

“Confidence in God”

Introduction: In these weeks after Easter we’ve begun to read together and reflect on Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica. As we go along, we want to pay attention to how Paul seeks to form and shape this 1st c. congregation for their life together, and for their life in the world, and to glean how that forming and shaping applies to us in the 21st c. as well. We said last week that the theme that will guide us in our journey is this: “Holiness and Hope in a Hostile and Hurting World.” And it raises the question: How are we to live distinctively (holiness) and trustingly (hope), as we participate in the mission of God in a world which is not easy (but hostile), yet needy (it is hurting)?

As he unfolds this theme, Paul begins by seeking to instill confidence in his readers, confidence in their identity as a community formed by the living and true God, a confidence that is confirmed in their life of faith, love, and hope.

I. A Community in God

A. Why would this have been an important place for Paul to begin? Well, consider that this church was only a few months old. Founded in 50 A.D., its members are Jews who have recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and Gentiles who have turned to Jesus from a life of idolatry. Thus, their Christian convictions have been newly acquired and their Christian lifestyle recently adopted. On top of this, they are being tested by hostility, hostility from their neighbors who didn’t like the way Paul was teaching about a new King in town, Jesus, who demanded their ultimate loyalty. Paul, in their mind, was “turning the world upside down.” Ultimately, such hostility had forced Paul to leave Thessalonica under cover of darkness (Ac. 17:1-10). After a few months, while in Athens, Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica to check things out (3:1-6). Had they gone back to their idols? Had they caved in under persecution? Timothy’s report had been encouraging but there were also things that Paul felt he needed to address, hence the occasion for this letter. One was that this community, due to the hostility it was facing, needed to stay firmly grounded and confident in God’s call upon them.

B. So know that when Paul addresses this letter to “the church of the Thessalonians, *in* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” the little preposition “in” packs a huge punch. It doesn’t mean that somehow the church is spatially inside God. It means rather that the church was brought into being by, and continues to draw its life from, the God who created, and is restoring, all things. A picture Jesus offers is of branches which bear fruit because they have remained “in” the vine (Jn. 15:1-8). This not only makes the church different and distinct from all the other communities, gatherings, and assemblies in the city; it also serves as a reminder to the church that it is God’s church, and that he has a distinct purpose for it, and that he will not abandon it but help it stand firm.

It’s a good word for us as well. Amid all the crazy winds that blow throughout our culture, amid the hostility that Christians can face, and amid declining church membership due to the indifference many seem to have toward the Christian message, it’s important to remember our identity, and the source of our life together, and the missional reason for our existence. So, stay connected, Paul would say, to the One who formed you and sustains your life. Find your confidence in Him. The form the church can take may vary, but the One who formed the church, and the purposes for which he formed, will not.

II. Confirmed by Faith, Love, and Hope

A. Not only has this community been formed in the living and true God, but Paul goes on to confirm the real change that has taken place in their lives through the faith, love, and hope that it is reported they are now living: “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3). They are, in other words, on the right track, and Paul wants to encourage them in order to keep them on this track.

Illustration: I was reading the other day about singer Mariah Carey. She is one of the most successful and popular female vocalists every, having won numerous awards and produced countless hits. And yet, despite all of this success, Carey once said that she can hear a thousand praises and just one criticism, and the criticism will completely drown out the voices of the thousand praises. Maybe some of you can relate to that! While I don’t know the character types of the congregation in Thessalonica, Paul knew that he needed to begin with praise, with confirming what they were doing right and well, as evidenced by this triad of faith, love, and hope in their lives.

B. We see this triad often in Paul, as well as in other NT letters. Many call it “a brief definition of true Christianity.” One of my professors says it describes the Christian life in this way: We live in the present (love), grounded in what God has done in the past (faith), urged on by what God promises to do in the future (hope). As Paul’s prayer goes on, we see that it’s faith, love, and hope which reveal that the Spirit has been at work in these folks with great conviction and power, and it’s faith, love, and hope that has caused the Lord’s message—the good news about Jesus—to ring out not only within the borders of their own country (“Macedonia and Achaia”), but beyond (“everywhere”). And it could even be said that it’s faith, love, and hope that are involved in the members of this congregation having turned to God from idols (faith), to serve the living and true God (love), and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (hope).

C. Let’s look a little more closely at this triad as Paul first mentions it. Two aspects to notice.

1. First, this triad helps reorient our lives. We are drawn upward toward God by faith, outward to our neighbor by love, and forward toward the return of Jesus by hope. In other words, this triad pulls us out of our self-focused introversion and redirects us toward living within the story of God. In this way, it truly does turn our world “upside down.”

Illustration: I remember a few years back a promotion run by GM. They were giving away 1,000 cars. All you had to do was go to a GM showroom, get in a car, and push a little button underneath the rearview mirror. If it made a certain noise, you won the car. One of their ads showed a young man doing just that. He climbed into a Cadillac, pushed the button, a noise sounded, and he won. We then saw him leaping out of the car shouting, “I pushed the button that changed my life!” That, my friends, borders on idolatry. It is believing that someone, or something, other than the Lord Jesus Christ, will truly bring us joy and new life. It is pursuing everything from Astrology to Zen for meaning and purpose. Such misplaced belief will only, in the end, lead to heartache, frustration, and a life outside of God’s good purposes and love.

St. Augustine, a fifth-century philosopher, theologian, and bishop from North Africa, pinpoints our struggle when he says of God: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.” Like a beach ball that is being kept underwater and will not be

“at rest” until it rests on the surface, unless and until we come into a relationship with the One in whose image we are made, we will never really be able to make sense of our lives or find our heart’s true home. Faith, love, and hope help orient our heart in that good and restful direction.

2. Second, while faith, love, and hope may sound like abstract qualities, each is meant to be productive. If our faith, love, and hope are alive, they will lead to concrete, practical results.

a) Faith produces work. We don’t come to faith in God through doing good works, but a true faith in God will result in our doing good things in response to what God has done for us. Without works, as James puts it, faith is dead, it remains in the abstract, which doesn’t do us, or anyone else for that matter, any good!

b) Love prompts labor. This might strike us as being the same as work, but I think labor adds the nature of effort to our love, reminding us that love is a verb and not just a noun, an action in addition to a feeling. True love, in other words, often requires exertion and hardship. It is “cruciform,” as some use the word, meaning it takes its cue from the crucifixion of Jesus and the love he poured out on us on the cross. That is what a labor of love is all about.

c) Hope inspires endurance. Hope, it’s always important to remember, is not wishful thinking, as the biblical writers use the word. Instead, it is grounded in what God has begun in Jesus, in the resurrection, and promises to complete in the future, at his return. Such hope leads to the practical ability to persevere in the face of opposition, pressure, and hostility. Why? Because it rests in the promise that when Jesus returns, God will issue his wrath (v. 10). Importantly, wrath is not a description of a god who has somehow lost control, but of the living and true God who will respond to all of the injustice of the world with his restorative justice, renewing and restoring all that has gone amiss in his good and beautiful world, covering the world with his “ferocious love,” as one writer puts it (Andy Johnson). Sadly, those who have been intentional and unrepentant in rejecting this God and worshipping idols instead will not experience his wrath as restorative but as that which will leave them outside of his love forever.

This is why God had chosen the church, the one in Thessalonica, and the one in Essex, and every other, so that we who have benefitted from the mission of God, who have turned from our idols, received his peace, and are finding our heart’s true home in him, might participate in that mission and share the good news of God’s love and peace with a world that, though hostile, is broken and hurting and badly needs to hear it. God has called the church to be the instrument through which his good news might reach to the ends of the earth.

So may Paul’s encouragement to the Thessalonian church help us to be confident in that divine plan. May we know that the church is God’s idea, that it has been formed by him, and lives its life in him. May our lives of faith, love, and hope lead to the work, labor, and endurance that will benefit not only us, but also our neighbor, and all to the glory of God.