

Gospel Shaped Church (8) - How to Become a Christian | 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13

We have seen in this chapter how Paul views himself & his co-workers as apostles, simply meaning representatives, sent ones or messengers of Christ. An apostle, a representative, a messenger by definition is a person without a personal agenda; they are representatives of another carrying another's message. At a very fundamental level this is what an apostle was at the time this letter was written. Paul has been highlighting the whole way through this chapter that the gospel they brought to the Thessalonians is **"the gospel of God"** (v2 & 8). They have been approved by God & entrusted with his gospel (4). Therefore they speak not to please man, but God who tests their hearts (4). God is witness to this (5 & 10). Then the phrase **"apostles of Christ"** is used in verse 6 to underline this further. Paul is doing all he can to emphasise that when they came to Thessalonica they did not speak on their own authority but with the authority of God. They came not with a message they invented but with one entrusted to them by God. This is so important to him. Then of course he builds on this further when he points out their character & conduct among them. They cared for them like a nursing mother & they instructed them like a father with his own children. They also worked night & day in order not to be a burden & to distance themselves as far as possible from the frauds that often passed through the city for personal gain.

Paul, Silas & Timothy were not in the ministry for personal gain, they wore no **"cloak of covetousness"** or **"mask of greed"**... but were in the ministry solely as representatives of Christ, as messengers of God. They carried God's message, & aligned with his vision! It is this very reality that enabled them to suffer & be shamefully treated in places like Philippi. For they were not so much concerned with how the message was received but with where the message came from. They were so gripped with being representatives of Christ & they were so gripped by the message entrusted to them they had no time for living for anything less. Christian ministry is about surrendering our personal vision, comfort & self to live for the gospel of God. The gospel is our vision, the gospel is our agenda, the gospel is our mission because the gospel is the authoritative message which has been entrusted to us by God & which alone has the power to make & mature Christians & to create & cultivate Christian community.

After highlighting what gospel ministry should not & should look like Paul reminds these Thessalonian Christians that this is also what they accepted the gospel as – they accepted it as the word of God, not as the word of men. In other words the Thessalonian believers, because of the work of the Spirit (1:5), recognised & responded to the authority of the message they heard from Paul & the others. And this was key to & evidence of them becoming Christian. So Paul now turns again to thanksgiving & writes in v13; **"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."**

This verse teaches us how the Thessalonian believers came to Christ & therefore how the Christian community in Thessalonica began. In doing it provides a template for how one becomes a Christian. It helps us to know if & why & how we are Christian & it helps us to play our small but significant part in helping others become Christian. In 1:2-3 Paul thanks God for their ongoing witness but here in 2:13 Paul goes back & thanks God for their conversion to Christ. In doing so he describes how it happened. Firstly they received the gospel by hearing! Secondly they welcomed the gospel as the word of God! We will come back to these two points.

I've pointed out before that the term **"word of God"** in the current context is being used to describe what Paul has called the gospel up to this point in the letter. Here he twice calls it the **"word of God"**. The gospel is the word of God & therefore it carries his authority. Just as the Old Testament prophets were entrusted with the word of God so Paul & his co-workers were entrusted with this authoritative word from God when they were entrusted with the gospel. Leon Morris writes; *"Paul could preach with certainty & power, for he had the profound conviction that what he said was not of man's devising; it was the word of God, a conviction at the heart of the church's message."*

We have now been entrusted with this same gospel via the NT which has been handed down to us. The baton is now in our hands. This is our message because it is God's message. This is what shapes how we live & all we do & say as Christians & church. When we preach the gospel we can confidently & completely declare **"Thus says the Lord"**, we cannot have such confidence when declaring anything else. Hebrews 1:1-2 says; **"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."** The gospel unpacks the how of this for us & therefore the gospel is the authoritative message of God for the days we live in. There is no other message from God that can compete with it & therefore every other message accredited to God must be measured by it... There simply is no other message that carries the authority of God like the gospel – it is the power of God unto salvation for those who believe. The Bible says that about no other message. The more we know it the more we know this is true. For this reason if we go one Sunday without the gospel being declared, then we fall short of being representatives of Christ. The Lord's Table exists to help ensure this does not happen... This is why we are here, this is what we have been entrusted with, this is our vision, this is what makes us Christian & this is what works in & among us as Christians.

What essentially is this gospel? What is the word of God that Paul passed on & which these believers received & welcomed as just that? Well we have the essence of what these believers accepted as the word of God summarised for us in **Acts 17:1-4**.

Here is the essence of what they believed & therefore here is the essence of the gospel: Acts 17:2-3 **"he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to**

suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaimed to you, is the Christ.” Here is what we glean from this: His basis is Scripture! His priority is explaining the death & resurrection of the Christ. His focus is the person of Jesus! 1. The Bible is the basis of the gospel entrusted to us! 2. The death & resurrection of the Christ is the priority of the gospel entrusted to us! 3. The Person of Jesus is the focus of the gospel entrusted to us! For he is what the Bible is all about, he is the Messiah who suffered & rose from the dead. The gospel then is the message that explains all we need to know about Jesus so we can encounter him & live for him! To welcome it as the word of God is to welcome Jesus into your life & to make him Lord of your life. This is how to become a Christian. Paul says there are two sides to this:

1. Receive the Gospel By Hearing

Paul writes; **“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard for us.”** Paul uses this same word ‘received’ in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 when he writes; **“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with Scripture, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with Scripture.”** Again highlighting how the gospel did not originate with Paul & how he viewed himself as simply the messenger. Paul was a receiver of the word as much as the Thessalonian believers!

The word of God, the message of God, the voice of God was heard through these men! When the gospel is preached the voice of God is heard – the voice which has the power to awaken faith! In the Greek there is a strong emphasis on hearing here. The gospel must be heard. Not only with ears but more importantly with hearts! In Biblical thinking hearing & obedience go together, so it is not idle hearing we are talking about but active hearing. Hence they not only listened to the word preached, they received it – they drank it in, they were open to it, they engaged with it, they took it serious. Going to church & idly listening to weekly sermons or moral lessons or even the gospel itself will not save you, receiving the gospel into your life will... This was the first side to them becoming Christians. **I hear echoes of Romans 10:5-17 here.**

I think these verses in Romans complement the ones we’re looking at in showing us what receiving looks like, what active hearing looks like & in helping us see how to become a Christian. It is not enough to listen to the gospel. Listening is only one part of true hearing; the other part is receiving what we listen to, by confessing it with your mouth & believing it in your heart & by living a life shaped by it - obedience. This leads to the second side of how to become a Christian:

2. Welcome the Gospel as 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.”** Do you feel the weight of this? The word accepted conveys the idea of welcome; the Greek word is the normal

word for reception of a guest. This is the imagery being used. To welcome the gospel as the word of God is to give it authority over your life. That is what you are doing when you receive & accept the gospel **“not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.”** It is not just that we welcome the gospel into our lives because it is a nice addition, so we give it a little side room in our hearts... No we welcome the gospel into our lives as the word of God. And to welcome the gospel as the word of God is to surrender the keys of our life to Jesus... for he comes in not as temporary guest but as eternal Saviour & Lord – he makes our lives his home... Therefore to receive the gospel is to give Christ authority to enter every room & rearrange everything as he sees fit. To welcome the gospel is to welcome Christ into our lives, into our clutter, into our privacy & into our tidiest rooms & when he comes in by his Spirit he will work at rearranging everything. He will order the skip & will get rid of stuff we have been holding onto for years... He will bring in new things, new priorities & new people, maybe even people we would not have let through the doors ourselves. To welcome the gospel as the word of God is to surrender all to Jesus.

Paul writes; **“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men but as what it is, the word of God, which is at work in your believers.”** This phrase **“at work in you believers”** can also be translated **“at work among you believers”**. The gospel works in the believer as an individual & the gospel works among the believing community – the church. It is two sides of the same coin. Think about how the gospel works in us & in the believing community at the same time... (Forgiving spirit...)

Once you have received the gospel & welcomed it as the word of God it will work in you & it will work among us. It will do in you what you cannot do in yourself & will produce among us what we could not produce ourselves – the power of the gospel, the power of all Christ is & all he has done & all he has promised. It is at work in us & among us. Ripping down the old wallpaper of sin & shame that we lived in & painting every room with the colours of grace & redemption. Note that it is the gospel that does the work in or among us. The fruit of welcoming the gospel into our hearts as the word of God is the ongoing work of the gospel in us & among us! It is the gospel at work among believers!

May we restrain from advising Jesus in how to decorate our lives; may we simply let him get on with doing what he does best – making all things new! Receive the word of God, welcome the gospel for what it is...