

I am excited to begin our preaching series this summer on First Thessalonians. There are many ways their church is like ours and many reasons we can learn from the teaching Paul gives to them in this book. It is very fitting, therefore, that we begin today with what made the Thessalonians a Model Church.

As an overview, first Paul mentions 6 characteristics of the church:

1. *Work produced by faith.* This means that their faith was not passive. It wasn't just doctrinal. It was evidenced in what they did and how they lived the new life in Christ (vs. 3). As James says, If the reality of our relationship with God isn't validated by what we do, your faith is dead (James 2:14, 18).
2. *Labor prompted by love.* The word "labor" connotes working to the point of weariness. God's kind of love is hard work and takes our best energies. The Thessalonians were living an agape love—loving others not for their own advantage but for the advantage of others (vs. 3). "Love expresses their faith" (R.A. Ward, p. 28).
3. *Endurance inspired by hope*—they had an active consistency in the face of difficulties (vs. 3).
4. *They welcomed the gospel with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit* (v. 6).
5. *They turned to God from idols.* There was a definite break with idols as well as their turn to serve God (vs. 9).
6. *They were awaiting Jesus' return* (vs. 10).

Faith, hope and love are consistently the triad describing Christian living. It's active. It's sacrificial. It's fueled by God's kind of love for others. And it takes strength from the confidence that Jesus is coming back and will right every wrong and bring His reward with Him.

From another overview perspective we look at:

"Thessalonica was the largest and most important city in Macedonia. And the capital of the province (Leon Morris, Commentary on Thessalonians, p. 15). It was a good port for trade and a center where roads converged, including Via Egnatia, the Roman highway to the East. It was strategic—"in line with Paul's methods to strike at the centers of Roman administration, the centers of Hellenistic civilization, the centers of Jewish influence, and the keys of the great trade routes" (Morris, p. 16).

The length of Paul's stay there has been the subject of much discussion among commentators. In Acts, he talks about preaching 3 times in the Jewish synagogue, so that is at least 3 weeks. He refers to his manual labor and the gifts that the Philippian church sent to him. Both of those facts could mean he stayed longer than 3 weeks. There is also a very significant response and understanding of the gospel among the Thessalonian believers—a rooting of their faith that conceivably would have taken more than 3 weeks. For sure, however, with the number of converts who came to the Lord in Paul's ministry, he would have been meeting with them throughout the week, not just the 3 Sabbath days of synagogue.

The early church was made up of Gentiles. There were *notable women in the city* who became converts and "*a great multitude of devout Greeks*" (Acts 12:4). There were also a few Jewish converts. That mix describes most of the church plants Paul made in Asia Minor. It is also clear that Jewish people were behind the persecution that forced Paul and Silas out of the city—another constant in all the churches Paul planted in Asia Minor. The intensity of the persecution caused by the Jews was not only directed at Paul when he was there but also from the text we learn was directed at the Thessalonian believers after Paul left. In fact, the book of First Thessalonians was written in part to encourage the believers as they withstood persecution.

This is a broad overview of the spiritual characteristics of the church and its situational context. So, in our application, how is the Thessalonian church relevant for us today? The sermon focus I was particularly drawn to for this Sunday is in verse 7. “And so **you became a model** to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere” (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

The word “model” means a prototype. It means others were to build their church on the same foundation that was in the Thessalonian church. The word “you” in verse 7 is in the plural. So we are talking about the whole church community. In verse 8, the phrase “from you” is actually emphasized and is placed in the Greek at the beginning of that sentence so it says, “*From you, the Lord’s message rang out or sounded forth.*” Macedonia and Achaia are the two Roman Provinces that comprised all of Greece (Ward, p. 38). The Thessalonian model had far-reaching implications for the gospel throughout their known world.

So an application question for us is: What about the model from our church? How is it similar to the church in Thessalonica? Is our model helping Jesus be known everywhere?

The first parallel that comes to mind is in the multiethnicity of both churches. In the book *Ethnic Blends*, authors Deymaz and Li make the important distinction between the terms multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. They say that the “term multi-cultural has become associated with postmodern universalism and the doctrine of tolerance” (Zondervan, 2010, p. 39), whereas “*ethne* is the Biblical word for one race that has different ethnicities” (p.39). Their thesis is that the early house churches of the new Testament were multi-ethnic churches, demonstrating Biblical oneness since *Jesus Christ Himself broke down the dividing walls of hostility between Jews and Gentiles and created in Himself one new humanity out of two*” (Eph.2:15). Scot McKnight says, “the house churches were trying out a new kind of community under a new Lord with new people around them with all kinds of new ideas about how to live under the new Spirit with new assignments and new gifts and new morals... Hierarchy, status, reputation and connections were the empire. The church, though was not the empire. So when the Christians gathered to worship, to fellowship and to meet and eat, the ruthless, divisive and status-shaped backbone of the empire snapped...” This was God’s grand social experiment, and the Romans – from elites to the slaves – experienced the church as nothing short of a wild revolution of equality.” (A Fellowship of Differents, Zondervan, 2014, pp. 17, 91). The Thessalonica church was comprised of Jews, notable women of the city and a large number of devout Greeks. It was a multiethnic mix from its inception.

Our church here is also built on this multiethnicity – we gather from many nations in an atmosphere of equality and oneness in Christ. We are not a hierarchal church. We are a church where the “whole Body ministers to the whole Body” (from our vision statement). Right now the ethnicities include Chinese, Japanese, African American, Zimbabwe, South African, Indonesian, and Caucasian.

Similarly, within the context of both churches, is the covenantal command to “love one another as Christ has loved us”. That teaching echoes throughout the New Testament, from Jesus on down through all the epistle writers. The love stressed is “agape” love, which comes from God and is to be the distinguishing mark of any Christian community. Remember, in v. 3 Paul commends their labors prompted by love.

We are not just a group of people who are alike culturally and share the same likes and dislikes, as most monocultural churches do around the world and many communities are on the internet. We want to intentionally keep breaking down any social and ethnic barriers that can exist in a multi-ethnic community, to “develop cross-cultural relationships...and deal with prejudicial feelings and thoughts through dialogue, determined to work through misunderstandings...We, and they, choose to “promote a spirit of inclusion...creating an environment where diverse people not only feel welcome

but also in time feel they are a significant part of the whole” (Deymaz, *ibid*, pp. 47-48,49). As Deyamaz adds, “The outcome of establishing a multi-ethnic church...is to turn the power and pleasure of God...outward to bless the city, lead people to Christ, encourage the greater body, and fulfill the Great Commission” (*Ibid.*, p.50).

That is exactly what the church in Thessalonica did, and what we focus on doing today as well. Both our churches are “God’s world-changing social experiment of bringing likes and unlikes to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family,...God’s show and tell for the world,...a mixed salad in a bowl” (McKnight, p. 13). Communities radicalized by the Spirit’s ability to help us love one another and treat each other as family.

This model reminds me of the *bodegas* communities in northern Spain. These *bodegas* are “handmade caves dating back to the time before refrigeration. Some of the *bodegas* are said to date back even before the birth of Christ. Each autumn, the harvest of grain, vegetables, cheese, and wine are brought to these caves so they can be accessed during the long winter and spring. Legend has it that the farmers would sit in a room built above the cave and inventory the items. This room became known as *el cóntador*, or the counting room.

As families built or inherited *bodegas*, they added these counting rooms, sometimes making a foyer and perhaps a cozy room with a fire place. Soon, people gathered at the *cóntador* to share meals around a table and pass the time. As refrigeration techniques improved, the room became more about friendship than about food storage. The room became a "telling room," the place where, on cold winter nights or endless hot summer days, friends and families traded their history and secrets and dreams. If you had something to get off your chest, or if you needed the intimate company of safe friends, you would head for the telling room. On weekends, these conversations among friends could last an entire day and night. In this way, the *bodega*, with its telling room, became a place of mystical communion between friends. *Adapted from Michael Paterniti, The Telling Room (The Dial Press, 2013), pp. 17-18*

We want our church to be like that – a safe, telling room where we respect and support one another in our needs and struggles. This is a family where we can be vulnerable and real – and supported in in midst of our daily life.

But our purpose as a community extends beyond the safe *bodega* environment of similar people in rural Spain. We want everything we do to be part of God’s global agenda. We want to be used by God not just in Wheaton or Illinois or even the United States, but in other places in the world, to have the impact the Thessalonians did where “*The Lord’s message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere*” (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

We developed our vision statement so we can model a church on track with God’s global agenda. Reviewing our vision statement again, we can find our purpose is to:

- ❖ Grow into Christ-likeness in our character and life-purpose (2 Cor.3:18).
- ❖ Be global Christians, living by the Spirit in alignment with what God is doing and wants to do in our world
- ❖ Serve a global God who calls us onto His team.
- ❖ Be nurtured and equipped so that wherever we are, we will be able to powerfully live out the role that God has created for each of us in His world.
- ❖ Our core values are prayer and community committed whole-heartedly to Jesus Christ, as a multicultural family,
- ❖ where the whole Body ministers to the whole Body, within a global context. 3/28/17

We will develop the biblical implications of this vision statement in our sermon series for the fall.

A second way I hope we can stand out globally is by our global interconnectedness. This interconnectedness globally is something that even Alyssa has commented on in her visit to China this summer. She's been telling people about our church and because of our involvement with the number of people in China itself, she is going to Jingjing's city to meet one of our converts, then going to Hong Kong to meet another one, then going to Beijing to go to the home church of a third member of this church, and will be staying with Siya, who is a fourth member of this church. She is living this interconnected model that we want to be all about and telling people about the vision our church represents.

Third, for the Thessalonians, part of their powerful witness was how they not only welcomed the gospel and internalized it, but then turned to God from idols to preserve the living and true God (vs. 9). So we need to ask the question: Are there ways we are turning from idols and making a break from the cultural norms that dominate our western church landscape?

In the book I reviewed this week, *12 Ways Your Smartphone is Changing You*, the author, Tony Reinke, (Crossway Books, 2017) speaks specifically about the idol worship surrounding smartphones. He says, "Idolatry is the vain attempt to find ultimate meaning in finite things that we can craft and hold in our hands. If our idols have no hands to embrace us, no eyes to see us, no mouths to assure us, and no ears to hear us, then we who worship idols become like them: spiritually powerless, blind, mute, and deaf. Our idols dehumanize us: they petrify our souls, and dumb and dull and deaden all our spiritual senses" (p. 112).

"Our worship and our idolatry are always acts of surrender...Instead of wisely using the products of their labor and ingenuity, people bow until the latest gimmick is ruling their lives—determine our how they use their time, how they spend their money, their interests and values. Submission to a created thing such as a smartphone is idolatry when that created tool or device determines the ends of our lives" (p. 115). He continues, "The digital age can bewitch and capture our hearts in unhealthy ways. Our advances in technology have a way of rendering God more and more irrelevant to our world and in our lives—the very definition of worldliness. And if our digital technology becomes our God—our wand of power—it will inevitably shape us into technicians who gain mastery over a dead world of conveniences. Aimlessly flicking through feeds and images for hours, we feel that we are in control of our devices when we are really puppets being controlled by a lucrative industry...We forget how to meet God and yet we defend our smartphones unwilling to admit that we are more concerned with controlling the mechanics of our God than worshipping a God whose sovereign power directs every breath" (pp. 192-193).

It would be a global testimony if we each make a concerted effort to break free from any idolatry we have fallen into with our smartphones!

Finally, a similarity between our church and the church in Thessalonica is in the multigenerational family atmosphere. This is not detailed specifically in this letter, but we know from the book of Acts that the early church plants involved whole families and so were in fact multigenerational at their core. That is our model as well. When we worship and share and pray and counsel together within this multigenerational family community, there is power and protection. It will take the wisdom of the whole church, listening to God together and moving by the Spirit to incarnate His gospel in the world, even when it goes against our normal inclinations.

The Morgan Sea Gypsies are a small tribe of 181 fishermen who spend much of the year on their boats fishing in the Andaman Sea from India to Indonesia and back to Thailand. In December, though, they live in shelters on the beaches of Thailand. In December 2004, in the hours before the killer Tsunami crashed ashore, the Morgan sea gypsies were living on those beaches. They were in harm's way and would have likely all perished—had they not listened to their elders. For generations, the elders of the

tribe had passed along one piece of wisdom. The tribe's 65-year-old village chief Sarmao Kathalay says, "The elders told us that if the water recedes fast it will reappear in the same quantity in which it disappeared." And that is exactly what happened. The sea drained quickly from the beach, leaving stranded fish flopping on the shore. How easy it would have been for those who live off of the sea to run down where the water had been minutes ago and fill every basket available with fish. Some people did just that in other areas of South Thailand [and they were all killed]. Not the Morgan sea gypsies. When the water receded from the beach, the tribal chief ordered every one of the 181 tribal members to run to a temple in the mountains of South Surin Island. When the waters crashed ashore, the 181 sea gypsies were safe on high ground. *"How 'Sea Gypsies' Survived the Tsunami," Associated Press, as seen in* They listened to their elders and it saved the community.

May be we model the multiplying faith of the Thessalonians and wisdom of the the Morgan sea gypsies. May we be God's model church whose *faith in God has become known everywhere*" (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

Let us pray.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 6/11/17