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A 6-SESSION STUDY  
FOR DIALOGUE IN  
COMMUNITY AROUND  
THE SCRIPTURES



# LAYING SOLID FOUNDATIONS IN THE GOSPEL

First Principles from 1 & 2 Thessalonians

BY JEFF REED

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These materials are designed to integrate with BILD International resources, which are designed to help churches train leaders.

All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from the New American Standard Bible.

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# ESTABLISHING THE THESSALONIAN COMMUNITY: THE INTENT OF THE LETTERS 1

It is easy to approach the Bible to look for what we can get out of it, rather than first reflecting carefully on the author's intent (purpose) for writing it. As we approach 1 and 2 Thessalonians, we must first explore the intent of the two letters. Who wrote them? Why were they written? What were they intended to accomplish? We know they were written by Paul to a young church in Thessalonica that he had recently founded. Let's begin by reading these two short letters in their entirety while thinking through the questions below. Then review the verses listed below and develop a summary paragraph of Paul's intention for writing these letters to this young church.

Attempt to discover how the second letter builds on the first one and why the second letter was necessary. Remember, Paul was writing to real churches. Paul says he felt daily pressure for his churches. As you read these letters, wrestle with what his pressures might have been.



## Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGES: 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS.  
THEN REFLECT ON 1 THESSALONIANS 2:18; 3:1-3;  
2 THESSALONIANS 2:2, 15; AND 3:4

### Think Through the Questions:

1. Why did Paul write these letters to the Thessalonian church? What were his main concerns? What was he trying to accomplish?
2. Is there any evidence these letters were intended to shape the young church in any way?
3. What clues can you gain from the individual verses listed above? Was Paul mainly concerned about people from within the church or people from outside the church having a destabilizing effect on the church?
4. In what sense did his second letter build on his first one?

**Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:**

Write a paragraph in the space below that summarizes Paul's overall intent for writing these letters to the Thessalonians. Following that, write a brief statement that describes how each letter contributed to Paul's overall intent. You should end up with one big intent statement and two corollary, subordinate statements.

Intent for Writing the Letters to the Thessalonian Church:

To \_\_\_\_\_

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by (1 Thessalonians) \_\_\_\_\_

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by (2 Thessalonians) \_\_\_\_\_

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## Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

### Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on the Intent of the Thessalonian Correspondence:

**Paul's Concept of Establishing.** One of the concepts that help us understand Paul's ministry is the idea of *establishing*. The New American Standard Bible consistently uses the word *establishing* in a number of passages related to Paul. After Paul went into an area and led people to Christ (in whatever manner he chose: sometimes on a riverbank, sometimes stirring up things in a synagogue, etc.), he gathered that cluster of believers together, began instructing them, and organized them into a local church, which included appointing leaders. He did that very early and very quickly within the churches, but he continued to strengthen the churches after that. In fact, in many of the situations, he left very quickly, particularly on his first missionary journey. At the conclusion of that first journey, he went back to Antioch and reported what had been done. Then he decided he would go back and strengthen the churches, or *establish* the churches. Acts 15 demonstrates this pattern very clearly. Near the end of the chapter, in verse 36, Luke writes, "After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'"

Paul led people to Christ, gathered them into community, instructed them intensely, appointed leaders, left the scene, and after a while he said, "Let's consider how they are

doing. Let's go back and visit them and see how they are." At the end of chapter 15, after he got into a ruckus with Barnabas, verse 41 says, "And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." "Strengthening" is the word establishing. He went around *establishing* the churches.

The particular word that is used here, *sterizo* (or one of its family members), is sometimes translated "strengthening," sometimes "confirming," and many times it is translated "establishing." It is a word that Paul used often. I wish it were translated consistently so it could be clearly seen throughout these different passages.

On one of Paul's journeys, he came across Timothy, who had a good reputation in the community. Paul wanted Timothy to go with him, so Timothy went with him. And what did they do? They continued to establish the churches. Notice Acts 16:5: "So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."

**The Concept of "Establishing" in the Thessalonian Correspondence.** In Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, we see one of the clearest pictures of how concerned he was to establish the new churches that had formed around his proclamation of the gospel. Paul uses the same word *establish* (from the *sterizo* family) in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The first use is found in 1 Thessalonians 3:2. After getting Timothy's report on how they were doing, Paul wanted to visit the Thessalonians himself, but instead, he sent Timothy with the first letter "to strengthen and encourage" them in their faith. The word *strengthen* is the same word again—"establish." The word is also used at the end of this section (1 Thessalonians 3:13), where Paul prays that their hearts would be "strengthened." The word appears again in 2 Thessalonians 3:3, where he expresses his concern for their stability because of those who were trying to disturb them and lead them a different direction. He expresses his confidence that God will establish them. Paul knows it is critical for this new church to be firmly rooted and established in their faith. And he knows there are people who would like to shake them from their newfound faith and destroy the church.

As you read through these letters, you can see the process Paul used to establish this church. He first shaped the Thessalonian community around a body of teaching (which he called "the faith," "the commands of Christ," and "*the traditions*" handed down to them from Christ). When others came along to try to challenge this teaching, he fought their efforts and used these letters to stabilize the churches. This process is visualized on the chart "Establishing the Thessalonian Community." Paul expected the Thessalonians to hold to the traditions—the teaching he delivered to them that he had received from Christ. Anyone who did not hold to it was considered unruly and eventually had to be dealt with firmly (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–13). These *traditions* included the gospel and all its directives—directives that describe our position in Christ and truths that direct our ethics and conduct. The chart details some of the process Paul used to establish the Thessalonians. The process is summarized from Abraham Malherbe's work, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophical Tradition of Pastoral Care*.

## Establishing the Thessalonian Community

Founding the Community	Shaping the Community (Commandments, Instructions)	Stabilizing the Community
Conversion	Concept of Traditions (Commandments, Instructions)	Challenge to Traditions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not in word only, but in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction 1 Thess. 1:5</li> <li>• The word of the Lord sounded forth from you 1 Thess. 1:8</li> <li>• You turned from idols to serve a true and living God 1 Thess. 1:9</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proved to be gentle among you as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children 1 Thess. 2:7</li> <li>• We were exhorting...as a father would his own children 1 Thess. 2:11</li> <li>• You received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God 1 Thess. 2:13</li> <li>• You received from us instruction as to how to walk...for you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of Jesus Christ 1 Thess. 4:1-2</li> <li>• Stand firm and hold to the traditions you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us 2 Thess. 2:15</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For we wanted to come to you...when we could endure it no longer... we sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions 1 Thess. 2:18; 3:1-3</li> <li>• That you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us 2 Thess. 2:2</li> <li>• Appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord, and give you instruction 1 Thess. 5:12</li> <li>• Admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak 1 Thess. 5:14</li> <li>• Keep aloof from any brother who leads an unruly life, and not according to the tradition which you received from us 1 Thess. 3:6</li> <li>• We have confidence... that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. And may the Lord direct your hearts... into the steadfastness of Christ 2 Thess. 3:4-5</li> </ul>



**The Process of Establishing the Church at Thessalonica.** One can see from the chart there was a three-phase process Paul used with the Thessalonians. Future study will reveal he used this process with all of his churches, and it provides a pattern for today.

1. Founding the Community. In this phase, the Thessalonians responded to the gospel as it was proclaimed (the kerygma). After they believed, their conversion was reinforced by careful instruction in the gospel. Their conversion needed to be reinforced, not as a desire to reform but as a *dynamic conversion*—a transfer, on the basis of God’s work, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God. (1 Thessalonians 1:1–2:12)
2. Shaping the Community. In this stage, the church was instructed in the *traditions* (the teaching, the didache) of the Apostles. This was a body of teaching delivered by the Apostles that all churches and individual believers were to follow. Paul established the Thessalonians in this didache through three means:
  - a. by teaching the church initially. (2:1–12)
  - b. by returning to visit the church. (2:13–20)
  - c. by sending a team member, if he was not able to go himself. (3:1–10)
3. Stabilizing the Community. Since many people followed Paul around—or followed after him—trying to get his churches out from under his influence, he had to reinforce his teaching to the Thessalonians by clarification and exhortation. This stage seemed inevitable for every church to pass through, almost as if it were a necessary part of the maturing process. Again, Paul followed the same pattern to try to get the churches to hold fast to the Apostles’ teaching. He challenged them to hold to his teaching (1 Thessalonians 3:1–5:28; 2 Thessalonians):
  - a. by sending letters that clarified his teaching and challenged them to hold firm.
  - b. by sending letters by men from his team and authorizing them to deal with those who would not conform.
  - c. by visiting them himself if possible.

It appears that Paul’s primary intent in writing these letters was to establish the Thessalonians firmly in the faith. In 1 Thessalonians he praised them for their whole-hearted reception of the gospel. Then he addressed three problems that were emerging, all from his expressed concern that they be firmly established in the faith. In the second letter he returned to two of the problems (work and the return of Christ) and gave them strong actions to implement concerning those who would not listen, so they would remain faithful to the teachings of Christ, which Paul had delivered to them.

### **Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:**

The following quote is taken from Abraham Malherbe’s work *Paul and the Thessalonians*. This book provides the structure for much of this booklet. In this quote, though

referring to his book, he is actually setting the context for understanding the Thessalonian correspondence.

“This book deals with Paul’s practice rather than his theology. It especially traces the way in which Paul established a church in the important city of Thessalonica, the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia, maintained contact with it in order to ensure its continuing nurture, and instructed its members on how to care for one another. Rather than simply organize a church, Paul founded, shaped, and nurtured a community. In so doing, he was sensitive to the needs of individuals within the community who had committed themselves to new beliefs and a new way of life. Paul was, in fact, engaged in pastoral care, although he does not describe the enterprise in that manner....

“...Not much more than eight months had passed between Paul’s first arrival in Thessalonica and the writing of his first letter to his converts there. In the intervening period Paul had founded a church and made a number of efforts to shape it into a viable and vital community. First Thessalonians reflects this pastoral care of a fledgling church more clearly than any of Paul’s other letters.”<sup>2</sup>

A brief quote from Georg Strecker is important in understanding the significance of these apostolic letters; his point can be easily missed.

“A characteristic identifying mark of 2 Thessalonians is that readers of the letter are to find their point of orientation in the authority and tradition of Paul as the apostolic norm.”<sup>3</sup>

Clearly these letters are written from the awareness that there is a tradition being handed down to the churches, and these letters contain important elements of that tradition. The *tradition* (the teaching, the faith, the sound doctrine, etc.) is embedded in these letters.

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quote:



## Think Through the Issues

It is critical that new churches become firmly established in the faith. Paul made it a major priority, and so should church leaders today. Part of a church becoming established involves seeing that each believer is strong in the faith and is ordering his or her life around the traditions and commandments the Apostles received from Christ. The letters to the Thessalonians were motivated by a concern to see the Thessalonian church become fully established in the teaching of Christ. Paul knew this was of utmost importance in order for the church to become stable and their faith to be kept strong and pure. This would enable a powerful witness to the watching world, that had already heard of their dramatic conversion. Today we have little or no sense of the need for establishing churches, and we don't have a clear process to do so. Reflect together on the importance of a church becoming established.

**ISSUE:** Importance of establishing a church

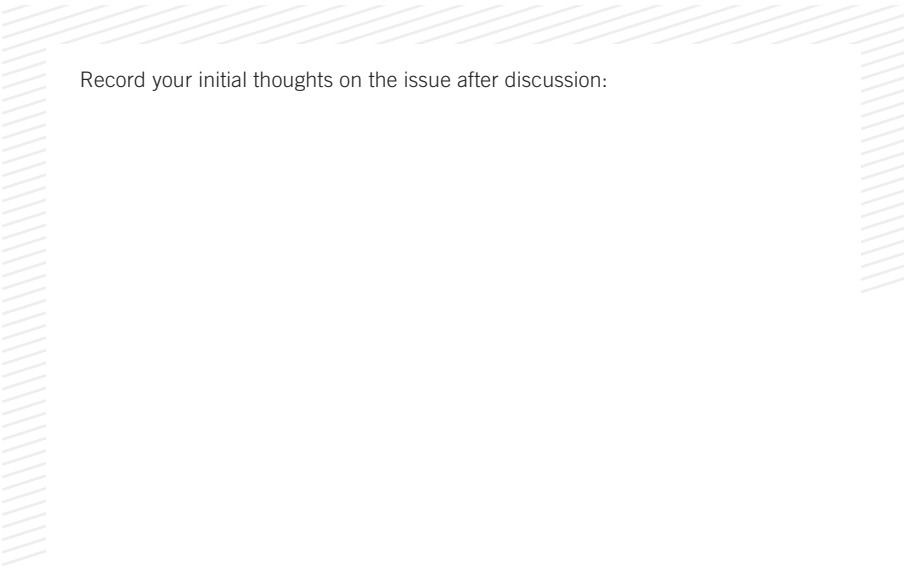
### Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why is it important to see that a church is carefully established in the faith?
2. What might be some of the consequences in the life of a church if it is not firmly established in the faith?
3. What does it take to firmly establish a church? What should leaders expect to have to do to establish a church?
4. How well established is your church? How well established are the churches in your network?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

**Discuss the issue in your small group.**



Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:



# Apply the Principles

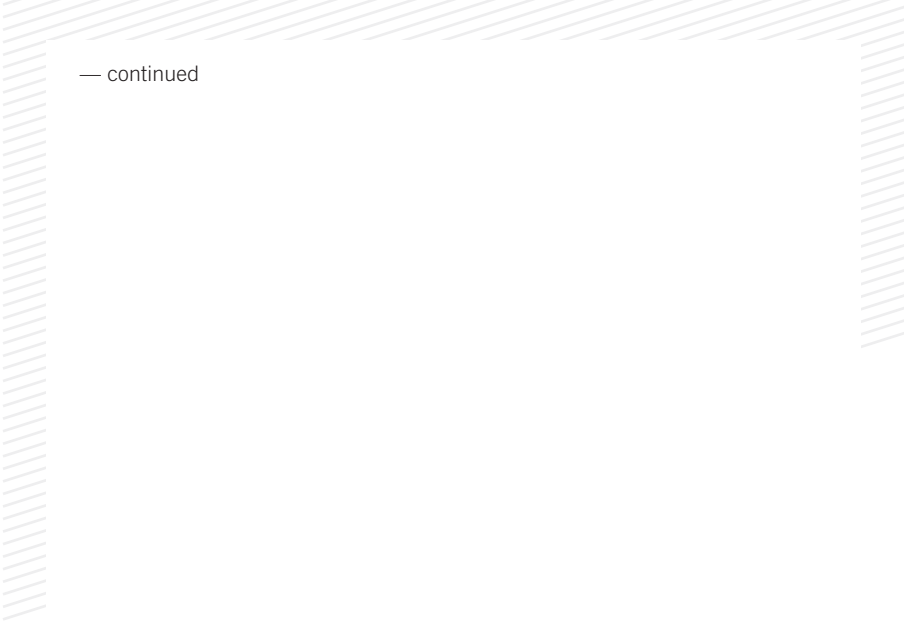
It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

## Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

### Design an Application for Your Life.

Think through the establishing process you have seen in this session. How well established are you in the faith? Were you established by a skillful leader like Paul? Or was your process unstructured and without careful nurturing? How about your church? your network of churches?

Write a brief summary of the process you were taken through to get you established in your faith. Compare it to that of the Thessalonians. Comment on the differences and their significance.



— continued