

A VITAL CONNECTION

SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

By Danny Hall

We're beginning a series of seven messages in the book of 1 Thessalonians. It's a wonderful book, and it used to be one of my favorite books in the New Testament. My reentry into it these past few weeks of study have been an exhilarating and energizing time of thinking and praying through what God is teaching us in our own church.

In this series we're going to survey 1 Thessalonians and look for the kinds of things God would teach us about church life. If you put the things Paul commends the Thessalonians for together with the things that he hopes and prays for them to do and understand, you get a wonderful picture of what a healthy, vibrant church can be. As we go through these passages, in each message I want to lift out one key principle or characteristic of a healthy, vital, growing church. I hope this list of seven characteristics will be motivational and instructive to us in what God wants us to be as a church.

Acts 17:1-9 tells the story of the founding of the Thessalonian church. Those nine verses are packed with plenty of action. Paul and his partner Silas had embarked on what we call Paul's second missionary journey. Young Timothy, who had been a convert on Paul's first missionary journey, joined them, and this band of folks was traveling along with some others to take the gospel into new places. They had revisited the churches founded on the first missionary journey in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Then God gave Paul and his friends a special calling to move farther away from Jerusalem and deeper into the Roman Empire, to cross over into the area of Macedonia (modern-day Greece). They came to the city of Philippi, and then they moved down to Thessalonica, which was on a major east-west thoroughfare through the Roman Empire. It was quite a large, cosmopolitan, important city in the region. Let's read the account of their arrival and ministry there.

The founding of the Thessalonian church

Acts 17:1-2:

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures...

We don't know how long Paul stayed in this city. These three successive Sabbaths are the only time marker we have. He could have been there only a bit more than two weeks, but probably he was there longer, because, as we will see, there was a following that arose. The longest estimate is usually six months.

Verses 3-4:

...explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number

of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

Notice the response. Upon hearing Paul explain that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah, some of these Jews believed. Along with them, a large number of the God-fearing Greeks believed. These were non-Jews who, in their search for God, had attached themselves to the synagogue in the Jewish community, joining in with their worship. The very fact that they had made the move out of their pagan, polytheistic culture and joined in with the Jewish community, marked them as people whose hearts were open to the truth of God. And it says even a number of the leading women came to Christ. While we don't know the total makeup of this church, it is at least suggested here that this church drew people from many different walks of life—perhaps a variety of socioeconomic levels, certainly different ethnic and religious backgrounds. So God was beginning a wonderful new work here.

But the plot thickens in verse 5:

But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar ...

Now this really grabs me! Down in the market place there were some wicked men hanging out. They were probably people whom no Jew in good standing would ever get near, normally. They were the unclean people of the city. But when the Jews needed some thugs to help them, they were more than happy to go down and recruit a few of them to form a mob to go after Paul and all the new converts.

Verses 5b-6:

...and attacking the house of Jason [the one who was hosting Paul and his entourage, perhaps himself now a new convert, in whose home the new church may even have been meeting], **they were seeking to bring them** [Paul and his cohorts] **out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”**

When Paul and Silas and their friends came into town and began to share about Christ, it turned the whole city on its head. God was at work, and people were excited about new life in Christ and a new community of faith. But immediately the status quo of the city, both religiously and perhaps in other ways, was challenged. The jealousy came roaring out. The Jews wanted to put a stop to this as quickly as possible. These believers had to live in the face of persecution almost from the very beginning of God's work in the city. They had to live out their faith with the pressure of all the other people in their society rejecting them and falsely accusing them.

It's interesting what they were accused of. “They all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” Now, the Jews couldn't stand Caesar! He was their oppressor, and they hated paying his taxes. So for the second time they did something unthinkable. In the need to up the ante against these Christians, they resorted to defending Caesar's honor. So first, they aligned themselves with unsavory characters whom they would have considered unclean, and then they became defenders of Caesar's right to rule even though they thought of him as an oppressor of their own culture, all because they were so violently opposed to what God was doing in this new church.

Verses 8-9:

They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And

when they had received a pledge [some sort of fine] from Jason and the others, they released them.

Paul and Silas moved on to Berea, the next town. When the Thessalonian Jews heard that, they came down to Berea and started another riot. So Paul and Silas moved on from there and eventually ended up in Corinth. It was probably in Corinth, at the most a couple of years later, that Paul, concerned about his friends in the church in Thessalonica, wanted to find out how they were doing. He knew the persecution was continuing, but he kept hearing good things about them. So he sent Timothy to them, and he heard wonderful news from Timothy that they were thriving and standing firm in the Lord. And then they heard throughout the countryside the wonderful report of the strength of this church. So Paul's heart was encouraged, and he sent them this letter that we call 1 Thessalonians, a love letter encouraging them for their wonderful faith and sharing his desire to see them continue on in the faith.

In the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians Paul paints a beautiful picture of this church that he loves so much.

The work of God in persecution, joy, and authenticity

Let's read verses 1-10:

Paul and Silvanus [Silas] and Timothy,

**To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.**

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

I want to first look at the middle portion of these verses, where Paul gives a description of how their faith was born and how it was being lived out. That portion is book-ended by his own description of them as believers and by the report other people gave of them. There is a wonderful parallel between how Paul saw what God was doing among the Thessalonians and how others described what God was doing.

Let's look first at Paul's description of how their faith was born and lived out in verses 4-8. There are two aspects of their faith that I want us to note. First, their faith was grounded in the work of God. He says, "Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you...." This church that was born in

Thessalonica was not something that had flowed out of Paul's eloquent arguments. It wasn't just a new club in town, a new movement to get excited about, or even a new preacher like Paul to follow. Paul reminds them that this was God at work. God had chosen them to be his people in that city. He illustrates this idea of God's choice with aspects of how his ministry there took place. "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...." (This verse foreshadows a beautiful description of his ministry among them in chapter 2.) This was a movement of God's Spirit. Paul came to share the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the full strength of his own conviction.

Second, their faith was expressed in transformed lives. "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation...." They mimicked the way Paul and the others had lived out their faith, and as a result they experienced all kinds of persecution. The Lord Jesus Christ himself had ended up dying for who he was, and Paul had been persecuted many times for his faith. Now they too had entered into that stream of God's people who stood for what was right and true, loyal to their Lord and Savior, and paid the price.

But notice, they also mimicked Paul and the others "with the joy of the Holy Spirit." The evidence of transformation in their lives was expressed in incredible perseverance and joy. Now, it's really odd to think of persecution and joy in the same sentence, but that's what we have here. In the face of all this opposition and pressure and persecution, these people were characterized by joy. Their allegiance to and love for Christ were so powerful that they were willing to endure whatever came for the sake of the glory of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and they did it joyfully as the Holy Spirit led them and built them in their faith.

Their transformed lives were also expressed through authentic living day by day. Paul goes on to say, "You became an example in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything." Paul went to other towns and started to tell the story of what God had done in Thessalonica, and people told him, "We've already heard about what God is doing there." This church was so amazingly on fire for God, so in love with Christ, that the news of the marvelous work God was doing was spreading throughout all the regions around them.

Now let's look at the verses before and after that middle portion, which give wonderful parallel pictures of how Paul saw what God was doing in the Thessalonians and how other people saw what God was doing in them.

Faith, love, and hope

Verses 2-3: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope...." Here is that wonderful character triad that Paul is so fond of bringing to our attention, the core values of our life in Christ: faith, love, and hope. He says first of all that he remembers their work of faith. Now, on the surface that sounds almost like an oxymoron. Isn't the whole point that salvation is based on faith, not works? How do you have a work of faith?

Jesus himself gives us an understanding of what Paul means here in John 6:26-29:

"Jesus answered them and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will

give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.' Therefore they said to Him, 'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'"

The work of faith that characterized the Thessalonian church was that they trusted God. They believed in Christ as the Messiah, their Savior.

Now look at the parallel description other people gave of the Thessalonians: "You turned to God from idols...." This is also a reference to their work of faith. The order of ideas in that statement is important. It's not just that they got tired of their idols and decided, "I think I'll go look for something else, something new and exciting. Maybe I'll try Jesus." No, what happened is they came face to face with the living God and the message of Jesus Christ, and what Christ had done for them was so beautiful and precious to them that they turned to that message. Leaving their idols behind was then easy to do.

Now their idols were probably tangible things like carved statues, trees with altars, all kinds of things in nature. You and I tend to think of idols in those terms and therefore think we don't worship idols. But an idol is really just the object of the central affection and devotion of our hearts. So every one of us has a variety of idols that attract us. They could include money, a person or relationship, a sense of achievement, and all kinds of other issues. An idol might actually be a false religion, some spirituality that allows a person to have a sense of fulfillment apart from any kind of dealing with their sinfulness. The truth is that we are all very easily enmeshed with other things that go after the devotion of our heart. But when people see the beauty of who Christ is, the wonderful liberating power of his grace, and turn to him, then leaving the idols behind becomes easy. That is the work of faith that these Thessalonians did.

The second element in the picture is their labor of love. The word "labor" here is a strong word that means to strive or toil arduously. Notice again in verse 9, the second thing that other people reported about them was that they "serve[d] a living and true God." That was their labor of love. They were so moved and motivated and changed by their love relationship with Christ that they were willing to do anything for him.

Now, a labor of love is important. It is not labor to prove ourselves to God or to earn his favor, but labor that is born out of our love for God. They were willing to serve God whatever happened, and it was a distinctive of their life that Paul and others were observing.

Finally, the third element in the picture of the Thessalonians is their steadfastness of hope. Notice the last thing in verse 10 that others reported about them: "To wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." These were people who were rooted in the hope of Christ's return. (It is true that they became confused about some of the details about that, and Paul will give them further instruction about that as the book goes on.) Persecution might come, but they knew who held their future. They anticipated that Christ their Lord and Savior was going to return. They were actively engaged in their world, serving God fully, but doing so in a sense of absolute hope that Christ was going to come as their deliverer.

What a wonderful description of a group of people on fire for the Lord. So then, our principle for a healthy church today is simply this: a healthy and growing church has a vital connection to the living God. These people were in love with the Lord Jesus, and that motivated them. It gave them comfort in the midst of trials, a sense of purpose to live out in their daily lives, and hope for their future. If we are going to be a healthy, growing church, we as a community of faith have to be people who are in love with Jesus. That is what will change us. That is what will make us a community that makes a difference. There was no evangelistic program going on in the Thessalonian church. These people were just living

out that community of faith in love with Christ, serving him wholeheartedly, passionately, and the whole world was hearing about it.

A community in love with Jesus

So as we seek to be a healthy and growing church, we must be vitally connected to the living God, in love with Jesus, or none of the rest of it will work. This is the beginning. And this community of people in love with Jesus made an enormous difference in their world, because when a group of people is united and bonded in a community of faith that is so in love with Christ, people take notice. It changes neighborhoods, it changes societies.

We have to look at that as an enormous challenge, but I would suggest to you that this is really good news. Making a difference for the Lord is not about getting the right program or method, or about how well we can argue our faith.

This point was illustrated to me by an unlikely source a few weeks ago. Our son Christopher is a student at UCLA, and in spring quarter he was taking a great class called *Jesus of Nazareth in Historical Research*. Christopher and I had a wonderful dialogue by email and phone all quarter long about all kinds of questions about the New Testament and the gospel stories that came up. The professor was a brilliant scholar and an interesting, wonderful, kindhearted man. He was not a believer, but he was an authority on New Testament history. Well, Ginger and I were attending a conference in San Diego, and we came back through Los Angeles one afternoon when there was an honors discussion section that Christopher was participating in. So I asked if I could drop in, and the professor agreed. It was just a small group of four students and the professor and I.

One issue came up from Acts 4:32-35, summarizing the life of the early church. This passage talks about the first Christians' holding all things in common, but in the middle of it there is a powerful statement about the preaching of the resurrected Christ. The professor was noting how important this passage was in understanding early church life, because the message of the resurrection preached powerfully was connected with their living out their faith in community radically, including and loving one another and loving the people around them. He was basically making the point that, at least according to the New Testament accounts, these were people who walked their talk, lived out what they believed. He quietly said, "You know, they didn't have large, fancy buildings and charismatic preachers to attract people. They had to rely on the quality of their lives." Then he moved on to the next subject, but that hit me. I had a wonderful conversation with him after the class, and one of the things he said he saw was that the modern church is way too involved in attracting people in all kinds of ways. He said, "The early church had only one thing they could do. What was attractive was the way they lived—the community of their faith, the realness of their walk with God, which changed their life." That was the power of their witness, not gimmicks.

It was a wonderful reminder to me, and convicting to us, and again I suggest that this is good news, not bad news, because we can do this. This is not beyond us. As important as it is to clearly proclaim the truth, the content of the gospel, we don't have to worry that we won't get it all said just right. We just need to live our life in love with Christ alongside other people who are in love with Christ, and we can have a powerful witness.

I have been reading a wonderful book called *Evangelism Outside the Box* by Rick Richardson. It's about the changes in our culture and how we communicate, particularly to our younger people, because of how they process truth. He talks about the shift in the way we need to think about how we share our message:

“People are first looking for a community to belong to rather than a message to believe in. They are looking for a safe place to work out their sense of identity and self.” (1)

A lot of people will come into the church even before they believe, if they see a rich community life, because they are hungry for community. Then in the process of working out who they are in the community, they will look to the message. He goes on:

“In the past, being an expert and having the answers were what built credibility and a hearing. Today, having the same questions, struggles and hurts is what builds credibility and gains a hearing.” (2)

It’s not about whether we can win an argument with someone. It’s about whether we can demonstrate in life the reality of Christ in us. That is what is attractive to people. Out there in our world people are hurting, and they want to know that we are too, and we have found a new life in Christ and answers and strength and grace.

That is exactly the way the church in Thessalonica was living: in love with Christ, living in that vibrant community—and the word of God was just bouncing off the hillsides all around because of the wonderful work that God was doing. This is good news! We can do this. We can love each other in Christ and love Christ with our whole heart. We can make a difference here. The testimony of the Thessalonian church is so encouraging.

So the first principle is that we have to have a vital connection with God. When that is true of us as a community, the word of God is going to go forth.

NOTES:

- (1) Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box*, © 2000, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. P. 48
(2) Richardson, p. 48.

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