

Building A Church Of Thessalonica For The 21st Century | Part 5 | True Fellowship | Dr. Madana Kumar Series

Contributed by Dr. Madana Kumar, Phd on Mar 11, 2024

Scripture: Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, 1 Thessalonians 5:11-15, 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4, 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2 Thessalonians 1:12

Denomination: Evangelical/Non-Denominational

Summary: Christianity is not a solitary religion. Church is Christ's body built on the unlimited liability principle. Dr. Madana Kumar, digs deep into the question of how we can build a community with unlimited liability mentality

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This is Part 5 of the Series of studies on 1 & 2 Thessalonians

For an Audio/ video version of this please visit here <https://youtu.be/DD6334VZSS0>

Good morning. We will continue our study of the epistles to Thessalonians today.

Till now, we have studied several things about the church of Thessalonica

- God orchestrated events in Paul's ministry journey to establish the church at a pagan place like Thessalonica
- The church at Thessalonica thrived despite persecution and threats and went on to become a model church.
- One of the key reasons for their success as a church was their hope of resurrection and the anticipation of Jesus' second coming.
- In preparation for His second coming we can learn several lessons on how to become a true church, namely
 - o True Transformation
 - o True Ministry
 - o True Fellowship
 - o True Evangelism
- True Transformation is a cycle of hearing and accepting the gospel, imitating Christ, setting an example and then sharing the gospel.
- True Ministry happens when you focus on building the faith of the congregation through Bold and Courageous Preaching and teaching. Bold preaching is balance of Comforting, Exhortation and Charging.

In this fifth part of the series, we will look into the third pillar of True church, namely True Fellowship.

One fact that sets Christianity apart is the fact that it is not a solitary religion. Paul uses the analogy of Christians being parts of a body in Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. The parts of a body cannot function by themselves but need to work together for the body to function. Christians are designed to build, nurture, worship as a community. The term "one another" is used more than 50 times in the New Testament.

What makes a community? What differentiates a community from a worldly institution?

Let us look at the pictures in the slide. What is common between all of them? All of them are declared as fraudsters by law. But despite the serious frauds committed by them through the companies that they set up; their personal wealth is intact. What enables them to keep their personal wealth safe, even though they own thousands of crores of rupees (billions) to their employees, vendors etc? The secret is in the law that protects them. If you look at the companies they have set up (or any other company for that matter), it will have a three letter suffix like Ltd., in India or LLC or LLP in the west. What is the meaning of these three letters? Ltd stands for Limited. LLC stands for Limited Liability Company etc. They are incorporated as institutions with limited liability. What does the limited liability clause mean? It gives the investors protection from any loss happening because of their business decisions. It limits the investors liability only to the extent of money that they have actually invested in the company. We cannot touch their personal wealth, beyond their committed investment in the company. You will actually see this limited liability clause in several documents that you get on a daily basis. This is what is referred to as the small print. The warranty card that you get with your product comes with several limited liability clauses. The insurance policy that you take out comes with many limited liability clauses. The medical test report comes with a limited liability clause. The doctor's diagnosis comes with a limited liability clause. I can go on... The message is clear. The world operates on a limited liability clause. There is literally nothing that comes without a limited liability clause.

This is where the church should differ. The church was not built on a limited liability clause. The church is a body of Christ. When Christ died on the cross, and asked His father to "forgive them for they do not know what they are doing," He was not going by the limited liability clause. He was pouring out the unconditional love of God on all of humankind. This is what is expected out of a Christian community. The willingness to drop the limited liability towards each other and embrace the mentality of unlimited liability towards each other. That is what True fellowship is. True Fellowship is when members of the community go by the unlimited liability clause when it comes to our interactions with other members of the community.

How do we demonstrate True Fellowship with unlimited liability? Paul offers some suggestions in his letter to the Thessalonians.

1 Thess 5: 11-15 Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing. 12 And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. 15 See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.

As you notice, Paul starts many of his exhortations with the word “therefore”. This is one of them. And whenever he uses Therefore, we know that we need to look at the passage in the context of the previous passages. If you look at your bibles, you will notice that this passage comes immediately after he assures them of the Second coming of Jesus and exhorting them to be watchful, sober, and be prepared with the right attire (breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation, as Paul puts it). Then Paul affirms the comfort that God’s plans for us is for our salvation through the death of Jesus Christ and not for God’s wrath. And then Paul segues into this passage where he lays down the guidelines for True Fellowship that should make up the True Church. What we need to understand from this positioning of this passage is that this is one of the preparations required for Jesus’ second coming.

In this passage Paul brings out the following aspects of True Fellowship

- Comfort each other, especially the fainthearted
- Edify each other
- Recognize those who labour among you
- Be at peace with each other
- Warn those who are unruly
- Uphold the weak
- Be patient
- Pursue what is good for all

It surely is a long list, and I have left out what we need to do for those “above you”. I have basically kept only the “each other” commands. But I am happy that I came across this list before the Lord’s second coming. Because I would not want to be caught complaining about my fellow church members when the Lord comes. I would rather be caught doing some of the things Paul listed here, comforting, edifying, recognising, upholding etc., We will not look into them individually, but let us look into them in a collective manner.

Let us first and foremost note that this is not all goody, goody list. Paul carefully slips in “warn those who are unruly” command here. So a True fellowship has a responsibility to identify and warn trouble makers. I am not going to focus on that today. The reason why I am not going to focus on that is because, as human beings, we all are wired to catch people do the things. Let us take the case of grocery shopping, not many do it physically now-a-days, but assuming that you were given a list of 23 items to get when you went out. You go out, and do you best, and return with 22 items. What do you think you will get picked out for? If you are like me, you are not going appreciate the fact that I came back with 22 right items, but the focus will be on the missing item. This is basic human tendency. We are great at catching people do the wrong things. Here is where a true fellowship should differ. Let us try and shift our focus to catching people do the right things and recognise them/ appreciate them immediately. I am glad at BBF most of do that very well. Let us continue to do this without letting go of that habit.

Paul asks the Thessalonian congregation to recognise those who labour among you. Let us dig in a bit deeper here. Mostly we are good to appreciate the pastor or the worship team etc. They labour among us and it is appropriate to recognise and appreciate them. Preaching/ Teaching/ Singing etc require great labour, but they are also the most visible areas of labour in a church. A True fellowship will go beyond the most visible areas of labour among you, while recognising. A true fellowship will know and recognise the person who gets us snacks every week. A true fellowship will appreciate the kitchen team. The person who keeps the supplies coming, the person who changes the toilet roll when it is over, or refills the handwash bottles. A true church will recognise the person who keeps the church clean. Let us continue to do what we have been doing and be a little more intentional in recognising our brothers and sisters who labour among us, especially in the invisible tasks.

Let us look at Paul's exhortation to uphold or uplift each other. Just imagine this situation. We go to a festival a fair nearby. This is a happy place to be and so we take our little daughter (or grand daughter) along with us. The place is filled with happy things, there is music, there are games, there are stalls, fireworks etc., etc. Overall it fits the description of a happy place. You are happy. Then you feel a tug at your trousers/ dress. You look down and realise that the little girl who tagged along with you is not happy. You wonder why she is not happy. Afterall, it is a happy place. So you decide to go down to her level to ask, Baby what is wrong. But when you bent down to her level, you realise that what she sees is not what you are seeing. At her eye level, all that she can see is dirty feet, and dirty shoes. You understand the problem. You lift your little one up and put on your shoulders, and the little one's face brightens up. She is now able to see and enjoy all that you have been enjoying all this time. You have done two things here. You demonstrated empathy when you bent down to her level to see what she is seeing from her perspective. Then you uplifted her. And see the difference it made!! A True Fellowship does this to each other. They understand each other's perspectives, they are able to empathise with each other and then uplift each other. Let us look for opportunities to uplift each other as much as possible. In the current times, when things are difficult out there, we can all do with a bit of uplifting. Paul acknowledges the suffering and persecution that the Thessalonian Christians are experiencing in 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5, and expresses his solidarity with them. This is part of uplifting. Sharing in our sufferings and persecutions. It is in times of adversity that Christians should stand together, and we are living in times of adversity for sure.

So let us do a small activity to practice love, appreciation, recognition and uplifting right now.

All of us felt good after the activity, isn't it? There is joy in giving appreciation, there is joy in receiving appreciation, and in doing so we build each other up. We build a True Fellowship, and through that a True Church.

But why should we spend our energy in building a True fellowship? There are at least two string reasons for us to do so.

1. There is a beautiful reward waiting for all of us when we do this. Paul says in 1 Thess 3:12-13, And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, 13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

Personally, I for sure want to be ready for His second coming. And we can do this by building up each other. Loving, comforting, edifying, uplifting, recognising .

2. We need to remember is that building a true church is not so that our church can become famous or popular. No, it is so that a True Church Glorifies God, Glorifies Christ. Paul starts the 1st chapter of 2 Thessalonians by admitting that they are bound to give thanks to the lord for "the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, (2 Thess 1:3). He ends the chapter 1 by affirming that all this is required so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess 1:12). You see, the church is the body of Christ. Anything we do to build that up is an act of glorification of Christ.

I hope that gives us enough reasons to invest in building a True Fellowship. So next time, when we are given an opportunity to demonstrate love, recognise, appreciate, uplift another church member, let us not hesitate. It is an opportunity to Glorify Christ. Let us just go ahead and do that.

Let us summarise what we learned today.

1. Christianity is not a solitary religion. It operates on the basis of "One another".
2. The world operates on the limited liability clause.
3. Church is a community built on the basis of unlimited liability.
4. Building a True Fellowship requires us to embrace the mindset of unlimited liability
5. Building a True Fellowship is possible through love, recognition, uplifting, comforting "one another.
6. The reward for those who invest in building a True Fellowship, is their preparedness for His second coming.
7. Any act towards building a True Fellowship is an act of glorifying Christ.

Let us pray.