

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 Thes. 1:1-10, “Chosen for Reformation”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/29/2017**

Left to my own devices, I would not be the person I am today.

Life throws stuff at you, no matter who you are, and the natural response is to develop defense mechanisms.

In Jr. High and High School, my defense mechanisms ran like this:

Try to be cool by putting other people down and telling dirty jokes.

When that didn't work, try to hide away by avoiding people who intimidated me.

When that didn't work, accept that I'm not a very impressive person, and refrain from letting any of the girls I had crushes on know that I liked them.

If all else fails, play a lot of video games and watch a lot of sports.

All in all, nothing very unusual in my experience here –

adolescence is a hard time for most people in one way or another.

Nevertheless, the trajectory I was on needed significant correction.

I was patterning my life in ways

that would not serve me well in the long-term.

And so I say again, left to my own devices, I would not be the person I am today.

Fortunately, God brought older men and women into my life who were willing to show me another pattern.

These people became mentors to me at varying levels:

Monica Philippi, my Jr. High youth leader who opened up my desire to explore the Scriptures.

Tim Nein, who would find me in the narthex after worship and say,

“Johnson. How's it going?” This was then followed up by,

“No, I mean really. How's it going?”

He challenged me to be honest and open in my high-school Bible Study.

Russ Poston was my youth leader who put me on a leadership team.

Two years after I graduated, he offered me a summer youth internship.

I asked Russ what he thought of the idea that I might go into some kind of ministry, and he said, “Matt, I really don't know.

But I do know this: You're a proclaimer.

Whatever you end up doing, you'll be a proclaimer.”

Andre Lewis was my College Ministry leader in South Carolina,  
he taught me how to be okay with my dorky side.

Mike Gaffney invited me back to the Northwest and gave me a job  
in college ministry while I was still grieving the loss of my mother.  
He would take individual walks with his staff  
on the campus of the University of Washington  
and I will always remember him saying  
“Don’t just listen to what I say. Watch me. Watch what I do.”

I could go into detail with each one of these people, and then add on  
Larry Wagner, James Parker, Jera Bloomquist, Dave Lutz, Jim Kenagy,  
Darrell Johnson, Richard Thompson, Jin Kim.  
These are people who invested in my life, and offered up to me a pattern  
of living that I joined in myself.

This is why I find what Gordon Smith about faith formation to be so deeply true:  
“It’s not your parents or your friends that have the most impact  
on your faith development. Rather it’s the friends of your parents.”

This list of people I shared with you were not literally friends of my parents,  
but they fit into that generation above me, they were my parent’s peers.  
Collectively God’s Spirit worked through those people to show me  
the pattern of life with Christ,  
and my sense of self was reformed.

Yes, reformed.

Today is Reformation Sunday, which marks the anniversary of  
Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses, or theological debate proposals,  
to the door of the Wittenburg Cathedral.

In fact, as you are probably aware, today marks 500 years  
since that moment.

Luther’s act was important, but became symbolic for much more:  
Across the church in Europe, people were questioning the pattern of life,  
the self-understanding of the church –  
specifically, the Catholic church.

As questions were asked. and as the Bible became available  
to people further down the food chain due to the printing press,  
and as the emerging cultural emphasis on the importance  
of the individual took hold within the church,  
there began a protest movement centered around themes  
that we take for granted today:  
The sovereignty of God, salvation by grace through faith,  
the centrality of Christ, the authority of Scripture,  
the priesthood of all believers.

These were taken not as new ideas, but rather as old ideas  
that had been lost in the shuffle of the Middle Ages in Europe.  
Luther and Calvin and many, many others used these central tenants  
to call the church back to the pattern of faith, worship,  
and life in Christ that they saw on the pages of Scripture.

In time this effort became known as the Protestant Reformation,  
and the Presbyterian Church is a direct product of this movement.

So I want to suggest that there is a kind of parallel between the great Reformation  
of 1517, and the personal reformation that I described a few moments ago.

The scale and themes and processes are about as different as you can imagine.  
But even so, there is an unmistakable connection:  
Seeking God through the Scriptures,  
I was led into a new pattern of life based on Christ.  
And, seeking God through the Scriptures,  
the Reformers were led into a new pattern of life based on Christ.

If you'll go with me that far, then perhaps we can move now to Paul's letter  
to the Thessalonians.

What I want to propose to you is that right in this passage  
we have evidence that this pattern of reformation  
was built into the spread of the gospel from the very beginning.  
And so, you might say, we are chosen for reformation.

Paul writes this letter to a church in a very important Greek city  
called Thessalonica on the famous Roman road, the Via Egnatia.

I say Paul wrote the letter, but really it's Paul, Silas and Timothy in the address,  
and the authors use "we" throughout the letter.

Silas and Timothy are two young leaders in the church  
that Paul has been mentoring.

Given the direction that the opening section goes in,  
I don't think their inclusion in the initial address is coincidental.

Verses 2-10 perform the typical functions expected in an ancient letter,  
but they also preview many of the themes that we will run into  
as we move through the letter.

These themes include the nature of Paul's ministry among them  
(along with Silas and eventually Timothy),  
the perseverance of the church in the midst of  
some very difficult times,  
and the future hope of Christ's return.

In verse 4, Paul frames all of these themes by referencing the sovereign choice  
of God (a fitting theme for Reformation Sunday.)

He says, "For we know, brothers and sisters love by God,  
that he has chosen you..."

In our own setting as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians,  
this theme of being "chosen" by God makes us feel a bit squeamish.

It smacks of arrogance and a holier-than-thou attitude  
that can be the very reason people stay away from church  
in the first place.

When Paul says, "For we know God has chosen you,"  
we hear this: "For we know that God favors you over your neighbors  
for some inscrutable reason, and there's really no hope for them,  
but hurray for you."

But I would like to suggest that this is the furthest things from Paul's intention.

Consider for a moment the make-up and situation of this church.

They are a mix of ethnic Jews who have immigrated to Thessalonica  
and Greek converts to Judaism.

Like other ancient cities, worship in massive temples to various gods  
dominated the public life of Thessalonica. You couldn't escape it.

Beverly Gaventa reports there is evidence of worship to “the Greek god Dionysus;  
the Egyptian deities Isis, Orsiris, and Serapis;  
and the Phrygian god Cabirus.

Thessalonica also participated in the imperial cult,” which involved the worship  
of the Roman Emperor as a divine figure.

Imagine yourself, not only as a Jewish minority in the midst of all this,  
but as a subset of the small Jewish minority,  
worshipping a wandering teacher  
who had been humiliated and shamed by crucifixion.  
They would have felt quite insignificant in their world.

As Jewish worshippers, these people would have been steeped  
in two major themes:

- 1) Worship of the One True God without any idol representation.
- 2) Being a people set apart as those chosen by God.

The Jewish people’s identity was shaped by the story  
that out of all the people on earth, God set aside one family –  
Abraham and Sarah – and chose them and their descendants.  
But their choice was not to the exclusion of everyone else.  
It was for the ultimate blessing of all families on earth.

When Paul writes, “we know God has chosen you,” he’s saying:  
“Don’t worry! The promises of the Hebrew Scriptures haven’t been set aside.  
You still belong to God. The blessing promised  
to all families on earth has arrived in Jesus Christ.  
You haven’t been forgotten or ignored!”

The theology of the Reformation made much of God’s choice.  
God is the initiator, the one who accomplishes salvation,  
the great coordinator of deliverance for God’s people.  
These are wonderful themes that arise directly out of Scripture,  
and it was a return to Scripture that Luther and Calvin were most  
animated by.

But sometimes the philosophy and logic of the Reformers  
overpowered the original message of the biblical text.  
And those who followed Luther and Calvin developed these themes  
into rigid structures that were extended and applied  
well beyond the purposes that the Apostle Paul ever had for them.

These were great thinkers and faithful people,  
but even so they had their blind spots.  
As we celebrate 500 years of Reformation,  
we must do so with humility,  
ready to repent when our own blind spots are revealed.  
This is why it is often said that we are Reformed and reforming.

So – back to 1 Thessalonians!  
“Yes, we know God has chosen you,” Paul writes.  
But *how* does Paul know this?

He explains in v. 5, “because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”

The Christian faith, Paul is saying, is not just another philosophy to debate.  
It’s not just a means to feel better about yourself.  
It is demonstrated on the ground with power  
through the presence and conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Okay, fair enough, but is there anything tangible in that?

Yes! And this is where things get really good.

Paul says in v. 6, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.”

Imitators. There was a pattern of life set out by Paul, Silas, and Timothy  
that was adopted and practiced by the Thessalonian church.

Now – think about this: Who was the originator of this pattern that was imitated?  
Who started it? Jesus of Nazareth.

When Paul says, “and of the Lord,” he’s referring to Jesus.  
(In fact, whenever you see “Lord” in Paul’s letters,  
you can assume he’s referring to Jesus.)

Jesus initiated a way of life that broke the pattern of life common to humanity.  
It consisted of love and allegiance to God above all else,  
    continual dependence on and awareness of the Holy Spirit in daily life,  
    love of neighbor above yourself,  
    raising up those who were cast down by society,  
being a healing, restoring, reconciling presence in the world in the name of God,  
and (this is important) doing all of this even in the midst  
    of suffering and persecution.

The first imitators of Jesus were the apostles.  
    Paul had observed this pattern well even as he was opposing it.  
    But then he joined in imitating it himself.

So:  
Jesus → apostles → Paul ... and then he develops his own disciples  
→ Silas and Timothy.

After that? The Thessalonian church.

Paul says, “you became imitators of us and of the Lord,  
    *for* you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering  
    with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”

Did you hear that? That’s the pattern of Jesus’ life in short form.  
    Welcoming the message of God in the midst of suffering  
    with joy from the Holy Spirit.

But the imitation didn’t stop there!

In vv. 7 and following we find that the Thessalonians  
    were also a model for other communities of faith in Macedonia and Achaia.  
    And now those places are telling others about what God has done  
    in Thessalonica – how these people turned to God  
    from idols and are awaiting the return of Jesus.

And how many generations of imitating the life of Jesus do you think there are  
    until you arrive at our congregation today?  
    We share in this pattern, and the future of the church  
    is secure because it keeps happening.

It includes all those names that I mentioned earlier,  
and all the hundreds of women and men who introduced many of you  
into that pattern of life.

That is what I call real reformation, and it goes back more than 500 years.  
This is being re-formed from the pattern of the world that surrounds us  
into the pattern of life we see in Jesus.

Not because we're so smart or so good or so superior – no!  
But because the message of Jesus isn't empty;  
it comes with power and joy through the Spirit.

The powers around us are telling lies, making much of their own names,  
banging the drums of war, encouraging the destruction  
of God's good creation, dividing our society along racial, cultural,  
economic, and religious lines.

That's not the gracious pattern of life we've been invited into.  
We have been chosen for something better.  
Chosen for Reformation.