

The Pillars of a Balanced Local Church: An Exegetical Review of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

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Foreword¹

Celebrating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation is a privilege of only one generation. It is, therefore, an extraordinary honor that it is us who are the generation that is able to mark this event, which has indubitably changed the course of human history.

It is difficult to overstate the positive impact of the Reformation. The Reformation has had a far-reaching influence: there is no corner of the world which hasn't been touched by its values at least in some way. The Reformation has also had a deep impact: not only did it influence the religious reality of its time up until today, but it also left its mark on politics, economy, and society. From a religious perspective, during the following centuries, the Reformation caused the rise of several various denominations and expressions of faith, which have immensely enriched the Christian Church.

However, the Reformation has another side, as well. Along with the variety of denominations which complemented the Christian Church, the Reformation has also, unfortunately, inspired many unorthodox expressions of faith and "Christian" movements. This tendency has shown itself not long after the Reformation

1 The article is based on the presentation at the Round Table on Reformation "Christ of the Light of the World" in August 2017 in Vinkovci in the Pastoral Center of the Church of God in the Republic of Croatia.

began, eg., in an eschatological sect in Münster.² Also, various theological and ecclesiastic extremes and various “isms,” which would have been quickly eliminated prior to the Reformation, had more freedom to form after the Reformation, and in some cases, even became institutionalized.

John Stott has recognized the Church’s tendency to move between various types of extremes. That is why in his book, *Balanced Christianity*, he writes that one of the greatest tragedies of contemporary Christianity can be summarized in one word: “polarization” (Stott 1975, 7). Stott also sincerely claims that the tendency towards extremes or disbalances is “one of the greatest weaknesses of Christians (especially Evangelical Christians)” (Stott 1975, 9). He thus claims, “It is my belief that we should love balance as much as the Devil hates it, and that we should promote it just as strongly as the Devil wants to destroy it.” (Stott 1975, 9). Therefore, I believe that a constructive and a concrete response to Stott’s challenge is for us to love and promote balance in the best way possible, so as to be able to pay respect to and nurture the heritage of the Reformers.

For this purpose, this article is a contribution to the call for a balanced Christianity. I will show you specifically how each believer can contribute to balanced Christianity in the context of their local church. The suggestion comes from my study of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22, the book which is probably the earliest Christian text written with the purpose of establishing order in the local church.

In the text, I’ll be revealing basic Christian paradigm from which Paul’s instructions come, as formulated in the most important of Jesus’ commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37,39). The believer’s relationship with their neighbor and with God that is marked by love is the essence of God’s history of salvation, and the framework of Christian authenticity (Mt 22:40; Jn 13:35). Therefore, the basic proposition of this paper is that the local church will attain good balance once the love for our neighbor and the love of God become its basic center. I will use this passage to try and show that any believer can make a practical contribution to bringing balance to the local church in its relationship with its neighbor and with God.

2 In 1534, radical anabaptists led by Jan Matthijszoon (who was replaced after his death by his disciple, Jan Beukelszoon), Bernhard Knipperdolling, and Bernard Rothmann – and inspired by the eschatological teachings of Melchior Hoffmann – they occupied the city of Münster, where they established the Kingdom of New Zion, with Beukelszoon as the “king of righteousness”. The “Kingdom” goes on to turn into a closed commune. All books apart from the Bible are burned; all those who refused to get baptized again are persecuted; and polygamy is introduced (Beukelszoon had sixteen wives, one of whom he had executed on a guillotine.). The commune ended tragically after seventeen months by way of their leaders being tortured and executed (see Mullet 2010, 338-340).

I will use the metaphor of pillars which, if positioned in the right places in local churches, will bring the necessary balance into the church dynamics. In the passage in Thessalonians, I have noticed the four pinnacles which Paul placed in the Thessalonian church as per outlined in Jesus' most important commandment. Two pillars deal with the believer's relationship with their neighbor, while the other two deal with the believer's relationship to God in the context of the local church. For every pillar, I will try and present the areas of contemporary application, with special emphasis on some areas in which contemporary Christians tend to go to extremes.

The Believer's Relationship with Their Neighbor (5:12-15)

The passage in 1 Thess 5:12-22 contains the final words of the apostle Paul to Thessalonians, as per this epistle. Paul was wont to conclude his pastoral letter with practical advice and instructions with the purpose of organizing the local churches to which he was writing.³ Therefore, we will consider this passage with this fact in mind. In this chapter, I will specifically present two ways (ie., pillars) in which the believers were called to show mutual love practically, and thus make a specific contribution to achieving balance in the local church: to have respect and extraordinary love for church leadership (12-13) and to take care of the needy members of the church (14-15). In these instructions, we recognize the outlines of one of two elements of Jesus' most important commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"

a. The first pillar: to respect and esteem very highly in love the leadership of the church (12-13)

Paul has two kinds of believers in mind. He writes to the "brothers", which is Paul's usual way of addressing the entire church. He asks the believers to appreciate and esteem very highly in love another group of believers, who have been described in verse 12 as those who "diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction."⁴ There is no question that Paul has been describing individuals from the Thessalonian church who were involved in some form of leadership.

First of all, Paul describes leaders as individuals in the Thessalonian church who "diligently labor among you". Earlier in the book, Paul has commanded the Thessalonians to "work with your hands" (4:11). Aside from this, the verb, *kopiaō*

3 Rom 12:1-15,13 and Gal 5:1-6,10 are two examples from other epistles which contain instructions for relationships inside the church.

4 Unless otherwise stated, the Bible quotes are taken from the NASB translation.

(“to work”) is often used in the New Testament in reference to professional work. Although we might think that Paul describes leaders as individuals who work hard in order to earn their livelihood, it’s more likely that Paul’s describing those believers in the church whose hard work pertained to various ministries in the church. Namely, in his pastoral writings, Paul often used the word, *kopiaō*, in reference to “spiritual workers” (eg., Rom 16:6; 1 Cor 15:10; Gal 4:11; Phil 2:16; Col 1:29; 1 Tim 4:10). Furthermore, the individuals from the leadership have not been described as those who work in general, but as those who “diligently labor *among you*” Apart from this, the other two characteristics from verse 12 - “and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction” - confirm that the work of the leadership is aimed at believers inside the church. Therefore, Paul describes the leaders who have been involved in the spiritual work in the Thessalonian church.

Furthermore, the word, *proistēmi* (“and have charge over you”), which literally means “those who are above you,” made a group of experts conclude that Paul was thinking about local church leadership in terms of hierarchy; in other words, that the church leaders are those believers who have been given the roles of leadership, and who have been placed in those positions. Leon Morris is one of those experts who, through insight in the original meaning of the word, *proistēmi*, concludes that Paul here is talking about the individuals who already hold a formal role in the local church structure. Along with the preceding lexical evidence, Morris adds a quote from Acts 14:23. He also takes into account the generally known synagogue structure as the model for structuring church leadership in newly founded local Christian churches (Morris 1959, 164).

In spite of this, I think that Paul recognizes leaders exclusively based on their work, and not the title they have received. First of all, J. A. D. Weima noticed the most probable influence of the then usual social practice of patronage.⁵ Namely, at that time only the more fortunate members of the church were able to host regular church meetings, simply because their houses could take more people. According to Acts 17:5-9, there’s a high likelihood that the Thessalonian believers gathered in the house of Jason. That is why patrons such as Jason took up certain responsibilities in the church (cf. 1 Cor 16:15-18) (Weima 2002, 426). C. S. Keener (2014, 592) also adds that the patrons, apart from opening their homes for church meetings, were probably among the rare people who were also educated, and were able to serve the rest of the local church by reading the Holy Scriptures, including Paul’s pastoral letters. This also helps us clarify the third characteristics of the leadership “and give you instruction.” Secondly, grammatically speak-

5 You can find more about the practice of patronage in the Graeco-Roman context in deSilva 2000.

ing, Paul is purposely describing the leaders using participles instead of nouns.⁶ Based on this grammatical nuance, G. Fee (2009, 203) concludes, “These participles identify them [ie., the leaders] according to their ‘work,’ as opposed to their positions.” Thus, Paul’s invitation to all believers to appreciate and esteem highly in love their leaders is not based on hierarchical foundations, but exclusively “because of their work” – as stated in verse 13.

We can now summarize the first pillar which can, I believe, bring balance to the local church. Therefore, as I have suggested earlier, a balanced local church is based on the love which the believers show to one another. Specifically, the first way (ie., pillar) for believers to contribute to the balance in their local church directly is by respecting and holding in high regard those individuals who act as leaders in the church, as characterized by hard spiritual work, leadership, and teaching.

b. *The second pillar: caring for the needy in the church (14-15)*

Going further, Paul again addresses the “brothers,” but this time he “raises his voice” and “commands,” “warn the insubordinate; encourage the discouraged; help the weak; be patient with everybody” (my own translation). It is clear that Paul was shifting the focus from the relationship with the leaders to a different category of relationships in the local church: ie., caring for brothers and sisters who are in need.

A number of experts prove that under the term “brothers,” Paul in this case addresses the local church leadership, and not all believers, as is the case in verse 12.⁷ According to them, warning the insubordinate, encouraging the discouraged, and helping the weak in the church is the responsibility of the leadership, and not of all believers in the local church. Their conclusion is based on the fact that, in verses 12-13 Paul characterized the leaders as believers who labor diligently among them, and that he describes the nature of their work in verse 14 in detail.

Although the previous statement seems convincing, I still think that Paul is addressing the entire church just like in verses 12-13; therefore, “pastoral care” is the responsibility of all believers in the local church. First, addressing believers as “brothers” like in verse 12, where there is no doubt that Paul is speaking to

6 As a word type, the Greek participles have the characteristics of both verbs and adjectives. Ie., they are able to describe nouns in terms of a verb. Paul was able to simply use nouns and say, respect the elders, pastors, and deacons. However, he described them by using participles (verb adjectives), respect the “working ones”, or, “those who work hard”. Find more about participles in Biblical Greek in Mounce 2009, 239-287.

7 Examples of experts who prove that verses 14-15 don't refer to relationships between believers, but to Paul's specific instruction to the leaders he had mentioned in the previous two verses: Chrysostom 1994, 367; Shogren 2012, 221.

all believers in the local church, points to the fact that Paul is still writing to the same group of people. Even if Paul had intended to narrow down the commands from verses 14-15 to only apply to believers in the leadership, how were the Thessalonians supposed to recognize that the following instructions only applied to the leaders, and not to all believers? Furthermore, D. A. Black (1982, 315) notices that, when Paul uses the word “brothers” in the entire letter to the Thessalonians, it is clear that he is writing to all believers in the church (4:1,10,13; 5:1,12, 25). I, therefore, agree with J. Byron (2014, 188), who concludes that Paul is surely commanding the leaders to care for the needy, but he does not limit this to them alone; instead, he delegates it for all believers in the local church.

We can now devote more time to the description of the needy believers in the church that need to be taken care of and shown love in that way. Out of all the three described groups of believers, the first adjective (Greek, *ataktos*) gained the most attention from Bible commenters and translators due to its ambiguity. In the Croatian editions of the New Testament, we find three translations: “admonish the *negligent*” (Knežević); “admonish the *loafers*” (Suvremeni prijevod); “admonish/instruct the *disorderly*” (Rupčić; Šarić).

I will try to prove that Paul is commanding the believers to admonish the “in-subordinate” believer in their local churches. First, Paul was using the then common military terms. The adjective *ataktos* was used to describe the soldiers who are willingly refusing to fall in line with the regiment they have been assigned to, meaning that they are causing disorder, i.e., they are “disorderly.” The Greek lexicon by Liddell, Scott, and Jones broadens the connotation of this term. Namely, this kind of military misconduct was not only a problem in terms of formality or aesthetics, but in terms of the level of purposeful undisciplined behavior, which caused disruption in the entire regiment; i.e., disorder in this sense as well. The term, “disorderly,” as used by Rupčić and Šarić in their translations, is therefore the closest to the original. Unfortunately, to describe an individual as disorderly in our language is usually implied in terms of personal hygiene and various types of lack of personal organization, which is far from the disorderliness that Paul was talking about in this passage. That is why I think that the word, “insubordinate,” describes more faithfully the kind of behavior in some believers, that needs to be reprimanded.

Furthermore, the translation, “idle”, which we find in the Suvremeni prijevod (the type of behavior that Knežević seems to be alluding to by translating the word as “negligent”) is the English-speaking world translators’ and experts’ most frequent choice. This translation choice is based on Paul’s previous instructions in the letter which had to do with professional work: “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and *work with your hands*, just as we commanded you” (4:11). Also, considering that Paul uses the same word

root only once more in the NT (Gr., *ataktōs* [to live in a disordinate/negligent manner]; 2 Thess 3:6-12), where it is clear that he's telling the believers how they should treat brothers and sisters who refuse to work for a living, it can be said that this same problematic group of believers is also spoken about in 1 Thess 5:14.

However, Paul's previous exhortation to "work with your hands" (4:11) has not been caused by a certain group of believers being idle; but instead, by the good work of the believers. No instruction given by Paul in chapter 4 is written as a warning, but as an encouragement – "as to how you ought to walk and please God (*just as you actually do walk*), that you excel still more" (4:1). In the following verses, Paul specifies commendations and additional exhortations to Thessalonians. Regarding their love for the believers in all of Macedonia he says, "*for indeed you do practice it (ie., love) toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more*" (4:10). Therefore, Paul is not reprimanding disobedient behavior, but is instead commending believers for their obedience and their faithfulness to the teaching they have received, and exhorts them to grow in it even more. It is in this context of exhortations that we see the exhortation regarding working with their own hands, which leads us to the conclusion that the Thessalonians were not idle; on the contrary, they were hard workers.

Furthermore, even though the passage in 2 Thess 3:6-12 is the strongest piece of evidence which is leading the expert group to prove that the adjective, *ataktos*, refers to being idle in 1 Thess 5:14, I think that this is not a sufficient reason to make us identify the problematic group from the second epistle with the group from the first epistle. Lexically speaking, the military jargon which Paul borrows is not connected to being idle, although it is possible to use it – as we can see in 2 Thessalonians – in the context of being idle as a type of disorderliness. Therefore, I consider that this phrase can be used to describe any type of frivolous behavior which disrupts order in the church.⁸

Besides this, Paul gives two different instructions about how believers are supposed to treat the "disorderly" conduct of some believers. Namely, in 1 Thessalonians Paul commands the believers to *admonish* the disorderly (insubordinate), while in 2 Thessalonians he commands, "*keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life [as idlers]*" (2 Thess 3:6). This remark is important because it is hard to believe that Paul would be giving two different instructions regarding the same type of problematic behavior. Not only are the instructions different and

8 Jeffrey A. D. Weima (2014, 393) tried to reconcile the idea of unruliness and idleness, which is why he thinks that *ataktos* doesn't refer to idleness in the general sense, but as a form of willing rebellion against the authority of local church leadership. That is why he translates the participle as "the rebellious idlers".

potentially confusing - and may even stir up some disorder – but they are also incompatible. In other words, it is not possible to keep away from someone and to admonish them at the same time. Therefore 2 Thessalonians helps us see that Paul had a very strict disciplinary measure for idleness, while in case of insubordination to the leadership he called for believers to be admonished.

Finally, in the previous two verses (12-13) Paul appealed to believers to appreciate their leaders and to esteem them very highly in love, and now he concludes the passage with the commandment, “Live in peace with one another!” Although this commandment does not lead us to conclude that there were some believers who were insubordinate to the leadership which they are supposed to appreciate and esteem very highly in love, Paul probably had a very good reason for including this commandment in this particular context.

We can now look into other ways that Paul calls Thessalonians to show love to one another, “encourage the discouraged,” “help the weak,” and to “be patient with everyone.” It is hard to ascertain the nature and causes of discouragement and the weakness that Paul is referring to. The context gives a hint that some believers were still grieving over believers from their life who have passed on (4:13-14), or that they were maybe burdened by various social pressures and persecution (2:14) and this made them feel discouraged. Also, the adjective, *asthenēs* (weak), is often used in the NT when referring to spiritual weakness (eg., Acts 20:35; Rom 15:1), as well as a physical weakness (eg., Mt 25:39; Acts 4:9). When it comes to spiritual weakness, Paul sometimes points to individuals who find it easy to resist the temptations of fleshly pleasures. The immediate context leads us to potentially interpret this as Paul speaking about a spiritual weakness that was caused by insecurity regarding the second coming of Christ, the topic that Paul had to deal with in 5:1-11. Although we cannot quite figure out what sort of weakness Paul was referring to, I am certain that any form of weakness that believers notice among other believers, Paul wants them to be cared for and helped by others.⁹ And finally, the instruction to “be patient with everyone” unifies the nature of the relationship which the believers need to have with each other in any circumstance because patience is a hallmark of love (1 Cor 13:4).

Ultimately, Paul also appeals to believers to love one another by not repaying evil with evil, “but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people” (15). It is important to note that Paul does not only command that evil should not be repaid with evil, but also calls on believers to *always* try to do what

9 In a discussion with my colleague Daniel Paras regarding the nature of the adjective “weak” in this context, Daniel suggested an interesting idea that Paul may have been so vague on purpose, so that caring for the weak in the Thessalonian church wouldn’t be limited to just one form of weakness.

is good. Repaying with good in cases when believers become victims of maliciousness is definitely a part of Paul's command, but it is not limited to those situations. The believers will show love to each other when they proactively step up for the good of one another. However, Paul goes a step further: commitment and doing good should not only be limited to the neighbors in the local church, but to all people. When the believers are actively involved in doing good to all people, then Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" is fully included. The local church must not allow itself to be(come) preoccupied with itself, but should always have the society it belongs to in mind. The commandment to love one's neighbor transcends the limits of the local church.

We can now summarize the second pillar, which brings balance to the local congregation: the believers in the local church show love to one another when, under the leadership of the local church, they take responsibility of admonishing the insubordinate, encouraging the discouraged, helping the weak, and of being patient with everyone. Furthermore, the believers complement this commandment by actively promoting mutual well-being, as well as the well-being of all people.

c. Contemporary areas of application

Paul held that it was extremely important for believers to appreciate and hold esteem very highly in love those believers who work hard among them and who lead them. Unfortunately, there's a prevalent phenomenon where the pastors, instead of receiving appreciation and esteem from believers, in most cases they receive regular and extreme criticism of their work. J. Byron (2014, 196) writes: "instead of praying for and supporting our pastor, our elders, and our deacons, we waste our time by questioning their ability, criticizing their ministry, and comparing them to the pastors of mega-churches or those whom we watch on TV." I would also like to add that, in some local churches in Croatia, it is customary not to provide any positive feedback to the pastors so that they would not become haughty. Unfortunately, this is the reason most pastors – whose numbers are few and who we should be cherishing like a drop of water in the palm of our hand – are forced to deal with discouragement on their own, and that's a very common feeling among pastors. Paul's instructions should challenge us to start regularly thinking of creative ways to show appreciation and love to our leaders for all the work they have been putting into the life of a local church. This is why each believer should at least pray for individual leaders and to support their work in specific terms.

Also, Paul emphasizes that caring for the needy is the responsibility of all the believers in the church, not just that of the pastor or the leadership. In regards to this issue, John Stott noticed the church's special proneness to extremes between clericalism and anticlericalism (Stott 1991, 118-119). In these extremes, the entire

role of pastoral care and church problematics is either left to the pastor and the leadership, or it is given to all believers in the sense that it is considered that the formal role of leadership in local churches is superfluous (Stott 1991, 118-119). Although Paul particularly emphasizes the importance of leadership, he certainly does not imply that the leadership is responsible for all ministries and needs in the local church (Byron 2014, 197). Surely, the leaders are called to confront the insubordinate, encourage the discouraged, and help the weak, as well as being considerate and actively involved in caring for the needy is the duty of all the believers in the church. Therefore, the least any believers can do is to open their eyes and ears, to recognize needs and to show an interest in their fellow man in their local church (Keller & Smith 2017). In this way, the believers will be able to show their appreciation for their leaders in an indirect manner, by not leaving the burden of caring for the needy on pastor's back alone.

The Believers' Relationship with God (5:16-22)

We can now move onto the second part of Paul's instructions for bringing order to the local Thessalonian church. In this chapter, we'll be considering verses 16-22, where we will find two more ways (ie., pillars) in which the believers can bring specific and practical balance in their local church: regular worship services (16-18) and a reasonable response to prophecies (19-22). In these instructions, we see the outlines of the primary element of Jesus' most important commandment, "Love the Lord your God..."

a. The third pillar: Steady worship (16-18)

Paul uses three "staccato imperatives" (Fee 2009, 213) to give these categorical and stern commandments to the Thessalonians, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." If we observe the mutual relationship between these three commandments, two remarks arise.

First, Paul is teaching Thessalonians about how to worship God in the church meetings. Rejoicing, prayer, and giving thanks are certainly very important elements of personal devotion, but Paul is here primarily referring to them as the basic elements of common worship (Byron 2014, 190). For this reason, we dare to qualify them using the categorical adverbial clauses: rejoice *always*; pray *without ceasing*; *in everything* give thanks.

Even though Paul's instructions seem to be clear at first, it is important to explain the practical meaning of these characteristics. At first glance, these instructions for worship can be read as "always be happy," in the sense that believers should always feel joyous; "pray without ceasing" – in the sense that, whatever

the believers do during the day, they should not stop praying somehow; “in everything give thanks” – in the sense that, whatever happens to the believers, they need to thank God for it. Even a superficial look at the rest of Paul’s writings and the entire Scripture canon will reveal that Paul never intended for these instructions to be interpreted in that way.

G. Fee (2009, 214) noticed well that this “rejoicing” does not refer to the believers’ feelings, but to the communal expressions of joy in the context of church worship.¹⁰ Various forms of communal expressions of joy are the way Paul used to encourage believers to show their love for God (see Phil 4:4).

We ought to take a similar approach to praying without ceasing. There must never come a point of saturation with prayer in the life of the local church. Communal prayer always needs to be a fundamental element of local church worship.

Finally, the relationship between believers and God should be filled with thanksgiving, as opposed to giving thanks *for* any circumstance (good or bad) they find themselves in; but *in* every situation. In the original, the phrase, *en panti*, in this grammatical construction should be understood as “in all circumstances.” In other words, the believers’ thanksgiving should not be conditioned by external circumstances, but by a resolute attitude of giving thanks to God, in spite of it not being the first reaction to problems in which the believers have maybe found themselves. Regarding the unconditionality of giving thanks, John Chrysostom wrote: “When Paul says ‘in everything give thanks,’ he is not only referring to those situations when we have been delivered from troubles, but also the times when we’re enduring them.”¹¹

Second, all three commandments share the feature of steadfastness. It is interesting how Paul is not focusing on specific ways of expressing joy, prayer, and thanksgiving as a community. For example, if we were to express our joy as a congregation through music, do we need to sing the Psalms, hymns, contemporary songs, or spontaneous songs? When it comes to prayer, do we need to pray written congregational prayers or spontaneous prayers; old prayers or contemporary prayers? When it comes to giving thanks, do we need to integrate it into the music, allow spontaneous expressions, written thank-you notes, or maybe to set aside a special day for giving thanks? It seems that Paul wasn’t burdened with such questions. On the contrary, Paul emphasizes that communal worship needs to be *steadfast*. Therefore, Paul emphasizes the nature of communal worship, and not on its forms. Therefore, the believers’ worship is the expression of love to God

10 Paul’s understanding of the relationship of rejoicing and worship has his roots in the Psalms, where rejoicing is a way of worshiping God (Ps 9,14; 33,1; 47,1; 95,2; 149,1-5) (v. Keener 2014, 592).

11 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues* 17.1 (NPNF 9:452), as quoted in Oden 2000, 99.

when the motive in various ways of communal rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving, primarily comes from the steadfast relationship with God. Any discussion regarding the forms of worship has been subjected to its fundamental nature.

Why are these three elements of communal worship so important? “For this is God’s will for you in Jesus Christ!” (v18). Here, the pronoun, “this,” refers to all three commandments. Rejoicing always, prayer, and giving thanks all the time are fundamental and equally important elements of worship in a balanced local church, which shows its love for God in this way. Steadfastness is the characteristic of the believer’s relationship with God, which God wants for the redeemed local church in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, apart from the love for our neighbor, a balanced local church is based on the love of believers for God. The third way (pillar) how believers can participate practically in creating a balanced local church is when they show their love for God primarily by regularly taking part in communal worship, by rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks.

b. The fourth pillar: a prudent response to prophecies (19-22)

Previously, we have seen that steadfast worship through rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving is a way and the nature of the believer’s love for God. However, this relationship of love is not a one-way street. In order to be wholesome, this relationship needs to include God’s contribution to this relationship. That is why Paul adds the instructions regarding the expectation and consideration of God’s activity in the local church through the Holy Spirit.

With this purpose, Paul emphatically forbids: “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances.” On the contrary, “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” Since the warning against quenching the Spirit and despising prophetic utterances has been juxtaposed to the command to question everything, we can conclude that, in this case, Paul is not talking about two separate elements of worship, but about two sides of the same instruction. In other words, by despising prophecy, the believers would be quenching the Spirit.

It is obvious that Paul not only allowed room for prophetic activities in the local church, but he also forbade against despising it. And he was quite adamant in that regard, due to the fact that despising prophecy is equal to quenching God’s work through the Holy Spirit in the local church. At the same time, Paul was aware of human proneness towards erroneous recognition and misinterpretation of God’s activity. Also, it is possible that he’s referring to various cults that were present in Thessaloniki at the time, and which were based on supernatural ecstasies as a form of spirituality, which the newly converted Thessalonian believers had probably been exposed to prior to their conversion (Weima 2002, 427). Equating pagan ecstasies with God’s activity in prophesying would be detrimental

for this young local church. That is why Paul calls for prudence, “examine everything carefully...” However, the examination is not the final form of responding to prophecy, but holding “*fast to that* which is good.” Therefore, prophecy is not a purpose in and of itself. The goal of being prudent in regards to prophecy is holding fast to that which is good, and which God brings into His church through His Spirit. So we see that both approving of everything that is labeled as prophetic and rejecting anything that resembles prophecy are equally unacceptable (in fact, forbidden) responses to prophecy.

The topic of prophecy is a rather complex and controversial one, and I am unable to deal with it in detail in this paper. I am aware that, even after we’ve thoroughly “squeezed out” these four verses, Paul’s insight into the phenomenon of prophecy in the context of the local church leaves us with more questions than answers.¹² However, before I conclude the debate in this passage, I will deal with the most important issue that the passage imposes: what are the reliable criteria which we can use for testing prophecies in order to hold fast to that which Paul refers to as, “good?”

Unfortunately, in this context, Paul does not provide even an indirect response to this question, which is critical for properly applying this instruction. That is why we will be considering the discussions about the criteria for testing prophecies in context of all of Paul’s writing and the early Christian text, *Didaché*, which was also written with the purpose of introducing order into church worship.

As a starting point in considering canonical and non-canonical criteria for testing prophetic utterances, we need to emphasize one of the features of prophecy which are particularly evident in our passage. Therefore, gives the commandment regarding integrating prophecy into the local church exclusively in the context of communal worship – same as we’ve ascertained in respect with the three fundamental elements of worship. B. R. Gaventa thus concludes that “Paul assumes that the appropriate environment for prophecy is *within* the context of the church” (Gaventa 1998, 85). It is, therefore, a fact that the ministry of prophecy is intended for communal worship, and not for “private séances or consultations” (Boring 1992, 495-502). Namely, Paul only justifies the prophetic word which has been tested by the believers who were present in communal worship. Using this preliminary remark regarding the aspects of the nature of early Christian prophecy in mind, we can now devote ourselves to the testing criteria.

12 Some of the discussion questions which arise: what is the ratio of the continuity and discontinuity between the Jewish and Christian understanding of prophecy (or, the Hebrew book and the New Testament)? What is the relationship between the prophetic utterances and apostolic teachings (in the context of the early Church) or the Scripture canon (in the context of the time after concluding the canon)? M. Eugene Boring dealt with similar questions in Boring 1992, 495-502.

Jeffrey D. A. Weima (2002, 409) has noticed that Paul mentions two standards for testing prophecies in his epistles. The first criterion for testing the validity of prophecies is how much does it contribute to teaching, encouraging, and comforting believers in the church (1 Cor 14:3-5). The second criterion deals with the relationship between the prophetic word and tradition: the prophetic word comes from God only when it agrees with the apostolic teaching (2 Thess 2:2.5).

In an early Christian pastoral manual for church worship, *Didaché* (11.3-11), the criteria for testing prophecies did not focus on their contents, but on the character and behavior of the prophet. The instructions in the *Didaché* seem to be based on the tradition behind Mt 7:15-20, „You will know them [ie., the false prophets] by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ... So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Weima 2002, 409). According to this criterion, the prophetic word of God will come from an individual whose morality and character reflect the Christian standard.¹³

We can now conclude the fourth way (pillar) of how every believer can contribute to creating balance in the local church. The believers are actively taking part in it when, in the context of communal worship, they allow space for God’s activity through His Spirit in the form of prophetic utterances, which they will

13 Prophecies need to at least pass the test of these three criteria. For example, the prophecies which spread false teaching and discourage believers on purpose are easily recognized as utterances which need to be rejected. Also, the person who claims to be speaking in the name of God, but they live contrary to the Christian moral standards, probably doesn’t even know the God for whom they claim to be speaking. Yet, looking at just a few OT prophecies points to the fact that prophecy can be more layered and more complex than the ones which can be tested using those three criteria. For example, we consider Jeremiah to be the true prophet of God, and yet his prophecies brought no fruit in his listeners. The prophet Isaiah walked around the city naked (an act which has been considered immoral in his day, and even today, [Is 20:3]). On the other hand, Hananiah, who has been labeled as a false prophet by Jeremiah and who is remembered by tradition as a false prophet, based his prophecies only on the teachings of the fathers and other prophets of God (Jer 28). Contemporary local churches can find themselves in similar situations. For example, if a person is truly speaking the Word of God, and the listeners refuse to receive the teaching and exhortation (because it may not align with what they want to hear in the current situation), should this prophecy be treated as wrong because it contributed nothing to the teaching, exhortation, and consolation? Furthermore, the aligning with the apostolic tradition is a criterion that is clear in and of itself, but the problem with it lies in the interpretation of these traditions. Unfortunately, the Biblical truths can be easily used for purposes they were intended for, even though the contents of the prophecy could be “in line” with the Scriptures. We have a similar problem with the criterion of the prophet’s morality. The standard of morality is often cultural and condition by the times we live in. For example, today nobody would say that a man’s prophecy must be rejected just because he’s got long hair. Same goes for a woman who wears earrings, for example. For more sources which deal the multilayered problematics of prophecy-testing criteria see Moberly 2006; Brenneman 2012, 781-788.

treat prudently with the purpose of keeping of what's good. We have also added three standards which the believers can use to practice prudence: the fruit of the prophetic word (teaching, exhortation, consolation), the soundness of the prophetic word in terms of the apostolic teaching (ie., the Scriptures), and the moral integrity of the person who is uttering the prophecy.

c. Areas of contemporary application

Paul is teaching us that the believers' communal worship needs to be founded in steadfast rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving. For example, some local churches have omitted communal prayer and thanksgiving from communal worship in order to create space for more modern and more interesting activities in worship services. Some local churches have gone to the extreme of reducing their communal worship services to concerts, or performance shows performed by the church's professional workers. Believers in the local church will contribute to balance in their church when they start preparing worship services on rejoicing, praying, and thanksgiving together.

Also, Bernie Van de Walle uncovered the irony in North American churches, claiming that any believer will say that worship by singing is their gift to God, but will at the same time give precedence to those songs which they personally like (van de Walle 2016). (I have personally once given my wife a book that I actually wanted, but my cover was blown very quickly.) In some cases, the believers will be prepared to leave their local church and go to another one because they do not like the song selection in worship services. It is therefore important to emphasize that, in the preparations and taking part in worship services, the believers need primarily to focus on the fundamental nature of worship: that they are *steadfast* in rejoicing, praying, and thanksgiving, - and only then do they need to deal with its specific forms.

Paul also teaches us that believers will show their love for God by allowing Him to act in worship services through His Spirit by way of prophecies; specifically, that they should test every prophetic utterance, and to hold fast to what is good and reject what is bad.

The topic of prophecy in the context of the local church can be especially set apart by its extremes. The view of one theological current - which I cannot enter into a dialogue in detail here - that prophecy is no longer a way that God uses to relate with His church, and therefore any attempt to label an utterance a prophetic one does not come from the Holy Spirit. The other extreme can be seen in some charismatic churches, where any apparent prophecy or manifestation with an apparent supernatural overtone is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. We have seen that these two specific extremes are not contemporary phenomena, and that Paul is calling for balance.

The question of a balanced integration of worship into worship services is

a broad and complex topic, which requires more than one passage that I have left for this consideration. However, for the purpose of covering this topic, I can suggest two ways how each believer can contribute to bringing balance in their local church in that respect. First, believers should practice receiving and giving prophecies exclusively in the context of worship services - or at least in the presence of other believers - where the prophecy can be tested, and not for private counseling and instruction. Secondly, prophecy is God's gift to the local church which needs to be developed and nurtured just like other gifts. For this purpose, testing prophecies by using these three criteria must be used for labeling believers as false or true prophets, but for building up, both all the believers to whom the prophecy's been given, as well as the believers whom God had used to bring this gift.

Conclusion

The 500th anniversary of Reformation is certainly a good cause to celebrate and commemorate the life and work the Reformers. I have based my own contribution to this anniversary on John Stott's call for balanced Christianity. I thought that promoting specific and practical balanced Christianity would be the greatest homage to the hard work and legacy of the Reformers.

Specifically in this paper, I have been focusing on the balanced dynamics in the local church. More precisely, I have been trying to look into how every individual believer can contribute to the balance in their local church. I have based the starting point for my study on the postulate that the center of a balanced local church needs to be found in Jesus' most important commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37,39), the commandment which is the essence not only of Christianity, but the entire God's history of salvation. Therefore, the key question that I have sought the answer to is, what are these relationships inside the local church supposed to look like, and how can each individual believer contribute to the balance in the local church they're in? I have suggested some concrete and practical instructions for promoting balance based on studying Paul's book of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22, in which I have recognized the patterns of Jesus' most important commandment. By using the metaphor of the pillars, I have noticed four specific and practical pillars, which can bring balance into local churches.

The first way (pillar) how believers can contribute indirectly to the balance in their local church by respecting and esteeming highly in love those individuals who serve as leaders in the church, who are characterized by hard spiritual work, leadership, and teaching. For this purpose, believers need to abstain from

the usual practice of criticizing their pastors. On the contrary, the believers need to bring their leaders to God in prayer, encourage them regularly, and support their work.

The second way (pillar) which can introduce balance to the local church is when believers, together with local church leaders, take responsibility for admonishing the unruly, encouraging the discouraged, and helping the weak. Furthermore, believers are fulfilling this commandment when they actively stand up for the mutual well-being and the well-being of all people. For this purpose, believers need to reject indifference and to take heed of the needs of their neighbors in the local church, as well as to participate actively in pastoral ministry.

The third way (pillar) how believers can participate specifically in creating a balanced local church is when they show their love for God primarily by being steadfast in participating in worship services by rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. For this purpose, believers primarily need to nurture steadfastness in the three main elements of worship services, and should only then discuss their forms.

And finally, the fourth pillar: believers bring balance into their local church when, in the context of worship services, they allow God to act through His Spirit in the form of prophetic utterances, which they will treat prudently with the purpose of holding on to what is good. We have also added the three standards which the believers can use in order to practice prudence: the fruit of the prophetic word (instruction, exhortation, consolation), basing the prophetic word in the apostolic teaching (ie., the Scriptures), and the moral integrity of the person who is uttering the prophecy. The believers need to give and receive prophetic utterances exclusively in the context of worship services, and to test them with the purpose of mutual building up.

I am aware that the four outlined ways of loving one's neighbor and loving God will not necessarily deliver the local church from all the problems, differences, and even misbalance in some other areas which have not been covered in this study. As long as we are waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ together, our knowledge will remain imperfect, and the natural part of our being will overcome the spiritual part. However, Jesus' most important commandment, which is the essence of God's will for His people, is the safest guideline for the repeated promotion of balance in all aspects of life in the local church.

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