

# Characteristics of the Church of God

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Preacher: Rev Alasdair I Macleod

[ 0 : 0 0 ] 1 Thessalonians 5 where Paul begins we ask you brothers now the church of Jesus Christ is hugely important it's important especially because it or she matters to Jesus Jesus died for his church and Jesus loves his church and is committed to his church and will never renege on his commitment to that church

I think it's very important for us as part of the church that we always remember that we are part of something really big something huge if you think for example of the we were thinking last Sunday evening in St. Andrews of some of the the word pictures that the New Testament uses to speak of the church and how great these pictures are so the church is a kingdom and Christ is the king the church is a family and God is our father the church is a people so whatever background or race we come from we are one nation one race one people under God the church is a vineyard taken care of by the Lord the church is a temple a temple of the Holy Spirit and we are being built up into a spiritual house the church is the body of Christ the church is the bride of Christ the church is the army of God the church is the great city of God and so on there are so many of them and all of them are saying from one point of view and then from another point of view the church is big the church is amazing and God has a great purpose for his church the church is big as the story of the church goes through the centuries the church is big in terms of the way it crosses cultures and languages the church is big spatially as it's spread throughout the world the church is also big that way because the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven and the church also spans time and eternity and the story of the church will never end the church will go on the people of God will go on forever and forever and forever as long as

God lives which is forever his people will live with him I find it hugely encouraging to think of the church in these kinds of ways the big picture the big panorama that however weak I feel however small a congregation might be however even big a congregation like yours might be you are just something small but you are part of something vast and God has a great purpose for his church but tonight what I want to do is to think about the church locally how we can live as we should as the local church part of something big that God is doing across history and across geography across the world what should you and I be like what are the marks of the church what are the characteristics of the people of God and how does

Paul in this passage encourage Christians in church life together to be the kind of people that the Lord Jesus wants us to be to be the kind of congregations that Jesus wants us to be so that's what we're going to look at tonight in verses 12 to the end of the chapter I'm going to suggest to you that there are five little sections here and we're going to look at each of them in turn and I'll explain what they are and then there's a quick concluding little bit from verse 25 sometimes people say maybe they're right that this is just Paul at the end of this letter firing off lots of little things one after the other that you're not meant to find any thread through but I think they do divide up into five separate little sections that each have their own message and then some concluding remarks so the first of these five sections is verse 12 and part of verse 13 so I'll just read that again and this is the church in relation to its leadership we ask you brothers to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the

Lord and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work so that's the first thing he addresses when he speaks about the church that people in a congregation that's functioning as it should should have a leadership who can be respected because they work hard and therefore the congregation should give affection and respect to that leadership and esteem them highly because of their work so that immediately raises issues for everyone in leadership and for everyone in membership it says to leaders that leadership is never meant to be a sinecure or something we do just for status but that leadership in the church of Jesus

[ 7 : 17 ] Christ where authority is exercised in the name of Jesus over others and as Paul says even to the extent that the leaders admonish people under their care they take people aside and somebody in leadership takes someone aside and say now you're not living as you should let's talk about this let's talk it through let me say what I think from God's word about your behavior and let's pray about this so that a leader has the courage to do with someone under their shepherding care so it's all about work and graft and labor that the leaders work hard for the Lord but on the other side it's about whether people give the respect that they should to the leadership with humility and there's the mark of the Christian in this particular section that a

Christian is humble enough when under wise and godly and diligent leadership to respect and even to receive admonishment and to be ready to give the kind of regard and esteem to the leadership that is appropriate now it's not easy to be a leader and I hope that you pray for all in leadership in the congregation and I'm not just speaking here about ministers elders deacons but anybody in any position of leadership who might be involved in working with young people or who might be in charge of a team of people who visit the elderly or who visit the sick or who might be responsible for a Bible study group of some kind or some other mission or ministry of a congregation it can be 101 different things but people are placed in positions of authority and responsibility over others and they're called to do it as to the

Lord and to work hard but those under their care are called to be humble and to encourage their leaders by being the kind of people who make their job easier that's a challenge for anyone isn't it are you the kind of person who makes the job of the leadership easier because you simply want to please the Lord Jesus Christ in every area of life and if he has placed leaders in the church you acknowledge that and you want to pray for them and encourage them in their work and their ministry and you want their ministry to be as fulfilling as possible for them and as helpful as possible for you and for the good of the whole body here and for the extension of the kingdom of Christ so that's the first little section in relation to the leadership leaders are to work hard and those under their care are to have the humility to esteem them and to love them for the work that they do the second little section is from the middle of verse 13 to 15 I'll read that section on its own be at peace among yourselves and we urge you brothers admonish the idle encourage the faint hearted help the weak be patient with them all see that no one repays anyone evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone in this section now Paul thinks of the responsibilities of Christians to one another he moves here to our relationship to our fellow Christians and how we are to relate to them and I think especially here the note with which he begins is the key one this idea of being at peace among yourselves a Christian should want peace in the fellowship in the local congregation and Jesus himself said in the Beatitudes that one of the marks of a Christian was to be a peacemaker that you would know his people by this as one of their characteristics blessed are the peacemakers and Paul often picks up on this theme later on in this very passage he will speak of God as the God of peace and those who follow the

[ 12 : 28 ] God of peace and those who love the prince of peace are called to peacemaking in the congregation and to be people of love and of harmony as far as possible later on in this little section you will see how he stresses that we are always to do good to one another and to everyone so that sense of loving other people shows itself in active ways that we actually do good deeds for other people and the everyone is either saying that it should be done to anyone and everyone in the congregation but some people think that it's saying that it should spill out beyond the congregation so that a Christian is somebody who wants to do good to their fellow Christians but also to others outside to love even their enemies in the name of the

Lord Jesus Christ but I want to highlight something else as well in this section you notice in verse 14 Paul seems to be saying to every Christian that we have a ministry to our fellow Christians Christians and he says three things he says admonish the idle encourage the faint hearted and help the weak now the idle may simply refer just to what it sounds like that some people weren't pulling their weight in the congregation or it may be and I think more likely that these people weren't actually interested in earning their daily bread so there were lazy people who could have done something with their own hands and who were sponging off others he's spoken about this kind of problem before chapter 4 and verse 12 verses 11 and 12 he says live quietly mind your own affairs work with your hands so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one and at the end of the next letter to the

Thessalonians there's a whole section on idleness because some of these people were saying if the second coming is imminent if Jesus could return tomorrow what's the point of me working so they were sitting doing nothing waiting for the return of the Lord that's not what the Lord said about his return he wanted to find his servants busy when the master returned but they misunderstood the doctrine and they weren't doing anything and Paul is saying here to these Christians if there's anybody in the fellowship like that he said it's your responsibility to warn them and to confront them and try and get them to repent and to live as they should encourage the faint hearted the encouragement to these people it may be that in the light of the previous section these are people who have been bereaved and who have been asking questions about what has happened to their departed

Christian friends and when and how and where they will meet again and Paul has said encourage these people he said it more than once and it may be that they are specifically referred to but it could be a whole range of other things couldn't it too I mean tonight here it could be that you know of someone who is thinking about going forward to the Lord's table but is faint hearted about it and that person needs encouragement and maybe it's your ministry tonight to go and encourage that particular person because God is saying to all of us tonight that we have a ministry to encourage the faint hearted then he says help the weak it may be in the context of this letter that the weak are those who are struggling with particular sins for example in chapter 4 from verse 3 he spoke to people who are living lives the kind of lives they shouldn't live in a world of sexual immorality as that culture was and it may be that kind of sin that he's thinking about or other sins like that where some people struggle with one particular sin they find it very difficult to cope with what we sometimes call a besetting sin and these people need special help he's saying cling on to them look after them be with them help them through the struggle they're having with this sin be a partner with them who's always there for them especially when they feel the temptation that they can turn to you and you're going to be the person who helps them through the next crisis and see what's important about this section for all

Christians and how it speaks of another mark of the church and a mark of the Christian is that all Christians are called to ministry we're all called to a mutual ministry in the church of Jesus Christ And it's very important to see that in this particular passage, because the first thing that we looked at in terms of the leadership, many people might think, well, if leaders are doing what they should be doing, then they're doing the work and that's it.

[ 18 : 45 ] But Paul goes on to say then that everyone in the congregation is called to some kind of ministry, and every one of us has to see our own responsibility in all of these things.

So whoever you are as a Christian, you are called to a ministry of helping a fellow Christian, helping several fellow Christians, being involved in some way within the fellowship so that you are a comfort and a strength and a guide and a support and a spur, whatever it is, to other people within the fellowship.

And I mean, just to take these two things we've looked at just now, I mean, there's nothing complicated here. There's nothing deep. There's nothing theological. There's nothing new. It's just simple stuff.

If you are part of a church where the leadership is doing its work and where every member of the congregation is seeking to do their work, then that's a congregation that functions well, where everybody is doing what the Lord has called them to do with their gifts and their talents and their openings and opportunities.

Everybody is seeking to serve one another in the way that the Lord calls and enables them. That's the second section. Now the third little section is in verses 16 to 18.

[ 20 : 27 ] Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Now I think this third section is saying something about the church and Christians within the church in relation to our circumstances, our providences where God has placed us, and the things that happen in our lives and that come into our lives and the changes that happen in our lives.

And you see the language is there in verse 18. In all circumstances. For this is God's will for you. And I think it's very important here to notice that Paul does not say what sometimes, and when I was a young Christian this was said to me, and I think mistakenly said to me, that I should give thanks for all circumstances and for anything that happened.

Give specific thanks for anything. I don't think that's what it's saying. It's saying in all circumstances. I'll come back to that in a minute or two. But you see the three commands here are to rejoice and to pray and to give thanks.

That's the way that we should relate to our circumstances. Now, it's difficult to be joyful and happy all the time.

[ 22 : 09 ] And I don't think Paul is saying that everybody should always feel happy. That would be a strange thing to say. But I think what he's saying is whatever the circumstances, you can find a reason for joy in God.

It may be that the circumstance has no joy in it. But you can always find joy in God, who is with you in this terribly difficult and tragic providence.

If your joy is rooted in him, then you can rejoice in him. You can also pray in every single circumstance.

There is never one in which prayer is inappropriate. And then also you can give thanks in all circumstances.

There is always a reason to say thank you. Now, let me be specific about this one. Because as I said, when I was a young Christian, somebody said to me that you should be able to say thank you to God for every single thing that happens, absolutely specifically.

[ 23 : 35 ] So the illustration this man used was, he said, if you find out tomorrow that you've got a tumor and it's inoperable, the Bible says you should give God thanks for that tumor.

And I, for one, thought that was ridiculous. And he said, well, the Bible says give thanks for everything. I said, no, it says give thanks in all circumstances. So that tumor in itself is an awful thing and a horrible thing.

And it's part of living in a fallen and cursed world. But you can give thanks even in this circumstance. Not for that thing, but you give thanks and you say, Lord, I thank you that you're in control.

I thank you that this is part of your plan for me. I thank you that you are with me in it. I thank you that I can thank you for the gift of prayer. I thank you for your promises that you won't leave me, you won't forsake me.

There will be a thousand and one reasons to say thank you in the circumstances. Though sometimes the tragedy or the pain or the bereavement, you cannot say thank you for this pain or thank you for this loss.

[ 24 : 49 ] But you say in the middle of my grief and bewilderment, I say thank you to you that you are here with me. And I pray to you and I rejoice in you.

Whatever the circumstance, Paul is saying we can always find a reason to rejoice in God and to be grateful to God for who he is and what he is able to do in any and every circumstance.

There's something else here as well that may be going on. Many experts in the Bible, as they read this passage at the end of 1 Thessalonians, wonder if again and again, Paul is thinking of the Christians in Thessalonica at worship.

And that maybe here, some people read these verses as referring to the service of worship. And that Paul, because he's going on to say something about prophecies, which would happen in the service.

And they say maybe at this point as well, he's thinking of the Christians gathered together in worship. And maybe especially what's in his mind is that whatever's going on in their lives, they can always gather together and they can rejoice as they sing praise to God.

[ 26 : 17 ] And then in the service, they can pray for God's help and they can give thanks in their prayers and worship, whatever their circumstances. So it may be that he's thinking of corporate worship at this point and the way in which whatever circumstances you're going through in your own lives, out there, that the Christians in Thessalonica were to draw strength in all circumstances because they could come together in their Bible studies and in their prayer meetings and in their gatherings and in the worship on the Lord's day.

And together they could rejoice in the Lord. Together they could pray and together they could give thanks. And the corporate sense of solidarity and raising their voices in prayer and praise to God made all the difference for them in their circumstances.

That in that sense, they could rise above their circumstances for an hour or two hours together and they could focus on God and find their joy in God and give thanks to God.

And I think that's a very attractive, possible way of understanding these verses, that Paul is encouraging people in difficult providences to get strength from getting together with God's people and looking up and focusing on God and finding their strength and their joy in him. Let's come to the fourth section, verses 19 to 22. And I think this section is speaking in relation to the Holy Spirit.

[ 28 : 05 ] Do not quench the spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything. Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

I think this section has to do with spiritual sensitivity. The Christian and the Christian congregation in relation to the Holy Spirit being sensitive to the ministry of the Spirit as he speaks and not stifling that ministry, not grieving the Spirit, not quenching his work, but receiving what is from the Spirit and rejecting what is from somewhere else.

You see how Paul speaks here about prophecies in relation to the Spirit. Before the New Testament was given to us, the early church often had to rely on prophets and on prophecy.

God could speak directly to the congregations through a prophet and give a word of revelation, of exhortation, of explanation. Messages were given directly through these prophets to the congregations.

But again and again, the New Testament says that these people had to be careful that these were real prophets and that what they were saying was really from God.

[ 29 : 37 ] So they had to test the prophets. You know, are these people saying things that are in accordance with the Bible that we have? Are they saying things that are faithful to Jesus and to his gospel?

Are they saying things that lead to edification and to the peace of the church? Are they saying things that are helpful?

No. And are they in their own lives living as prophets should? Do they bear the kind of fruit that shows that in their own lives God is really working?

That they deserve the name of prophet because they live the lives of prophets and they speak the things that prophets should speak. So Paul is saying to these people, remember to test the prophecies and test things so that when you hear something that is clearly wrong, you're able to say it's wrong and reject it.

But also when you hear something that is clearly coming from a prophet and is from God, then he's saying, make sure you hold on to that.

[ 30 : 49 ] Cling to it. Don't let it go. Remember it. Let it make its influence on your life so that it makes a difference in your life. So you're to reject what is wrong, but you're to hold fast and cling to what is coming from God.

Now obviously, these people needed spiritual sensitivity to be able to do these kinds of things. Paul is calling for that, to live close to Jesus so that the spirit of Jesus is filling you and giving you the kind of spiritual antennae that enable you to sift between truth and error.

Of course, we still, even though we do not have prophets in our churches now because we believe we have the whole word of God, the whole New Testament now to add to the Old Testament, but we still have people preaching the word and explaining the word and we discuss the word and we have Bible study groups and all the rest of it.

And we need, in all of these areas, sensitivity so that we are listening carefully for what the Holy Spirit is saying and we're asking questions all the time.

And when we hear something that is clearly from God, as you will, I believe, every single time you hear people preach in your church, in your churches, you'll be hearing people expounding God's word and applying God's word and saying things from God.

[ 32 : 24 ] You hold on to these things and you say, what is God saying to me through this today so that I should be different, so that I will be a better servant of Jesus because I was here today or here tonight.

So it's encouragement from Paul to be sensitive in that way, to be listening, to be attentive, to be open, and to be receptive to what is true and at the same time to be careful and to be critical of what is wrong and to have no truck with error but to be completely open and receptive to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

We need to pray for spiritual sensitivity that we might know God's mind and God's will and be able to follow it. And then the fifth section, verses 23 to 24.

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. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. If I were to sum up that fifth section, I would say it's to do with our relationship with the future, in relation to the future.

[ 33 : 48 ] And what's so impressive here is that Paul is saying to that church, to these churches and through the word to us tonight, that our great aim as we look to the future should be that we as a Christian community might be holier.

that every single person who names the name of Christ might have it as their ambition as they look to the future to say, I want to be more like Jesus.

I want to be holier this year than I was last year. I want to be holier the year after that than I was the previous year and so on. Because he says, may the God of peace sanctify you through and through completely, spirit, soul and body be kept so that it will be blameless at the coming of Jesus.

So he's saying, as you look to the future you want to be holier and holier and holier. And then as you look to the future return of Jesus, you want to long for that day because on that day you will be made blameless.

You will be made sinless and perfect on the day that Jesus returns. And isn't that a great mark of any Christian and a mark of a Christian church and a Christian community that as we look to the days to come our great goal is that we might be more like Jesus, that we might be sanctified by the power of the spirit.

[ 35 : 27 ] and then our great aim as we look to whenever the Lord returns or when he takes us from this world our longing is to know that on that day we will be made perfect.

Everybody who trusts in Jesus the moment they fall asleep in this world and they wake up in heaven they are perfect and will be perfect forever.

We long for holiness, more holiness in this life but it's an amazing thought isn't it that one day you will never think anything that you'll be ashamed of again.

You'll never say a word that you'll want to take back ever again. You'll never do anything that you'll say I'm glad nobody else saw me doing that. But in your thoughts, in your words and in your actions one day you will be sinless, flawless, perfect.

So Paul wants Christians to move forward in the light of their destiny which is one day to be perfect and he wants them every day that they live to want to be more like Jesus than they were the day before.

[ 36 : 40 ] I think that desire is one of the greatest evidences of being a Christian, one of the key marks of being a Christian that your desire is to be like Jesus and one day to be perfectly conformed to the image of Jesus.

If that is your desire then the Holy Spirit has given you that desire and you should be at the Lord's table which will help you as a means of grace to be even more like Jesus.

Well, there's that final little section which I think is Paul rounding everything off. Maybe once again from verse 25 he's thinking of the service of worship and he thinks about all these Christians getting together for prayer and he says don't forget to pray for me and those who work with me and he thinks of all the Christians greeting one another and he wants them to show the greeting to everyone not just to be friendly to a clique of their own so he says greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

I've been in a church in England where they translated that greet them with a hearty handshake. If you came to St. Andrew you'd be greeted with a holy hug. So I suppose it's culturally different places but the point Paul is making is that it's greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. Not just your own little group but he's saying they did that in that day. They would greet everyone in the church with this liturgical greeting.

[ 38 : 13 ] I put you under oath to have this letter read. He's saying his letter is scripture. He's writing this by inspiration of the spirit. He doesn't say test my letter and hold on to what's good and reject what's evil.

He's saying all of what I'm writing is good because this is to be read in church. The authority of the apostle writing this and have this letter read to everyone. And then he says in his benediction the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

And of course that's the answer to the question how can anybody be sufficient for any of these things? How can I be what I should be?

How can my church be what my church should be? How can any of us attain to any of what the word of God calls us to be and to do?

Well there's the answer at the very end. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. That's the only way we can do it. By the grace of God. And the great thing tonight is to know my own weakness and in humility to seek that grace.

[ 39 : 21 ] The power of Jesus Christ working by his spirit in my life so that I might be the kind of person he wants me to be. And so that this church and our churches might be the kind of communities he wants them to be.

Let's seek grace. let's seek more grace because only the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for all these things.

Let's pray. Lord we thank you for your church. For the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we thank you for every congregation of your people and the way that you work in them and through them. That we might be a blessing to one another and that we might be a blessing to a needy world.

We look to you tonight for your grace. We ask that you would fill us with your Holy Spirit. That we might be the individuals you call us to be.

[ 40 : 24 ] And that in fellowship and in community we might be the kind of churches that you want us to be. That we together might praise your name. That we together might bring glory to you.

That we together might be useful as your people in this needy world. For Jesus' sake. Amen.