

Power and Conviction

Paul, formerly Saul the Pharisee, had it all. He was a respected member of the inner circle of Jewish



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scholars and a citizen of Rome. But Saul, the theological enforcer for the Jewish power block, became Paul, the leading voice of the gospel across the Roman Empire in the first century A.D. Paul forcefully expresses the change in his life: “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

This is the reason we are reading Paul’s words twenty centuries later and the reason Paul planted a church in the strategic city of Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a major trade center for the empire, situated on the Egnatia Highway, connecting Rome on the European continent with Asia. Read the tumultuous story of the beginning of the Thessalonian church in Acts 17:1-10 and you will see the strong bond that formed between Paul and those early believers.

Paul began his letter celebrating the remarkable testimony of this church in the face of strong opposition. Paul begins with their “work of faith” (v. 3). Find out the driving motivation of a person’s life and you will know exactly who and what they are. Why do they support a food pantry, after school program or a women’s shelter? Faith in God shows itself in where you volunteer, what you support financially and how you treat people. Faith is not getting your name on a list: faith is caring and doing.

Paul commends his readers for their “labor of love” (v. 3). The gospel is not about your family’s religious tradition, memorized creeds or societal obligations. Christian love guides you outside

your comfort zone, beyond established prejudices or societal obligations, and into the realm of compassion that expects nothing in return. Christ-like love sees a need and cannot turn away.

Paul finds joy in their “steadfastness of hope” (v. 3). The Thessalonian church faced ongoing pressure from the Jewish community that saw them as a threat to the synagogue and to religious balance in the city. Paul was so concerned at one point that he sent Timothy to check on them. But God’s Spirit continued to work through those faithful people. They were the example of what Paul later wrote in what we call his “love” chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

Keeping in mind that this letter was written during the critical earliest days of the spread of the gospel, what enabled the Thessalonian believers to be such powerful witnesses? Certainly they must have caught the passion of Paul, Silas (Sylvanus) and Timothy’s faith. Paul reminds them that “our message of the gospel came not to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit ... so that (they) became an example of all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” and “in every place your faith has become known” (vv. 6-8).

“Evangelism” has always been a “hot” word for evangelical Christians. We remember the days of annual revivals in local churches, citywide crusades, door-to-door visits with “The Roman Road” in hand. Response to those techniques has faded, not because the passion was wrong, but because our emphasis was too much about saying the right words and signing the card. Evangelism, witnessing and spreading the gospel should never be reduced to a sales pitch. The New Testament reveals the secret of sharing the gospel

Formations

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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1

effectively: 1) a consistent Christian life, 2) compassion for others who are not like us, 3) trusting the Holy Spirit to work by his time table and purpose, and 4) prayer that God will be at work beyond our human efforts and plans.

A middle-aged woman that I had baptized a few months earlier called in the middle of the week asking if I would visit her widowed mother one evening. She had brought her mother to church a couple of times, confiding that “mom is not a believer,” and asking “could I help her witness?” When we got together I began to gently share the love of Jesus. Mom was very interested and began to talk about the changes she was seeing in her daughter. Before I could move on to any decision mode, mom said, “Pastor, I have decided to believe in Jesus, not because of you or your church, but because of the wonderful changes in my daughter’s life since she has become a Christian.” There it was ... the simple truth that when we follow Christ and love in the power of his Spirit we can be a witness.

The dynamics of the first century church and the spread of the gospel to the far edges of the empire and beyond happened because the people of God lived by faith, exhibited hope and joy in their circumstances and showed the world the God of love and grace who is not confined to officially sanctioned organizations, government endorsement or cultural expectations. Paul, Silas and Timothy, the twelve apostles – these are only some of the faithful witnesses who shared Christ in their homes, villages, cities and the generations down through the centuries until today. May the Holy Spirit shape our living and words to help others find the way into God’s grace.