

## 1 Thessalonians 1      Turning to God from Idols

Many people in America are *Almost Christian*. That was the title of a book that came out last year by a Princeton scholar, but the data come from a study a few years back called the National Study of Youth and Religion. The beliefs the study describes are held by more than just our youth.

The principal American faith, which the scholars have labeled *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*, consists of these specific points:

1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth."
2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."
3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."
4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."
5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."

### **To know the true and the living God, we have to give up our idols – the false gods that we now believe in.**

1:1    **The Church**      A church is a group of people called out by God from the mass of humanity to a life of separation to Him. They belonged to **God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. Paul is writing to the Christians in Thessalonica – not to the city as a whole.

An identifying mark of a true Christian is that he or she is part of a church. The word church in Greek is *ekklesia*, literally means a group of people called out and brought together into a public meeting. We could translate the word as "meeting, assembly, or congregation."

**Grace**    The customary greeting in Greek; it can also mean "Rejoice!" The grace or favor of God is certainly something we can rejoice over.

**Peace**    is equivalent to the Hebrew *shalom* meaning. It means "favor," "prosperity," and "well-being." These two words of salutation always occur in this order in the New Testament.

Theologically God's grace is the basis for our peace. Our *shalom* or well-being depends upon God's peace. Paul takes these commonplace greetings and packs them full of meaning. In this context they are more of a prayer or a blessing.

### 1:2-5    **The Visible Faith of the Thessalonian Church:**

- **Work of faith**    This was an active church. Their work was produced by faith in Christ.
- **Labor of love**    This was a hard working church and love prompted all their labor.
- **Patience of hope**      Their endurance was inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The God of the Thessalonian Church:**

Paul mentions all three Persons of the Trinity: **God the Father** (v.3), **The Lord Jesus Christ** (v.3), and **The Holy Spirit** (v.5)

Not everyone who believes in God believes in God as the Trinity, but true Christian doctrine will always uphold the Trinity. This is not an optional belief. What does it mean?

*The Christian understanding of God as triune. Trinity means that the one divine nature is a unity of three persons and that God is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ultimate basis for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity lies in the divine self-disclosure in Jesus, who as the Son revealed the Father and poured out the Holy Spirit.* (The Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms)

There are not three Gods; there are three distinct Persons who share the one divine nature.

**Election:** Election tells us that salvation is a work of God. Self-confidence is inadequate.

- Election does not imply that people are saved without genuine personal faith in Christ.
- It does imply God has provided for our salvation and without Him we cannot be saved.

In his first letter Peter described believers as follows:

**1 Peter 1:2 NKJV** *elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ...*

The Gospel in word and in power:

**Not ... In Word only** Words are not enough, but at the very least, we have to understand what the Gospel means.

**1 Cor 15:1-5 NKJV** <sup>1</sup>Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, <sup>2</sup>by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup>For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. ...

**In Power** The Gospel, which Paul just explained to us, has a life-transforming effect upon those who believe it. When we put our faith in Christ, He saves us from judgment, gives us eternal life and begins to increase our spiritual understanding. We no longer abide in darkness.

**John 12:44-50 NKJV** <sup>44</sup>Then Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. <sup>45</sup>And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. <sup>46</sup>I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. <sup>47</sup>And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. <sup>48</sup>He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. <sup>49</sup>For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. <sup>50</sup>And I know that His command is everlasting life. ...

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1:6-10 Their acceptance of the gospel resulted in changed lives among the Thessalonian believers. They became imitators of the missionaries and imitators of Jesus Himself.

- This was a church born in the midst of persecution and yet they were joyful.
- Thessalonica was located no more than about 50 miles from Mt. Olympus, the traditional home of the Greek gods. In the very home of Greek mythology, they were turning away from these **idols**, these false gods **to serve the living and true God**.
- They were a newer church, but they had already become an example to other churches because of the active nature of their faith.
- From this church the gospel was going out into other areas.
- They were also waiting for Jesus. They had very specific beliefs about Jesus Christ, the coming judgment, and Christ's future return. When Paul was in Athens, this was his message to the pagan philosophers on Mars Hill:

**Acts 17:29-31 NKJV** <sup>29</sup>... we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. **[nor is he or she the god of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism – OK, maybe I added that, but the point is we can't make up our own gods and expect them to be real – God is who He is]** <sup>30</sup>Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Who did God raise from the dead? Jesus. Jesus is going to judge the world. This is essential doctrine of the Christian faith. John said it like this:

**1Jn 5:19-21 NKJV** <sup>19</sup>We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. <sup>20</sup>And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

<sup>21</sup>Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

**To know the true and the living God, we have to be willing to give up our idols – our false ideas of God.**

## Conclusions:

Back in colonial days, the evangelist George Whitefield, observed a similar problem to what we have today. Many people, even those who attended church were **almost Christian** – but they were still not quite in the fold. This is how he described their problem at that time.

*“An **almost Christian**, if we consider him in respect to his duty to God, is one that halts between two opinions; that wavers between Christ and the world; that would reconcile God and Mammon, light and darkness, Christ and Belial. It is true, he has an inclination to religion, but then he is very cautious how [far he goes] in it: his false heart is always crying out, Spare thyself, do thyself no harm. He prays indeed, that “God’s will may be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” But notwithstanding, he is very partial in his obedience, and fondly hopes that God will not be extreme to mark every thing that he willfully does amiss; though an inspired apostle has told him, that “he who offends in one point is guilty of all.” But chiefly, he is one that depends much on outward ordinances, and on that account looks upon himself as righteous, and despises others; though at the same time he is as great a stranger to the divine life as any other person whatsoever. In short, he is fond of the form, but never experiences the power of godliness in his heart. He goes on year after year, attending on the means of grace, but then, like Pharaoh’s lean cows, he is never the better, but rather the worse for them.”*

*(George Whitefield)*

## The Solution:

### Becoming a Real Christian:

#### Marks of a Real Christian:

1. A real Christian believes the basic doctrines of the historical Christian faith – for example, in Christ’s virgin birth, His atoning death and literal resurrection, the Trinity and a literal future judgment.
2. A real Christian has received forgiveness of sins, has experienced the new birth and now has eternal life.
3. A real Christian allows the Word of God to transform his or her life through the inner working of the Holy Spirit.
4. A real Christian is not a spiritual loner, but outwardly identifies with other Christians as part of an active church.
5. A real Christian (and a real church) is concerned that others come to know Jesus Christ in the same way. Real Christians in real churches will be active in making that happen – taking Christ to a world that needs to know Him.