

Who are the Churches that people are talking about today? A few years ago it was the Crystal Cathedral in Southern California. Robert Schueller and his hour of power were the model of Church that people all wanted to copy. My own minister went over there for a conference in the late 80's and almost straight away we were modelled on how they did things over there. Then in the early 90's it was Bill Hybels and the seeker services. Everywhere Church services were not about worship but evangelism, it was the model that made an incredible impact around the world.

Over the last few years the flavour of the month has been Rick Warren and the Saddleback Community Church with their discipleship programme and teaching ministry. And in Sydney at the moment, the Church everyone is comparing themselves with is Hillsong, with its emphasis on praise and worship. It now runs an annual conference that books out a 30,000 people stadium.

But if there is any Church that has a mandate, a real mandate for others to model themselves on, it was the Church at Thessalonica. This was the Church that Paul founded in about 51 AD. Paul was then on his second missionary journey. He and his companions, Silas and Timothy had travelled on to Thessalonica, where there were no known Christians. They began preaching the gospel and some Greeks and Jews were converted. But Paul had only been there three weeks or so, when the Jews rioted, and the three missionaries had to leave this fledgling Church and so travelled on to Athens.

But despite such difficult beginnings, this young group of Christians had become a model Church. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:7 that they became a model to all the believers throughout Greece. The Lord's message began to ring out from them and soon their faith in God became known everywhere. This was a model Church.

A Church worth copying. The apostle Paul says so, and he should know, as he saw the inner working of many Churches close up. So before we start chasing the successes of the Hillsongs, the Willow Creeks, the Saddlebacks, the Crystal Cathedrals, the Churches that seem to be doing something right today. Why don't we look together at the Church at Thessalonica and see if there are any timeless principles that they displayed that we can use today.

1. The model Christian life. For when we do that we see in the first couple of verses, that a model Christian Church is made up of model Christians. Now that makes sense doesn't it? Having structures or programmes or Church buildings are not the place to start, for the Church is primarily about people. And so if we want to grow a healthy Church, we begin by growing healthy Christian men and women. But what qualities do healthy Christians have? What characteristics

are found in model Christians? Well they are known for their faith, their hope and their love.

Now these qualities of faith, hope and love almost act as a summary of what the Christian life involves right through the NT. Faith that assures that God has stepped into history and through Jesus has saved his people from their sins. Love that attitude of heart that fills the believer, and encourages them to live not for self but for others. Hope, that confidence that God has begun something really special, and one day he will complete the good work by delivering us away from a imperfect, broken world and give his followers a perfect environment in which to live. Heaven.

Faith, hope and love are qualities that all Christians should have. But notice that the Thessalonian Christians had a certain type of faith, hope and love. Look at v 2. Paul says, “*We always thank God for all of you in our prayers*” *Why? Because of*

Your work produced by faith. These Thessalonians did not just have a faith, a head knowledge about what God had done for them. For that head knowledge led them to work out that faith. They didn’t just sit back and hope that God would help them grow, they rolled up their sleeves so to speak and put in the hard yards.

I was watching 60 minutes recently and they were interviewing Pavarotti, that great opera singer. And he made the point that it took an incredible amount of hard work for him to train his voice to sound so natural. And likewise it takes much hard work for you and I to grow in our faith. It doesn’t just happen.

Likewise it wasn’t just any old love that these Christians had at Thessalonica. *It was a labour prompted by love.* Their love wasn’t just words, it was an action. It wasn’t just pious talk, it was demonstrated by the sacrifices they made for each other and by the time, money and effort they expended on helping one another. Their faith meant that they involved themselves in a labour of love, as they served both God and others.

And then there was their “*endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*” They went through some tough times these Christians. And when they were tempted to be consumed by the present, they looked instead to their future. When they felt like giving up, they remembered that God would one day reward their steadfastness. When they were struggling, they dug deep and found the strength that God had placed inside the very core of their being. As one preacher has put it, when “*Other men see only a hopeless end, the Christian rejoices in an endless hope*”.

Friends, these are the qualities that believers should have in bucket loads. For if we have been gripped by the good news not only will we

have been saved by the good news but we will have been changed by it! I love the story of a guy named DG Barnhouse who was at the time the minister of the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. One day Barnhouse was out open air preaching, when he was confronted by a very rude atheist. *How can God be true, its just rubbish!*

And Barnhouse said to this atheist, it is true and I can prove it to you by the change it makes in people. And so I challenge you to bring back next week 10 people whose lives have been completely transformed by their belief in atheism and I will bring along with me a 100 people who have been completely changed by the good news of Jesus. And guess what? Barnhouse was there the next week with his 100 people and the atheist . . . he didn't turn up.

So if we want to have a model Church, we need to be growing model Christians in faith, in love and in hope. And how will we do that? By discovering

2. The inspiration behind the model. And we see that in verses 4-6. And that inspiration is none other than God himself. Look at verse 4, *“For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,”* The first motivation behind our faith and hope and love is God's love given to us. We are beloved by God. God is love. And so as he relates to his sons and daughters, he does everything in a loving manner.

Isn't that a good reason for us to be growing in love? I'm loved by my wife and so what do I want to do in return, I want to love her even more. I am perfectly loved by my Heavenly Father and that should motivate me, force me, compel me even to love Him back and to love the people around me who have been clothed in His image.

But not only did he love us, but he choose us, because as Paul says in verse 5 *“our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.”* The Bible's clear testimony is that ultimately we did not choose God, he choose us. Or put it another way, yes at one time we decided to choose God and to follow him, but that was only after He decided to choose us and sent his Holy Spirit into our lives.

God choose us, before the creation of the world. It had nothing to do with how good you were, how pretty you are, how much you might think that God needs you. No he chose you by his grace & that makes the Christian incredibly special. God didn't have to choose us, he could have chosen someone else in my place. I don't know why he choose me, but boy doesn't that give my life a meaning & a purpose?

I like how American writer and preacher Warren Wiersbe has put it. He says, *“As far as God the Father is concerned, I was saved when He chose me in Christ before the world began. As fas as God the Son is concerned, I was saved when He died for me on that cross. As far as*

God the Holy Spirit is concerned, I was saved one Saturday night in May 1945, when I heard the word and trusted Jesus Christ. At that time the whole plan fell together and I became a child of God.”

What a responsibility that puts on us. If God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit has been working in us for thousands of years, even before we were alive, they are worthy of our faith, of our love and of our hope. But more than that, we should be imitators of our God. Paul continues in verse 5 *“You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; “*

The Thessalonians are called to be like God. Or to be like Paul as Paul imitates God. Is God loving? So should they be. Does God forgive? So should we. Does God continue to give people chance after chance after chance, then so should we. Our faith, should imitate the faith of Jesus. Our love should be like the love of God the Father. Our enduring hope should be like that of the HS who never gave up on us.

So model Christians come about when we model ourselves on God Himself. As A. W. Tozer once said *“that if a 100 pianos were merely tuned to each other, their pitch would not be very accurate. But if they were all tuned to one tuning fork, they would automatically be tuned to each other. Similarly, unity in the Church isn't the result of running around and adjusting to everyone else. The Thessalonian church was surrendered to Christlikeness. “* It modelled itself on Jesus.

And if we do that, Paul says **3. We then become a model to others** Isn't that what happened to the Thessalonians? V. 7 says that they became a model for those in the neighbouring regions. Their faith began to ring out everywhere. Everyone around them saw that they had turned from idols and now served the true and living God. They became known far and wide for their waiting and trusting for the return of their Saviour Jesus.

One commentator writes; *"It would be difficult to exaggerate how radical is the change of allegiance which is implied by the turn from idols to the living God. For idols are dead; God is living. Idols are false; God is true. Idols are many -- God is one; Idols are visible and tangible -- God is invisible and intangible, beyond the reach of sight and touch. Idols are creatures, the work of human hands -- God is the Creator of the universe and of all mankind."*

But that was the model that was preached and lived. The model of a life fully transformed by the power of the Christian message..... I like the story of the country family who visited the big city for the 1st time & went into one of those big sky scrapers. The father & the son then watched with amazement as an old lady got into an elevator and about a minute later, out came a beautiful younger model. The Dad couldn't believe his eyes and called out to his son, "Son... go get your mother."

You see if people are transformed by the gospel that will get others

talking. That will encourage others to go get their family & friends. That will mean that we will become model for others around us.

Now I don't know about you but I don't really like the thought of being a model for others. I don't like the fact that others may look at me & want to be like me. For I know what I am really like. I know that I often let others down & some of you will know from first hand experience that at times I have let you down as well. I don't like the thought of being a model. But I am. And its not just because I am a minister, its because I am a Christian.

Which means if you are a Christian, you also are a model. For God sets before us the model of what a Christian looks like, a model of faith, hope and love. He motivates us by showing us his love and by calling us to imitate him. And then he makes us his models, for a world that can't see him. They can see us, they can notice the changes in our lives. They can note our love, our forgiveness, our grace and through these qualities they can learn about an invisible God.

Which just means we are all models. People will notice if you come regularly to Church or not. People will notice if you come to serve yourself or to serve others. They will notice if you leave straight away and don't say anything to anyone each week or if you go out of your way to talk to those you don't know. For friends, we are models.

But I don't think the Church has been very good at producing good models here in Australia. So often we just teach people with our words, rather than teaching with our words and then showing people with our actions. Can you imagine Lleyton Hewitt giving you a lecture on how to do a top spin backhand? He might try but then he would pick up a racket and ball and show you how its done.

Likewise, how do we teach people to do evangelism unless you take someone along with you? How will learn to pray unless you come along & hear other people praying? How will we raise new kids Church teachers, new hospital visitors, new Scripture teachers unless we show by word and action. And how will you know if you have a talent for that sort of thing unless you go along and have a try at the same time?

Whether we like it or not, we are models, modelling to one another the truth of the good news about Jesus. Friends God shows us a model of faith, hope and love. He inspires us with a model of how he works in this world and he wants us to be a model to those around us. That is what a model Church looks like.

So is midweekchurch a model Church? Yes it is. But whether it is a good model or a bad model is up to us and what we do next!