*. It is of singular importance that the church sees itself as a family – a community of people related together with mutual care, concern and support. So, this is addressed to the *brethren* (v.12, 14).

Here are some of the qualifying categories for a spiritual church. A spiritual church is marked by Biblical leadership, fellowship and worship.

### Its Biblical Leadership

(v.12-13)

Writing as an elder (and speaking as an elder) we address the church in such a way as to call forth from you the very response required. Respect, submission and esteem cannot be demanded. Even though they are required, they spoken of as being requested. And the elders who are to be appreciated and esteemed are marked by certain characteristics.

<sup>12</sup> We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

### The Characteristics of Godly Leadership

This is addressed *primarily* to elders and then generally to those whose ministry is characterized by these categories.

#### In Their Labor

Good elders work hard. The word here is used of someone who works hard. It was generally used of laborers in the quarries and fields. The picture is of someone who is working hard at ministry. It sets a standard, not only for the elders who must be diligent in their work, but for everyone in the church who ministers.

The prevailing view that church ministry ought to be easy is simply wrong. There are high standards, difficult demands and hard work. It requires endurance. Our philosophy of volunteerism has eroded away at the Biblical use of gifts. Every person in the church has at least one gift *that they are either using or wasting*. Do you know where you are being spiritually enabled to serve this body of believers? Have you committed yourself to a lifetime of hard labor (without present and visible pay or reward) to exercise that gift on behalf of others for Christ?

#### In Their Governance

Good elders exercise Biblical authority. The word here is used of those who have the oversight or are in charge over. The old word used to be translated *rule*. Today, with the abuses of ruling elders, we prefer the word *governance*. The (NASB) consistently uses this word to refer to the elders of the church in their governing role, whether it is in the home to be qualified for eldership, or in the church where they are exercising the oversight of the church.

The key texts are Romans 12:8, "he who *leads*, with diligence"; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, "One who *manages* his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity 5 (but if a man does not know how to *manage* his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" and 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well

be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." The governance of the church in the Bible is committed to the elders, not to the deacons. The elders are to oversee the church by shepherding as men mature in the Word.

### **In Their Admonition**

Good elders have the grace of courage. This is borne out by the word which is used here. It is from the Greek word *noutheteo* which means "to confront with truth so as to bring about change" thus it is usually rendered *to admonish*.

In Acts 20:31 Paul warns and reminds the elders of the church at Ephesus, "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." He also told the church at Rome in Romans 15:14, "...concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another." Paul wrote the Corinthians, "...not to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children." (1 Corinthians 4:14). Admonition is a part of worship in music, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16) and in preaching, "And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). Instructing in holiness is even what we do with those who are under the discipline of the church as in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. 15 And *yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

So elders are to confront with truth so as to bring about change, constantly, with tears, in the worship of the church through its singing and preaching involving everyone in it so as to present believers before God without blame even when we are dealing with someone who is refusing to bow to the apostolic authority of the Scripture themselves.

What a picture Paul gives of elders and of the church as a whole. Both are working hard in ministry under the governance of the elders who, along with the many, are confronting people with truth needed to produce change.

*So how are we to respond to people like this? Why does Paul follow with the next paragraph?*

Because this is not the common picture of the church. Three misconceptions regarding the church are dealt with here. Ministry requires hard work. Elders are to govern the church. And we must be confronting one another with the Scripture or we will not be blameless.

Because too often we respond wrongly to this kind of ministry. We do not want the commitment this ministry requires. We do not want to obey our elders. And we do not like to be confronted in such a way that we are pressed to change.

## The Responsibilities to Godly Leadership

Here is how we are to respond to this kind of leadership.

### Know them

The word here means that we are to have an instinctive knowledge which leads to appreciation. He chooses not to use the word which means to know by experience. Too often, what we know by experience of elders are their failures and weaknesses. Paul is pointing us toward an appreciation of our godly elders whose ministry is characterized by labor, governance and admonition.

### Esteem them

Here is an interesting word which heaps superlative upon superlative. It means to honor and respect, to hold them in high esteem. This esteem comes from the motivation of love and is prompted, not because of their office, but because of their work. An elder may not be the cuddly lovable person we all like to have as pastors, but he is to be respected and held in high esteem in love because of his work in ministry.

### The Mutual Goals

### *Be at peace...*

This phrase is addressed to the brethren which takes in elders and congregation. So then, what does *living in peace* look like?

It means that the elders and congregation may not declare war on one another. In both instances, there must not develop an "us against them" mentality.

It means that petty differences in perspectives, styles and personalities are to be overlooked in favor of character, conduct and ministry. Peace and unity are to be maintained in the midst of diversity, not at its expense.

It means that loving sacrifice is demanded of the elder and loving submission of the congregation. We do not like to think in these terms. But we, in our submission to Christ who sacrificed for us model that submission and sacrifice in our homes and in the church.

It means that the gracious oil of the Holy Spirit must be applied to all our points of friction.

What does living at peace look like? It looks like loved, respected and esteemed elders moving among the congregation with hard work, diligent governance and loving confrontation with truth.

Now, Paul turns to the congregation and frames a second series of exhortations to the church as a whole.

## Its Biblical Fellowship

(v.14-15)

In their relationships to one another, Paul uses a much stronger word, *to exhort or urge*. It is an imperative that both the elders and the congregation deal with people and with problems as the Holy Spirit outlines for us.

<sup>14</sup> And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. <sup>15</sup> See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

## In Dealing with People

(v.14)

The fruit of the Spirit is one of the keys to relating to one another as Christians (Galatians 5:22-23). We find these same fruit alluded to in this next paragraph. The fruit mentioned here include love (5:13), joy (5:14), peace (5:13) and patience (5:14). Out of these gifts we must deal with these categories of people God's way.

### The Undisciplined

The word here was used to describe those who were marching in an army and were out of step. It came to refer to people who were careless and undisciplined in the way they lived. These people may not even be involved in sin. But, since we are family, everyone needs to stay in step and be disciplined in their lives. We are not therefore seeking for uniformity, but creativity within the vision, purpose and mission of the church.

So what is required is nouthetic confrontation—the undisciplined members of the family of God are confronted with truth by the elders and others so as to bring about change. Much more can be done on a one to one level than we do. Too often, this is left wholly to the elders who use the pulpit as the place to do it. Why don't we begin then to lovingly confront one another with truth for each other's good and holiness?

### The Fainthearted

To translate this Greek word with *timid* really misleads the English reader. What Paul has in mind are people who are literally *small souled*, or fainthearted. These are the people for whom life with its pressures and problems is just too much. They are prone to discouragement and depression. They often are the quitters.

What is needed for them is encouragement. We told, rather than shouting at them from a distance, to come near and to speak gently and tenderly with words to uphold them in times of distress. Now this is what we really want to receive and sometimes find more difficult to give. This strikes the balance with the previous phrase.

### The Weak

The New Testament nearly always uses the word *weak* to refer to Christians who trying to live by all sorts of rules and standards. Their efforts are doomed to frustration and failure. What we must then do is to help them by holding on to them. We must help them out of the maze of their rules into the maturity of liberty and Biblical obedience.

### All Brethren

No family can peacefully coexist for long without patience. We must, as we deal not only with the undisciplined, the fainthearted, the weak, but also with *everyone*, do so

in patience. We must wait with endurance and long-suffering until God by His grace effects change in people's lives.

Are we patient with one another? Do we demand instant change, instant maturity, instant affirmation? Are you willing to wait for God to use the means of grace to change people? Are you young people patient with the older ones? Are you Senior Saints patient with those who have a lot of maturing to do?

### **In Dealing with Problems**

**(v.15)**

Siblings often have real problems with the constant getting back at one another and the blindness to what is good for the other. This is too often too true of brothers and sisters in Christ as well.

### **No Retribution**

**(Romans 12:17-21)**

Christians must not be getting even with one another. Now this injunction is not only for church life, but for home life. The peace and harmony of the church and the home are utterly wrecked when people keep settling scores. If you are keeping accounts of when you are wronged in the church or your home (or anywhere else) in order to get even, you do not love as 1 Corinthians 13 tells you to love. This particularly applies to brothers and sisters at home and to teens with one another. If you react to being wronged by doing something back, no matter how petty, then you are sinning against God and the community of the church.

Christians must stop one another from getting even. Notice the language here. "Make sure nobody pays back..." Again, it begins with elders, but is also the responsibility of the church as a whole. It is part of our ministry with one another as reconcilers. What glory it is when one member of the body, in great love to God and their brother or sister in the community of the church, intervenes and stops those who are trying to pay back wrong with wrong, instead of with love.

### **Seek the Best**

**(Philippians 2:2-5)**

This is what makes Christians unique. This is the greatest expression of Christian love. We, when wronged, still seek the best for others for we have disciplined ourselves to see that other person as more important and are deeply concerned to look after their interests.

Are we looking out for the best of others? We have no trouble looking out for our own concerns. But have we so learned the cross and the sacrifice of Christ that we express His love in sacrificing our very selves for the interests of others, *even when it gets absolutely nothing for ourselves?*

## Its Biblical Worship

(v.16-22)

We tend to think of worship as a formal and set time, whether publicly or privately, where we focus our attention on God with the intent to learn more about Him and honor Him. These verses refer first to this. but they also have in view the whole of a Christian's life as it is meant to be conducted in an attitude of reverence and worship of God.

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.

### In its Attitude in Prayer

(v.16-18)

Key marks of our prayer and praise: rejoicing and thanksgiving. How much of our praying simply degenerates into griping and complaining to God? The point here is on the unending process of our rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving. It is *always, without ceasing and in everything*. In other words, our joy, our prayer and our thanksgiving is not to be driven by our changing circumstances. It is the river of God's pleasure cutting Grand Canyons through the mountains of our impossible situations.

But is this our spiritual reality? Not usually. We rejoice when we feel good, we pray when we are in trouble and we give thanks for the good stuff. All of this speaks of the poverty of our spirits and the low level of our thirst for God.

### In its Approach to Preaching

(v.19-20)

What was prophetic ministry in the New Testament is now preaching ministry. In some measure, it even has the same function—*to mediate God's Word*. Until the canon was complete, God gave inspired revelation to New Testament prophets who mediated the Word of God directly. Now, we have the apostolic and prophetic deposit in the Scripture. Preaching today then mediates the Word of God indirectly.

But the exhortations in relation to the Word of God, whether in prophecy or in preaching do not change.

### Quench not the Spirit

We are not to put out the Spirit's fire. Now Charismatics today misuse this to condemn those of us who expose their error and heresies for what they are. The problem is, they have missed the point entirely. We are not to quench the Spirit *in relation to sound preaching of the Word*. This is not some slogan which condones any and all excesses in the name of the Spirit. Rather it warns us that we are to hear the Word as it is preached and to listen to the convicting and correcting ministry of the Spirit.

### Despise not the Word

In our day, preaching is often treated as blasé, old-fashioned and unnecessary. Not so. To so despise preaching as a means of grace is a direct violation of this brief command. Frankly, the opposite of what is here forbidden is to be encouraged. We ought to be fostering a love and appreciation for the preaching of the Word of God.

### Examine everything carefully

The first application of this and the next command has to do with prophets and preachers (not prophecies and preaching.) In being careful not to quench the Spirit

and not to despise the mediating of the Word, we also are to carefully give heed as to *who are true ministers of the gospel*. If a prophet was found to be false, he or she was to be exposed and condemned as such because of the great danger to the welfare of God's people. All of us well know the horrendous damage a pretender to the ministry can cause.

**Cling to the good.** - So we cling to the good. Those who meet the qualifications of good ministers of the Scriptures are to upheld and listened to. That is why, I am not ashamed to call names from this pulpit of people you ought to be reading and listening to.

## **In its Accountability in Practice**

**(v.21-22)**

### **Test everything**

Now let's consider these verses in their broader context. We ought to be carefully examining everything that comes to us as "good ideas." We must be evaluating the Biblicalness of everything which is attempting to influence and affect Christians and churches. We must do it privately and publicly. And we are being swamped with every conceivable movement known to man. We have Christian therapy, Promise Keepers, TBN, Christian coalition, holy laughter, etc and etc all claiming to be ready to take us to the next level of spirituality. We had better be carefully weighing everything.

### **Stay away from every form in which evil presents itself**

Paul's warning here has more to do with the shifting chameleon faces that evil world views adopt over time and in varying cultures. In the light of our need to weigh everything and to cling to the good, we need to be very aware of the carefully disguised heresies which comes to us clothed in the most modern and attractive dress. And we who preach to these things are sometimes treated like the little boy who finally said that the emperor has no clothes.

## **Its Biblical Dependence**

**(v. 23-28)**

The closing of the letter reminds us that we are dependent on the means of grace to be what God has called us to be.

### **On the Transforming Power of God**

<sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

### **Praying according to God's Purposes**

Paul prays for the holiness of the Christians in all their being in all their spheres of life until Jesus comes. It is the God of peace who commands peace among His people who is working out our sanctification on such practical terms that we will be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

### **Growing according to God's Promises**

This petition is emerges from a promise grounded in the *character* and *covenant* if God. God is faithful and He is committed to bringing this about. The petition may loom large as very difficult, the promise of God in the character of God presses us onward to be blameless in all our conduct at the *Parousia* of Christ.

**On the Loving Community of the Church****(v. 25-27)**<sup>25</sup> Brothers, pray for us.<sup>26</sup> Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.<sup>27</sup> I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

Our prayers are an integral part of being together as God's people. We must ever be mindful of those who serve away from us as missionaries. Prayer is God's way of tethering us to them and them to us.

Our fellowship is an expression of our union with one another. Fellowship means both connection (partnership) and communion (participation). For Paul, he saw both as a seamless garment of many colors.

Our Scriptures bind us together by the Word God has given us. The Bible is given to the church and to the world. It is God speaking to us. It is God feeding us. IT is God changing us. And so, the Word is not just for the Elders, leaders and teachers. It is for all God's people. You have it. Learn it. Love it. Live by it.

**On the Ever-present Grace of Jesus****(v. 28)**<sup>28</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

This is the benediction. It is a wish for the church flowing from God's will to the church. He has, does and ever will grant us His grace. This is His poise, His loving and kindly inclination towards His own. And it is His power, His mighty, enabling, transforming provision for His own.

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**Reflect and Respond**

May the Lord continue to grant that the Chapel will be Biblical in:

Its Biblical Leadership	(v.12-13)
Its Biblical Fellowship	(v.14-15)
Its Biblical Worship	(v.16-22)
Its Biblical Dependence	(v. 23-28)

May God so work in us by the Word and the Spirit that our church fellowship will be characterized as a spiritual church.