

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

What Does a Maturing Church Look Like?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

The title of this current series is *Life Together: called into the community of faith*. In the interest of continuity and comprehension we have been spending a few minutes each week reviewing the previous sermons in the series. In my first sermon I pointed out that while you were saved as individuals the Holy Spirit immediately placed you into a body, the Body of Christ. Into this community you were called *by* God and in this community you live out your common faith *before* God (*coram deo*). The idea of a freelance, private, independent, individualistic, Lone Ranger faith is completely contrary to both the spirit and the letter of true Christianity. So my goal on July 13 was to help you begin to turn a corner in terms of how you actually *think* about the Church. Indeed, the point of that first sermon was this: when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think corporately.

I suggested that this shift in mentality is like that of an independent, single man who takes a wife and within a few years finds himself with several children. His thinking changes not just in the sense that he now “takes his family into consideration.” Rather, his thinking changes in that he simply can no longer

define himself or interpret his manner of living in isolation from his precious ones. Such a corporate mentality ought to characterize *every* professing Christian.

On July 20 I put forward an answer to the question: what is it that binds this community together? What is the fundamental thing you have in common? The Bible teaches that you share a common life in Christ. You are joined to Him in both a representative and a vital union. Everything else you have in common is a consequence of this single, fundamental spiritual reality. I closed with these words from A. A. Hodge, "Since all true believers are thus intimately united to Christ as the common Head of the whole body, and the Source of a common life, it follows that those same believers must be intimately united together" (*The Confession of Faith*, p. 324).

Last Sunday, July 27, we gave ourselves to exploring this question: What marks a local church as a genuine expression of the body of Christ? Saying it another way, what infallible criteria can be employed to verify that a church's claim of authenticity is valid?

The big idea was this: the gospel alone is the essential mark of the true church. In defense of this thesis I quoted from an article by J. A. O. Preus: "According to the reformers, this Gospel (or the doctrine of justification) stands over the Church as the criterion of the Church's authenticity. It is the judge of what is truly the Church and what is not. It is the presence of this Gospel, in its verbal [and] visible forms (i.e., Word and Sacraments), that identifies the Church of Jesus Christ and distinguishes it from every other organization or sect. Where this Gospel is, there you have the Church. Where you do not have evidence of this

Gospel, you do not have visible, and therefore trustworthy, evidence of the Church” (*The Doctrine of Justification: The Article on which the Church Stands and Falls*, 2002, ACE).

I pointed out that there are three dimensions of this essential mark as expressed, for example, in Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession* (1561; see *EDoT*, p. 132): “The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin.” The gospel alone is the essential mark of the true church.

By way of transition into today’s subject, I want to read **Ephesians 4:12-13** from the translation by J. B. Phillips. *[God’s] gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity – that measure of development which is meant by “the fullness of Christ.* Paul is saying that God’s sovereign purpose; God’s kind intention is that the Church more and more reflect Jesus; that the Church more and more take on His likeness. When the apostle speaks of maturity that’s what he means. And so the question for today is this: “What criteria can we use to measure ourselves to see if we have arrived at some degree of maturity” (Gene Getz, *The Measure of a Church*, p. 16)? What is God’s standard for evaluating the growth and maturity of a church? Like a tape measures distance, like a watch measures time, like a scale measures weight, like an odometer measures speed, like a dipstick measure oil level, how is the maturity level of a church measured?

Unfortunately, when we consider how a church is doing, we rarely think in terms of spiritual maturity. More often than not we think in terms of external success. Consequently our popular standards for evaluation are inadequate at best and just plain inaccurate at worst. Churches are judged to be “successful” on the basis of the scope of *programs* available to the saints. Many churches are held up as models because of their rate of *growth*. People are coming and sticking. For other churches the fact that they are seeing many *conversions* is the incontrovertible seal of divine approval. Some churches are judged to be solid on the basis of the *efficiency* with which the ministry is run. They just seem to have it all together in terms of literature, staffing, and procedures. Some churches achieve a certain reputation on the basis of their *enthusiasm*. “Dynamic” is the term often applied to these ministries and the men who lead them. Not a few churches are judged to be successful on the basis of sheer *size*. Just look at the crowds. We must be doing something right. Some churches gain the reputation for being *innovative*. “Cutting-edge” is the term often applied to these very creative ministries. Some churches gain a following on the basis of *popularity*. The church scene in any given community can be like the fashion world. Different churches are “in” at different times. The word about a particular church spreads within the Christian community and a lot of people attend because a lot of people attend.

As Gene Getz recognizes, “Many of these things will be present in a mature church” (p. 17). “But, unfortunately, [he says] *all* of these things can be present without having a mature church” (p. 18). “The Bible is very clear regarding the criteria for measuring the maturity level of the local church” (p. 18). “Maturity in the body of Christ can be identified by the enduring virtues” of faith, hope, and love (*Sharpening*, p. 85). Paul “often turned to these three words to define what it

means to *become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (*Measure*, p. 99). The presence of these virtues "thrilled and encouraged him about certain churches" (*Measure*, p. 18). It was the presence of these virtues for which He thanked God. It was the increase of these virtues for which he prayed. Nowhere more clearly than in **I Thessalonians 1:1-3**. Please read these verses aloud with me. *Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³ 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.* He reinforces the essential character of these virtues in his other letters.

II Thessalonians 1:3-4, *We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your **faith** is greatly enlarged, and the **love** of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; ⁴ therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and **faith** in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.*

Let's read **Colossians 1:3-5** together. *We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴ since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and the **love** which you have for all the saints; ⁵ because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel.*

Ephesians 1:15-18, *For this reason I too, having heard of the **faith** in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your **love** for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

*the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the **hope** of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.*

I Peter 1:20-22, *For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you ²¹ who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your **faith** and **hope** are in God. ²² Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere **love** of the brethren, fervently **love** one another from the heart.*

Hebrews 10:22-24, *by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of **faith**, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our **hope** without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴ and let us consider how to stimulate one another to **love** and good deeds.*

Faith, hope, and love are often referred to as “theological virtues” because they are so clearly rooted in the New Testament (Kerr, *EDoT*, p. 1146; Harper, *Beacon*, p. 480). One scholar describes them as “the three fundamental elements of the Christian life; the primitive Christian triad” (Hoffman, *NIDNTT*, p. 242). Another said, “The New Testament attitudes of faith, hope, and love toward God are the primary elements for coordinating Christian character” (Harper, *Beacon*, p. 480). Consider the process of triangulation. Triangulation is sometimes used in cellular communication to pinpoint the geographic position of a user. The location of a cell phone can be determined by measuring the distance or direction

of the received signal from two or three different fixed points. If we really want to know the position of ours or any other church for that matter, we must determine where we are by our relationship to the three fixed, base coordinates of faith, hope, and love.

Now think back to last Sunday. I want to ask you a question. What happens when a congregation is clearly manifesting the marks of a true church? The virtues of faith, hope, and love are being formed by the Holy Spirit in that church's life as the Word of God is faithfully preached and the means of grace (sacraments) faithfully administered. **Colossians 1:3-5, 23**, *We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴ since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and the **love** which you have for all the saints; ⁵ because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, **the gospel** ... if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of **the gospel** that you have heard.* Now let's look at these three virtues; these measures of maturity – faith, hope, and love.

Saving faith is “a certain conviction, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance (trust) on the promises of God in Christ” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 503). Based upon this definition, I believe saving faith will show itself in at least three very clear ways in the community life of a maturing church. First, God's people in that place will have a firm grip on the gospel. Listen as Paul describes the initial reception of the gospel by the Thessalonians. **I Thessalonians 1:4-8**, *knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; ⁵ 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. ⁶ You also became imitators of us and of*

*the Lord, having **received the word** in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.⁸ 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.* The Thessalonians understood the gospel. They *embraced* the gospel. They *lived out* the gospel. This congregation was not loaded with people who had some vague understanding of the gospel and tenuous profession of faith. God had done a profound work of grace among them. Second, God's people in that place maintain doctrinal integrity and stability. In a maturing church the historic, apostolic faith will not only be maintained but it will also be cherished. A maturing church is not tossed about on the waves of speculation (Eph. 4:14) but is happy and secure in *the faith once for all delivered to the saints* (Jude 3). Third, God's people in that place continue in servicing Christ and others. In **I Thessalonians 1:3** Paul thanks God as he remembers their *work produced by faith*. So God's people in a maturing church will be abounding in good deeds as an expression of the genuineness and vitality of their faith.

Christian hope is not a groundless wish for good fortune. A wish is nothing more than empty desire, a preference. A man might wish he could live his life over. A teenager, without any grounds whatsoever, may wish he had a car. A wish is like a feather floating on the wind. Hope introduces the element of confidence. For example, what if that same teenager's father takes him aside and promises him, "Son, before school starts in the fall we'll go out and get you a car." That boy's desire is now more than a wish. His is an anticipation and expectation based upon the sure word of his father.

II Corinthians 1:20 assures us that *all the promises of God are “yes” in Jesus Christ*. Christian hope is the anticipation, the expectation of the promised benefits which flow from the gospel. The Bible speaks of the hope of salvation (I Thess. 5:4, 5, 8), the hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:4-7), the hope of resurrection (Acts 23:6, 24:15; Rom. 8:23, 24; I Thess. 4:13, 14; I Pet. 1:3, 4), and the hope of glory (Rom. 5:1, 2; Col. 1:27; II Thess. 2:14-17). Faith emphasizes assurance (Heb. 11:1) while hope emphasizes the anticipation of the things of which we are assured. “Hope is the expectation that all God’s promises to us and for us will (soon) be realized. It is trusting – and waiting – on God” (*Beacon*, p. 265). So God’s people in a maturing church will be a happy and patient bunch having their eyes and affections fixed on the glorious future which is theirs in Christ.

What about love? Love, grace, mercy, and longsuffering are all expressions of the inherent goodness of God. This divine goodness is “that perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bountifully and kindly with all His creatures” (Berkhof, p. 70). Love is God’s goodness seeking to give or share of Himself (p. 71). **John 3:16**, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.* **Romans 5:8**, *But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* **Ephesians 5:2, 25**, *walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us ... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.* **I John 3:16**, *We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.* So we are called to give ourselves for the benefit of others. But even this kind of giving can be done without love. **I Corinthians 13:3**, *And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.* So this self-giving, in both its motivation and its manner, must be after Jesus.

In **John 13:1** the Bible says of Jesus, *Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the father, having **loved** His own who were in the world, He **loved** them to the end.* In **John 13:34** He said, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you **love** one another, even as I have **loved** you, that you also **love** one another.”* Do you recall what happened in between those verses? Right! Jesus washed the feet of His disciples (13:2-11). The image that the Son of God wants us to have in mind when we think of His love is that simple, exquisite, and clear demonstration of self-giving.

We will flesh this out in later sermons but for the time being let's boil it down to a single statement. In a maturing church there will be a noticeable (John 13:35) and sincere (I Pet. 1:22) commerce of money, time, energy, affection, and goodwill within the community of God's people and beyond. One day I went up to BNSF to have lunch with Jim Howard. He had arranged to give me a little tour. We visited the very nerve center of the railroad – a huge open, windowless room designed to withstand the most powerful tornado; a futuristic beehive of activity; the floor filled with workers at computer stations; giant screens lined up around the walls including electronic maps of the entire system displaying the movements and location of every train. Like that system of trains moving all over the country a maturing church is a commerce of Christlike affection and self-giving moving between the saints and on display before the world.

This past week I received a note from a long-time member of this church. Neatly typed and enclosed inside a card the note was her prayer for me and my family. Here's the last paragraph: “Gracious Father ... may You continue to use Pastor Tom, and his family, in the lives of those they touch. Encourage, strengthen and protect them. Please provide Tom with adequate prayer and study time to mold

him according to Your will. Refresh him in the quiet of the mountains, lakes or peaceful valleys and renew a steadfast spirit within him.”

In a maturing church there is a healthy commerce (lawful trafficking) of such tender affections, spiritual desires, and prayers passing back and forth from saint to saint as a way of life. Remember, maturity in the body of Christ can be identified by the enduring virtues of faith, hope, and love.

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

A brief review

July 13 ... when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think _____ .

July 20 ... The Bible teaches that you share a _____ _____ in Christ.

July 27 ... the _____ alone is the essential mark of the true church.

Ephesians 4:12-13, [God's] *gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity – that measure of development which is meant by “the fullness of Christ.*

“What criteria can we use to measure ourselves to see if we have arrived at some degree of maturity” (Gene Getz, *The Measure of a Church*)?

Maturity in the body of Christ can be identified by the enduring virtues of _____ , _____ , and _____ .

I Thessalonians 1:1-3, *Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ²We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³constantly 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.*

Colossians 1:3-5, *We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and the **love** which you have for all the saints; ⁵because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel.*

Now think back to last Sunday.

What happens when a church is clearly manifesting the marks of a true church? The virtues of faith, hope, and love are being _____ by the Holy Spirit in the church's life as the Word of God is faithfully preached and the means of grace (sacraments) faithfully administered.

Colossians 1:3-5, 23, *We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and the **love** which you have for all the saints; ⁵because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, **the gospel** ... if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of **the gospel** that you have heard.*

Faith

Saving faith is "a certain _____, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty _____ (trust) on the promises of God in Christ" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*).

God's people in that place will have a firm _____ on the _____ .
God's people in that place maintain _____ integrity and stability.
God's people in that place continue in _____ Christ and others.

Hope

Christian hope is the _____ , the expectation of the promised benefits which flow from the gospel.

So God's people in a maturing church will be a _____ and _____ bunch, having their eyes and affections fixed on the glorious future that is theirs in Christ.

Love

Love is God's goodness seeking to give or share of _____ (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 5:2, 25; I John 3:16).

In a maturing church there will be a *noticeable* (John 13:35) and *sincere* (I Pet. 1:22) _____ of money, time, energy, affection, and goodwill within the community of God's people and beyond (BNSF illustration).