

**THE HEALTHY CHURCH AND THE WORD OF GOD
1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-16**

I. Church leaders and historians recognize this year as the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther is credited with beginning this reformation. The pope in 1517 had sent an emissary to Germany to raise money for the building of St. Peter's Basilica. This emissary, Johann Tetzel, was given authority to give time off in purgatory for people, or their loved ones, who gave contributions to him.

This pushed Martin Luther over the edge. He was a priest in Wittenberg, but he was fed up with the corruption that he saw in the Roman church. So on October 31, 1517, the story goes that he nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. These theses listed his complaints about the pope and the church. They were circulated widely. Luther wrote several books and tracts that explained his views. All of these writings attracted considerable attention from church officials.

The opposition culminated in a conference that was convened in the German city of Worms, in which Luther was called upon to recant his complaints. The dignitaries before whom he appeared included Charles V, the young king of Spain, who had also been chosen to be the Holy Roman Emperor, and a variety of church officials.

On the second day of the conference Luther was called upon by the king's spokesman to recant his heretical views. He replied in both German and Latin. The translation of what he is reported to have said goes like this: "Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." Thus Protestantism was born. A foundational principle of Protestantism is that authority for Christians is rooted in the Bible, the Word of God.

Is the Bible the Word of God? There are many who call themselves Christians today who don't regard the Bible as our ultimate authority. There are even some who call themselves evangelicals who doubt its authority, at least in certain areas. Today we will go right to the Scriptures to see what they have to say about the authority of God's word.

We have been looking at the brief New Testament Book of First Thessalonians on Sunday mornings. We have seen that Paul and Silas and Timothy came to the Greek city of Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey. They went first to the synagogue for three Sabbaths where they told the Jews about Jesus. After three Sabbaths they were kicked out. Probably they stayed in Thessalonica for a few more weeks.

A significant number of Gentiles responded to the gospel, and a church got started. Then, according to Acts #17, Jews from the synagogue joined with Gentiles to cause a riot and to force the Christian missionaries out of town. Several months later Timothy brought a report to Paul, who was in Corinth, about the condition of the church in Thessalonica. That prompted the apostle to write this letter.

We have seen in #1 and #2 that Paul regarded the Christians at Thessalonica as part of a healthy church and as a model to other Christian congregations. The Christians there demonstrated faith, love and hope. Last time we saw from #2 that Paul defended his ministry among them by describing how he and his cohorts were examples for how to do ministry. Now in #2 we find out more about what made the Thessalonian Christians healthy responders to the stressful situation that they faced.

II. First, in v. 13 of #2 we learn that THE HEALTHY CHURCH EMBRACES THE WORD OF GOD. Paul writes, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers." In vv. 2 & 3 of #1 Paul said that he and his fellow missionaries always gave thanks to God for these Christians because of their faith, their love and their hope. Now he gives thanks to God for them because they embraced the word of God.

Paul uses two similar, but slightly different, verbs to describe their response. The Thessalonian Christians "received" the word. Then they "accepted" it. This suggests that there were at least two stages in their response to the gospel message. The Greek word for "received" refers to the intellectual reception and comprehension of information.

The second term "accepted" refers to a second stage in the process. It refers to a personal acceptance and embracing of this information. As a young person I learned about the Bible and about Jesus in Sunday school and church. I received the message about sin and Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and ascension. I had a certain comprehension of it. But it was not until I was twelve years old that I accepted that message. It was at that point that I personally responded to, and embraced, the gospel. I prayed a simple prayer and asked Jesus to come into my life and be my Savior.

In Paul's day there were Greek philosophers floating around who promoted various philosophies. There was Stoicism, which said that one could succeed in life by controlling his emotions and by not getting worked up about anything. There was Epicureanism, which said that one should eat, drink and be merry. There was Platonism, which emphasized reason and development of the self. There were pagan cults that had complicated, mystical rituals. The apostle makes a distinction between all of these belief systems and his message. He labels their philosophies and religions "the word of men," and he calls his message "the word of God."

Whether the Christian gospel, and the Bible, is truly the word of God has been a major issue from the time of Paul to the present day. Is Paul's message, and the Bible that now contains it, the literal word of the true God, or is it the word of men? By the fourth century Christianity became the dominant, accepted religion of the Roman Empire. In the next couple of centuries it became dominant in the rest of Europe. For the next ten centuries Europe was under the influence of the church. The Bible was generally recognized as the word of God. Not all people accepted the gospel message. They did not necessarily go to that second stage of personally trusting in the Christ of the gospel message. But the vast majority of people in Europe regarded the Bible as being authoritative and having its origin in the God who is really there.

With the coming of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries scholars began to regard human reason as more authoritative than the Bible. Some scholars with religious interest began to look at the Bible through the lens of human reason. The stories about the Creation, Noah and the flood, the miracles of Jesus, the virgin birth, the resurrection and the ascension did not fit with principles of human reason. So some began to look at the Bible as the word of men rather than the word of God.

In our country Harvard College was established in 1636 to train pastors. But within a few decades the predominant view of the faculty was that the Bible was the word of men rather than the word of God. So in 1701 ten pastors from Connecticut met to establish Yale College to teach pastors the word of God. But within a few decades the predominant view of the faculty had changed to the idea that the Bible was the word of men rather than the word of God. Then Princeton University was established. It remained committed to the idea that the Bible was the word of God for a longer time than these other institutions. But by 1920, it also accepted the notion that the Bible was the word of men.

Princeton Seminary has long been connected with the Presbyterian Church. The seminary recently awarded its annual Kuyper Prize in Reformed Theology and Public Witness to Tim Keller, because of the influence that this pastor was having in New York City. Tim Keller is a solid, evangelical pastor who started a Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. It has about 5000 members, including many young professionals. Keller is an expository pastor, preaching through the Bible in way similar to what I do.

The seminary took flack after this award was announced. For Keller believes that the Bible is the word of God. He believes that things like abortion and gay marriage are morally wrong, and he opposes the idea of having women elders, because he finds these prohibitions in the Bible. The seminary administration and its supporters do not believe that the Bible is the word of God. So they took back the prize that they had earlier promised to give.

For most of our nation's history the vast majority of the people accepted the notion that the Bible is the word of God. It was regarded as authoritative. But over time the increasing liberalism of colleges and seminaries began to have a greater impact upon cultural leaders and eventually upon common people.

As late as 1965 65% of people responding to a Gallup Poll indicated that they believed that the Bible is the literal word of God. In 2014 the same poll found that only 28% of Americans believe that the Bible is the word of God and should be taken literally. A theologian by the name of Bernard Ramm claims that 40% of all theologians who call themselves evangelicals have abandoned belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. In other words, these scholars who believe that salvation comes only by trusting in Jesus as Lord, think that there are mistakes in the Bible.

Paul praised the Thessalonian Christians because they "accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God..." In 2 Timothy #3 vv. 16 & 17 the same apostle wrote, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." It was the response of the Thessalonians to this word of God that prompted them, according to #1 v. 9, to turn "to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Most of you are familiar with the story of the *Mutiny on the Bounty*. But you may not be familiar with the part of the story that deals with the life-changing word. In 1790 British sailors mutinied against the captain of the *HMS Bounty*. They took women from Tahiti and settled on tiny Pitcairn Island in the south Pacific. Life together proved to be difficult. Gambling, carousing, drinking and fighting drastically reduced the population of the island.

But one day Alexander Smith, who had changed his name to John Adams, was rummaging through the belongings from one of the men from the *Bounty* who had died. He discovered a Bible and proceeded to read it, and his life was changed. Smith shared the message of the Bible with the other residents. They received it and also accepted it. Their lives were changed. When an American ship stopped at Pitcairn Island in 1808, the Americans discovered a healthy community. There was no jail. There was no crime. The people had responded and embraced the life-changing word of God.

The same word had changed the Thessalonian Christians. It gave evidence to the proposition that the apostolic message truly is the word of God. That same word can also change our lives, if we will receive it and accept it.

We are currently making preparations for our summer vacation Bible school program. Each year we see children come to faith in Christ through this outreach. We also see this happen in our Sunday school program. We have classes for adults during this time and at other times during the week. We will be starting a church membership class shortly, which involves a theological survey of the Bible. Anyone is welcome to participate in that, even if you don't want to become an official church member, or if you already are a member. If we are truly convinced that the Bible is the word of God, we will be motivated to take advantage of such opportunities.

III. In vv. 14 through the first part of v. 16 we find that **THE HEALTHY CHURCH PERSEVERES IN THE MIDST OF OPPOSITION TO THE WORD OF**

GOD. In v. 14 Paul writes, "For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews..."

The evidence that the message that Paul and his friends presented at Thessalonica is truly God's word is the changed lives of the Thessalonian Christians--- and their perseverance in the face of opposition. The exact nature of this persecution is not described. It may have included loss of jobs, rejection by families and social ostracism. Maybe some Christians were physically hurt.

The churches in Judea were the first to experience persecution for the faith. Some of the early Jewish Christians were killed. Paul had originally been one of the persecutors. The Thessalonians in their healthy response to opposition were following a pattern that had earlier been established in the first church in Judea. There is some comfort for the Thessalonians in knowing that their situation is not unique. Paul later wrote in 2 Timothy #3 v. 12, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."

Verse 14 in our passage indicates that most of the people in the church at Thessalonica were from a Gentile background. These Gentiles grew up in a religious environment that was polytheistic. They had accepted the notion that there were many gods. Their culture might well have accepted the idea that this Jesus whom Paul was preaching about was another god who could be added to the list. But these missionaries were proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of the only true God, that all of the Greek gods were false gods and that there was no other path to heaven. That provoked a reaction.

It is that same exclusiveness that provokes a reaction in our culture. Our cultural leaders are often content to accept the notion that Jesus is one way to God, and it is fine if He works for you. But when we say that faith in Christ is the only way to God, and that apart from faith in Him, everyone else is going to hell, that brings a reaction from many.

Persecution for the Christian faith is pretty tame in our country. There may be discrimination related to our Christian faith at times. But we seldom see Christians attacked or jailed for their faith. That is not the way that it is in much of the rest of the world, however. The organization Open Doors USA says that the killing of Christians has nearly doubled since 2014. More than

a million Christians have been forced to flee to Europe or America from Africa and the Middle East. Christianity has largely been eliminated in Iraq.

Michael Horowitz is a columnist and director at the Hudson Institute. This Jewish man calls evangelical Christians "the new Jews of the 21st century." He sees danger signs in our country. He writes, "Every statement used to distance oneself from Jews is now being said about Christians. It's utterly striking how verbatim the same language is used in newsrooms, at fancy dinner parties, in faculty clubs." More serious opposition may be awaiting us.

In v. 15 and the first part of v. 16 Paul speaks about the Jews who were persecuting Christians in the first century, "who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved..."

During his missionary journeys Paul's greatest opposition came from fellow Jews. Typically when Paul entered a new city, he went to the synagogue and spoke about Jesus being the Messiah. After a while, he would be kicked out of the synagogue. Then Paul would preach to the Gentiles. This would get the Jews even more upset to see one of their own denying Israel's exalted status and hanging out with the Gentiles. The Jews would then try to stir up trouble with the local authorities. This is what happened at Thessalonica.

Paul sees in all of this a more deeply rooted pattern. He recognizes that His people, especially their leaders, have long been guilty of opposing God and His purposes. They were responsible for having Jesus, their own Messiah, crucified. Before that, they were responsible for killing many of the prophets sent by God in the Old Testament.

Were all Jews guilty of this? Obviously not. Paul was Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. The first Christians and churches were Jewish. But this pattern of rejection of spiritual truth and opposition to it was ingrained in Israel's past behavior.

Paul says that the effect is that the Jews "oppose all mankind." How is that? In the first century Jews did have a bad reputation in the Gentile world for their exclusivism. Tacitus, a Roman historian of this era, wrote that Jews are loyal toward their own "but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity." (*Histories* 5.5)

More important than this attitude is what Paul says in the next line of our passage: They keep "hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved..." In this we get a sense of God's perspective. There is something especially evil and insidious about people and institutions and policies that keep people from even hearing about the gospel, from learning about Jesus.

In some school districts around the country it is OK to teach children about Islam. But perish the thought that impressionable young people should hear about Christianity! It is OK to teach children that that sexual activity outside of marriage is perfectly normal, but Christian valedictorians and salutatorians better not mention Jesus in their graduation speeches.

Paul's overall point is that the Thessalonian Christians had a healthy response to persecution. They responded to the life-changing word of God, and then they persevered in a situation of opposition. They hung in there in the face of persecution. They kept on talking about Jesus. They continued to practice their faith. That is what we need to do when we encounter a little opposition, or when we are tempted to refrain from speaking for fear that people may not accept our message.

IV. Finally, in the last part of v. 16, we find that THE HEALTHY CHURCH RECOGNIZES THAT THE WRATH OF GOD IS THE RESULT OF OPPOSITION TO THE WORD OF GOD. Paul indicates that the Jews are guilty of hindering the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles "so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!" The picture is that of filling a cup. The Jews started filling the cup when they killed the prophets in the Old Testament times. They filled it up more when they crucified Christ. Now they are filling it up to the brim as they try to keep the Gentiles from hearing about Jesus.

In Matthew #27 the Roman governor Pilate tried to avoid taking responsibility for ordering the execution of Jesus. After washing his hands and proclaiming his innocence, the Jewish people before him cried out, "His blood be on us and on our children!" In 70 AD, roughly 40 years later, some of that blood came on these people and their children. The Jews revolted against the Romans, and the Romans came in and wiped out Jerusalem. They crucified hundreds of Jews.

Down through the following centuries the Jewish people have been persecuted. Thousands of them were killed in the Inquisition and in pogroms in Russia and in Europe. Six million Jews were murdered in the

Holocaust by the Nazis during WWII. The Jews have suffered for their rejection of Jesus.

Some of this suffering has been perpetrated in the name of Christ. In the eleventh century some Crusaders killed Jewish people in Europe because they blamed them for the crucifixion of Jesus. In 1492 King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella got credit for financing some Italian guy in his expedition across the Atlantic. Also in that year they expelled 150,000 Jews from their homes in Spain in the name of Christ. In 1555 Pope Paul IV ordered Roman Jews to live in a ghetto. Across the street from the entrance to this ghetto was a church on which an inscription from Isaiah appeared. It read, "I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good..." For more than three centuries no pope would act to dismantle this ghetto.

Martin Luther is the hero of the Protestant Reformation. But toward the end of his life he wrote a tract entitled "On the Jews and Their Lies." In it he wrote that Jews "should be forbidden on pain of death to praise God, to give thanks, to pray, and to teach publicly among us and in our country." He goes on to call for the burning of Jewish books, the burning of synagogues, the outlawing of Jewish schools and the prohibition of Jewish worship.

Was this behavior done in the name of Christ justified? Absolutely not. Judgment of the Jews is God's responsibility, not ours. Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is to love one's neighbor as oneself. Cruel behavior toward God's Chosen People is hardly a display of love.

In Genesis #12 God told Abraham that those who bless Abraham and his descendants will be blessed, and those who curse them will be cursed. While Paul was exasperated at times by the behavior of his Jewish opponents, he also kept trying to reach them with spiritual truth. At the beginning of Romans # 9 he wrote, "I am speaking the truth in Christ... that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Many Jewish people are painfully aware of this history of Christian antisemitism. That is why they are sometimes not trusting of Christian people. People calling themselves Christians have often acted cruelly toward the Jews. At the same time, we can recognize God's hand of

judgment in these bad things that have happened. God's judgment does come upon those who resist and hinder the gospel.

At the end of v. 16 Paul says, "But wrath has come upon them at last!" Is this a reference to the destruction that came upon Judea and Jerusalem in 70 AD? Is it a reference to this long history of persecution? To what was Paul referring?

I suspect that he is referring to the coming Tribulation that is still future from our day. Why? First, there are many references in the book to the return of Christ and the events associated with it. Paul seems to be writing this letter with one eye on the end times. Second, Paul puts a "the" in Greek in front of "wrath." He is talking about "the" wrath, which suggests that a particular time of judgment is in view. Third, in v. 10 of the previous chapter Paul told the Thessalonians "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." The context seems to suggest that Paul has in mind the seven year Tribulation where God will display His wrath in a special way upon those who have opposed His purposes.

In what sense then can Paul say that this wrath has already come? In the Bible prophetic events that lie in the future are often described with a past tense verb to stress their certainty. The sense in our passage is that judgment is on the way. Perhaps Paul saw evidence of future judgment in the current events of his day. We know, for example, that in 49 AD the Roman emperor expelled all of the Jews from Rome. Also in that year there was a massacre of hundreds of Jews in the temple during Passover.

What is the proper response then to the reality of God's judgment? It is to make sure that we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior. Then we do not need to worry about being subject to God's wrath. There also may be some reassurance in knowing that those who continue to persecute the followers of Jesus will eventually meet the judgment of God.

The healthy church, and its members, will embrace the word of God. They will persevere in the midst of opposition to the word of God. And they will recognize that the wrath of God is the result of opposition to the word of God.

The word of God in our passage refers to the message that God communicated to human beings through His representatives. But in the Bible we find that God Himself communicated with us in the form of His

Son. In the first chapter of John's Gospel we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." A bit later the Apostle John tells us, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." Jesus Christ became the best means of communication from the Triune God with the creatures whom He created. The God-man Jesus ultimately died on the cross so that we could go to heaven some day by faith in Him. We are going to express our appreciation for His sacrifice now as we observe the Lord's Supper.