

Title: A Note of Caution . . . and Invitation  
Text: I Thessalonians 1: 1 – 10  
Date: October 22, 2017

I just want to give you a head's up that my message today, and for the next two weeks, will loosely be based on Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica. This should be of some interest for those curious about the roots of Christianity. You see the earliest gospel – the Gospel of Mark – was written around 70 AD. Of all of Paul's letters, this is thought to be the earliest of them, believed to be written in 52 AD. So when this letter arrived in the mail, no one said, "Oh boy, the first book of the Bible!" No one said, "Let's study this, and see how it compares to the gospels." It was just a letter. There was no frame of reference.

Some further background might be in order, if we are going to be playing in these waters for the next couple of weeks. Please be clear, however, that I make no claims of being a New Testament scholar. For those seeking extra credit, there is an account of Paul's visit to Thessalonica recorded in Acts 17. So Paul might have established the church around A.D. 49 or 50 on his second missionary journey, and the letter today might have been written 2 or 3 years later. So this is very early material.

Thessalonica was an important city, the capital of the Macedonian province, located on an inlet, and on an important trade route. The converts referred to here likely would have participated in any one of several cults in this busy port city. OK. Enough background.

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I once heard preaching described as "local theology." I am taking a little bit of a risk inasmuch as I have only been here one month. Do I know you well enough to have a license to practice theology? Don't know. Here goes.

I know that many of you came from more conservative churches where questions were not encouraged. From that background, Shepherdstown proved to be a wonderful breath of fresh air. Not only were you free to ask questions, but you were given resource material to help you consider alternate meanings or explanations to any number of different things. Equipped with tools of "historical and textual criticism," your intellect was no longer offended as you began to realize that there may be alternate explanations to things.

While there is a sense in which this pursuit can be liberating, there is another sense in which this can pose something of a concern. I hope I am not reading too much into anything, but as we are on the path of "explaining things away" that seem hard to believe, are we satisfied with seeing Jesus as nothing more than a good teacher?

So then with those ruminations in the back of my mind, I read Paul's words this morning where he reflects on how the **"message of the gospel came to [the Thessalonians] not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."** (I Thess. 1:5) Now there is no miracle here of turning water into wine. There is simply a description of something indescribably powerful that happened to a group of people. Can this actually happen? Beyond the power of words, can you even conceive of some kind of movement of the Spirit that powerfully effects and changes people?

Of course there is always room for skepticism. I few years back I read an article describing a village in India where 350 Dalits converted to Christianity in one day. The article contained lines such as, "God's power at work today!" Now just two weeks ago I read an article that said

“325 Dalits convert to Buddhism today.” Say what? You see, the Dalits are the lowest class in India, and there are significant social advantages in India to change your status on your government ID card. There are reasons to be skeptical.

When I was in Papua New Guinea I lived in a village that was known as “a Christian village.” Even though the first missionaries had come to PNG about 80 years earlier, many people in this village described to me in a very serious tones about a time roughly 40 years earlier when, to use Paul’s words, the **“message of the gospel came to [them] not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”** The way they described it, this was an otherworldly milestone in the life of the village. Frankly, I came to know these people well, and there is no part of me that desires to throw cold water on their story! I am forced to conclude that something happened!

Thinking of these days in which we live though, I reserve some healthy skepticism when I hear stories of “group conversion,” but I have no doubt whatsoever that the Spirit still works today in powerful ways at inexplicable times in individual lives. The Spirit has been real in my life.

Though not a name I would expect that any of you would recognize, Dr. Ralph W. Hood is one of handful of people who are involved in the serious, scholarly study of mystical experiences. Folks who study this have identified six categories that are characteristic of states of mystical consciousness. This would include states of (1) unity, (2) transcendence of time and space, (3) intuitive knowledge, (4) sacredness, (5) deeply felt positive mood, and (6) ineffability and paradoxicality. This is hardly the place to go into this in any detail, but studies have been done not only in the vast realm of religious literature, but also through exhaustive interviews with many people in our times who have had mystical experiences. This would include people in various religious traditions, as well as people coming from no religious tradition at all. More people have such experiences than you would imagine. This fascinating realm of interspirituality transcends the religious silos we often find ourselves in.

So you might ask, “If there are reports of mystical experiences in all religious traditions, why do we spend so much time talking about Christianity?” Fair question. I am not entirely sure, but I think it was the Dalai Lama that said that “it is better to dig 1 twelve-foot hole, than 12 one-foot holes.” In other words, rather than dabbling in numerous traditions, perhaps we better served by digging deeper into the tradition that we were born into.

In the early 1960s, Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904-1984) stated that if Western Christianity did not rediscover its mystical foundations, we might as well close the doors of the churches because we had lost the primary reason for our existence. He said, **“In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic (one who has experienced God for real) or nothing at all.”** Now don’t let the word “mystic” scare you. It simply means one who has moved from mere belief systems or belonging systems to actual inner experience. All spiritual traditions at their mature levels agree that such a movement is possible, desirable, and even available to everyone. The intent is *not* to imply that only extreme mystical experiences – with those 6 characteristics that I described earlier – are the only ones that count.

I wonder if any of you are anxious for me to address some of the social justice issues of our times. Believe me, we’ll get there. But until someone has had some level of inner religious experience, there is no point in asking them to follow the ethical ideals of Jesus or to really understand Christian doctrines beyond the formulaic level.

My hope for you is to be something more than the Shepherdstown Ethical Society. Richard Rohr writes: **“You quite simply don’t have the power to obey the law or follow any ideal—such as loving others, forgiving enemies, nonviolence, or humble use of power—except in and**

**through union with God. Nor do doctrines like the Trinity, the Real Presence, salvation, or the mystery of Incarnation have any meaning that actually changes your life. They are merely books on shelves. Without some inner experience of the Divine... nothing authentically new or life-giving happens."**

So my note of caution is that we don't get so stuck in our heads that the message of the Christ is stripped of its transformational power. My note of invitation is that we help one another fan the flames of the spirit within so that we might be continually drawn to go deeper into an inner Reality that will make a difference in terms of how we conduct ourselves in the world.

This shift in orientation can make a difference in terms of how we read Paul's letters. Verse 4 references how God **"has chosen you."** If we read this with our mind we get into arguments about the doctrine of election. If we read this with our heart, we might ask ourselves: "Have I had such an experience in the life of faith where it actually *feels* like I have been chosen as God's beloved?"

Verse 6 describes how the Thessalonians **"received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit."** If we read this with our mind we get into arguments about the content of the words that were shared. If we read this with our heart, we might ask ourselves: "Have I ever received a Word that opened floodgates within me where I experienced cascading joy?"

Verse 9 reads: **"For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols."** If we read this with our mind we want to find out more about the kinds of cults that were active in that port city. If we read this with our heart we might say, "May we too be the kind of place where, throughout the region, people speak of the welcome that they received here."

During my time here I don't expect to spend much time telling you what to believe. Instead, I rather think of myself as being "a great tease," exciting you with the possibility that there may be *something more* to this life of faith than you have previously fathomed... that there may be *something more* to this person of Jesus the Christ than your mind has been able to grasp. Ultimately, may this be something that *you* experience more of for yourself.

Amen.

## **I Thessalonians 1: 1 – 10**

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

·We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ·remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ·For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ·because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ·And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ·so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ·For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ·For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ·and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.