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A CHURCH'S WITNESS

We often hear talk about “influential” people. When we hear this, we may think of business men, teachers, coaches, presidents and other leaders. The truth of the matter is that all of us are people of influence. We can influence others to be as we are and that can be either positive or negative. Though we do not usually think of influence in these terms, we can influence others to be the antithesis or the opposites of what we are. This also can be either positive or negative. To provide reasons why their children should get a good education, parents will sometimes use people who are considered “unsuccessful” as an example of what their children should *avoid* becoming. Everyone has some influence on someone.

Not only do individuals exert influence, groups and organization have influence. In fact, organizations take on a persona and much of what we can say regarding the influence-wielding ability of an individual also applies to distinctive groups. Of course you can recognize these characteristics as the basis for stereotyping. I can remember when I was in college, I thought that people in fraternities and sororities were those who were more interested in drinking and partying than in getting an education. They had influence on me in that I was determined to *not* be as they were. It is disconcerting that most of the examples of “influence” I can think of are related to “what to avoid.” I would call these “negative role models.” We can think of many such group role models that are negative. Unfortunately, churches are being characterized in a negatively interpreted persona by much of our society. Many churches have reacted to this by trying to “fit-in” and conform to societal pressures. In doing this, they have become reflections of the world rather than windows to the Kingdom of God. When this happens, then churches miss the opportunity to be the proper witness as required by God.

When we mention the “proper witness” of a church, we should have in mind the character of a church. Are there Scriptural “norms” by which we can assess how we are doing? We are not likely to find a check list, but can gain insight by examining various passages. Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica can help us understand what some of these norms are.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10 As we read this first chapter of Paul’s letter we can pick out things that characterized the “church of the Thessalonians.”

Number one in Paul’s list of prayer for this church was their “work produced by faith.” The King James version calls this simply the “work of faith.” If we recall the writings of James, we recognize the connection of “faith and works” in that true faith is validated by works of faith. As James wrote, unless our faith produces results (works), then it is dead. (We need to be careful and not confuse the “result” with “activity.”) In our present-day churches we may see many things being accomplished. The question then becomes “by what means did we produce the accomplished results?” Was it based on strength and resources provided by God or was it based on our own efforts? Abraham was characterized as doing a work of faith when he followed God’s direction and offered up his son Isaac. If the “work” we accomplish in our churches is not based on God’s enablement, then it is simply work of the flesh since it is done in the strength of the members. Many churches think they can do anything because they have plenty of money and know sound business principles. That is nothing more than faith in ourselves and in the world system. True faith thinks thus: “we can do all things through Christ Who strengthens us.”

A church should also be known by its “labor of love.” We tend to use the words “work” and “labor” interchangeably. In the context of this passage, we should think of “work” as the result of “labor.” Our efforts or actions are the “labor” and the outcome or result is the “work.” The idea of “labor prompted by love” has to be concerned with the motive or driving force behind our actions.

We sing the chorus “God is Love” and we recognize the inseparability of unconditional love and the character or nature of God. We learn from Scripture that this love has been poured into our hearts (our being) so that we too have the nature of God within us. Consequently, the natural (meaning by nature) response we have as Christians should be actions that flow from no other motive than unconditional love. It is not something that we “decide” to do because it will please God (or a less noble purpose), it is spontaneous action based on our new nature. If we have to analyze the situation and determine what is “the right thing to do,” then we are functioning on the basis of the “knowledge of good and evil.” We are deciding in our intellect (soul) what should be done rather than simply bearing the fruit that comes from a transformed nature that is a result of having a born-again spirit within us.

Another characteristic is called “patience” in the KJV and “endurance” in the NIV. The Greek word is *hupomeno* which has also been translated as abide, stay, stand, and dwell. In our vernacular, we might call this “stick-to-it-tiveness.” Such endurance that characterized the early church was inspired by “hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Hope, as used in the Bible, is not just “wishful thinking.” Hope is *firm confidence in a future reality*. In this case, the reality is the fact that Jesus is Lord and knowledge of His sure return to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. Such hope inspires us to “keep on keeping on.”

Paul then made an interesting observation. He **knew** that God had chosen those in the church at Thessalonica **because** the word preached to them was confirmed with external signs of the power of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit was also internal to each of the believers there in that each was deeply convicted. Jesus told His followers “When He (the Holy Spirit) comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.” Evidence was clearly seen that God was at work among the people to whom Paul preached. This is another characteristic witness of a church.

The next trait mentioned by Paul was that of a “changed lifestyle.” The new Christians took on new behavior that was characteristic of those who walked with Christ and even of Christ Himself. The behavior of this church was not only a witness to the people in the area where they were located, but it also witnessed to Christians in other areas. A church that acts like the world and operates according to the principles of the world is a church in name only.

The church at Thessalonica loved the word of God. They “welcomed it with joy.” Some churches are content to feed on pop psychology and listen to lectures based on articles or books that deny the validity of the Scriptures. True believers are hungry for the word of God and are not satisfied with anything less. The church at Thessalonica not only received the word with joy, they also proclaimed it to others. Apparently, they were not timid about it. Paul said “The Lord’s message **rang** out from them.”

A significant part of the witness of a church is whether or not it serves God. One who serves is a servant (slave). Jesus told His disciples that when we sin, we become a slave to sin (John 8:34). We could generalize this to a principle that “we become the slave of what or whomever we serve.” A slave serves by doing what his master commands. In other words, service is strongly linked to obedience. A church that serves God is a church that is obedient to God’s commands. A slave is also attentive to hear his master’s call. In the same way, we need to listen to hear the “still small voice” that beckons us to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus.