

**MAYBRIDGE**  
COMMUNITY CHURCH

# **GROUND WORK**

## **BUILDING A HEALTHY CHURCH CULTURE**



**MAYBRIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH LEADERS  
GATHERING**  
NOVEMBER 2023

## **Part 1: Healthy Fountains (1 Thessalonians 1v1-10)**

*'Culture Eats Strategy For Breakfast' Peter Drucker*

*'We humans are culture creators. How we are around each other will always take on a particular relational dynamic, a shared personality, a noticeable tone. It can never be otherwise. We shape one another in many complex ways, and a resulting culture always emerges. It's true of friendship groups, of workplaces, of families, and of churches. There will always be a vibe, a feel, an intangible but powerful way the group tends to be together.'* Sam Allberry

### **Common Ways Of Seeing Church**

Church is...Chaplaincy (Look after me)

The Sort of Disciples This Produces: Unproductive, victims of circumstances, tendency to be needy, lacking responsibility

Church is... School (Teach me)

The Sort of Disciples This Produces: Cerebral, knowledgeable but not practical. A Christian 'worldview' but perhaps not lived experience of God.

Church is.... Supermarket (Impress me)

The Sort of Disciples This Produces: Consumerist, arms-length commitment to others, limited resilience when things are difficult.

Church is... Media service (Entertain me)

The Sort of Disciples This Produces: Uncommitted, passive, unable to deal with suffering.

Church is... Club (Reward me)

The Sort of Disciples This Produces: Inward looking, stuffy, closed to change.

Church is... Corporation (Organise me)

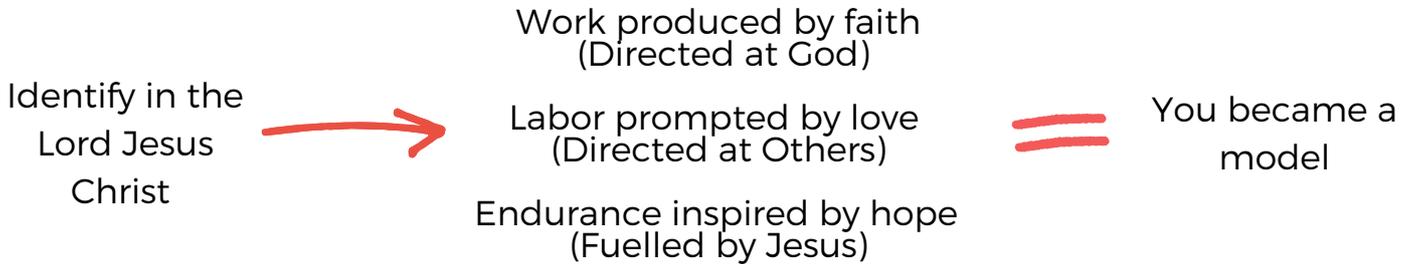
The Sort of Disciples This Produces: Cold, not relational, satisfied to give financially and turn up to see things but lacking depth of relationship with God.

Church is... Family

## Discussion Questions:

- Which of the above are you most tempted by in how you see church?
- Which of these have you seen 'lived out'? (No naming names!)

## The Seeds of a Healthy Church



## The Basis of Healthy Church: The Gospel

While there is one Gospel message, it is communicated in different ways.

- The Hebrew God (Yahweh) deliberately created the universe, including our world.
- Humans were lovingly and specially made - in God's image - in order to enjoy relationship with Him.
- However, from the first humans onwards, every single one of us has rejected God at heart level and this is tragically evident in our thoughts, choices, behaviours and relationships.
- The Old Testament promised that God would eventually - and finally - solve this problem and reconcile broken humanity to Himself through a Messiah.
- Incredibly, God's own son, Jesus, was this Messiah, who came into our world as one of us, was crucified to take on the consequences of our sin, and then miraculously rose again to life and defeated death for us.
- The implications of Jesus' death and resurrection are endless and wonderful - reaching to every place and every person and every part of us.
- Through all this, Jesus inaugurates a new 'kingdom' of people who love Him and will joyfully embrace and live under his kingship for ever in a restored creation.

*'When the gospel is taught clearly, and the people of the church believe it deeply, it does more than renew us personally. The doctrine of grace also creates a culture of grace. In such a church, the gospel is both articulated at the obvious level of doctrine and embodied at the subtle level of vibe, ethos, feel, relationships and community...Without the culture, the doctrine appears pointless'. - Ray Ortlund*

## Session Summary:

Paul and Silas committed 'Gospel time' to the Thessalonians, and that church soon became a source of inspiration to other Christians in Macedonia and Achaia, a huge geographical area. In the long run, this investment in the Thessalonian church multiplied and grew and became a huge influence throughout church history as a model to be emulated.

## Discussion Questions:

- Where do you feel personally challenged? How are you encouraged? How are you minded to pray?
- Given that we're all imperfect people, what is it to be a 'model' of the Gospel? How can we do that better, not merely as individuals but as a community? What would help us to do this, based on the text?
- By constantly calling them brother and sisters, what 'mindset' about the nature of church does Paul help build in the Thessalonians?

## **Part 1 Notes:**

## Part 2: Healthy Church (1 Thessalonians 2v1-17)

### How Paul and Silas Shared the Gospel And Changed the World

No Self-reliance	No Flattery
No Error	No Masks
No Impure Motives	No Greed
No Trickery	No Authoritarianism
No Praise Seeking	But rather.... We were like children

*"This is the secret of Paul's success—the continual and selfless giving of his all to people whom he loved dearly." - John Stott*

*'It's better to model a value than to value a model' - Naomi Walmsley*

*'The great concern of the New Testament Epistles is not about the size of the church, it is about the purity of the church'. - Martin Lloyd Jones*

### Discussion Questions:

- Why is the character of God's people as they serve Him much more important than their strategies and methods? What does this say about God? What does it say about church?
- In your own words, what clues does the passage give us about the foundations of healthy church culture?
- Where do you presently see results in terms of fruit at MCC?
- Do any of the traits you see here stand out as something a) you feel the need to grow in personally or b) MCC needs to grow in?

### How Paul and Silas Lived the Gospel And Changed the World

- They loved the Thessalonians
- They shared the Gospel message with priority
- They shared their lives
- They worked hard
- There were holy, righteous and blameless
- They were 'parently'
- They were encouraging, comforting and urging

*'What is at stake in (church) culture isn't just the internal health, though that is crucial, but also our capacity to compel with world with the message of Jesus. It seems to me that, particularly in the cultural moment we now find ourselves, there's so much anger, polarisation, and anxiety, that relational beauty... .. will be so magnetic, so needed, so unusual, and so attractive to people who might not like what we believe but who find that kind of relational beauty hard to resist.'*

*- Ray Ortlund*

## How the Thessalonians Responded to The Gospel and Changed the World

- They Accepted
- They Imitated
- They Suffered

*'Wherever and however you lead, your job is not primarily to complete tasks but to be imitable in your faith'*

### Session Summary:

The amazing spiritual fruit in the Thessalonian church was built on how Paul and Silas invested the church. The 'secret' was remarkably simple - they put in hard work and demonstrated Christlike character. This investment set an example and a culture for the new Thessalonian Christians that helped them to grow in maturity for the long haul.

### Discussion Questions:

- What has stood out to you in this session? Where do you feel personally challenged?
- How would you describe the 'DNA' of the Thessalonian church, from what we have seen so far?
- Anything surprisingly present/absent?
- Are you imitable in your walk with God?
- What steps can we take towards Gospel doctrine creating gospel culture? What would this look in a Partnership Group, a Sunday, or even a social setting?
- How are you minded to pray?

### Part 2 Notes:

## Part 3: Healthy Leaders (1 Thessalonians 2v17-3v13)

*'In my ministry life, I had marched God's people through 40 days of everything, done hundreds of 'programs', and developed small group system after small group system, but none of this actually changed the culture of the church that I had led. It took me some time to come to terms with the fact that most of my ministry had been driven by a strategy and not the cultivating of a culture.'*

- Bishop Clark Lowenfield.

### How Leaders Love People In Healthy Church Culture

Prioritise Quality Time

Glory in your People

Entrust Responsibility

Emphasise Living Faith

Pray for 'Growth with a Goal'

The prayer: For increased faith & Increased love & Strengthened hearts...

...so that ...

you will be blameless and holy before God when Jesus returns.

### Personal Reflection

Read over the passage. Pray over it. Circle the things that stand out to you.

What, that is here, do you see other leaders do?

What inspires you to either do something differently or have a different mindset?

17 But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 19 For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

## Session Summary:

The leadership Paul demonstrates in this passage is another indicator of how he used influence to help develop a healthy church culture in Thessalonica. His love for people and priority on their spiritual wellbeing is incredible, and the practical ways this comes out give us a fascinating insight into some of the oft neglected things we can prioritise to be good news to others.

### Discussion Questions:

- How would you describe the way Paul regards the Thessalonians in your own words?
- How is the leadership demonstrated in this passage different from what the world around us often tells us about good leadership?
- Do you 'glory' in how other people are doing? Why or why not? How does this mindset about the people you are in a spiritual family with challenge you?
- Charles Spurgeon, soon after his conversion, said: 'I felt that I could not be happy without fellowship with the people of God. I wanted to be wherever they were, and if anybody ridiculed them, I wished to be ridiculed with them, if people had an ugly name for them, I wanted to be called an ugly name, for I felt that unless I suffered with Christ, I could not expect to reign with him in his glory.' How can we grow our affection for and attachment to the church? (as in God's people generally, not only MCC!)
- How are you minded to pray?

## Part 3 Notes:

## Part 4: 1 Healthy Relationships (1Thessalonians 4v1-12)

*What is at stake in having culture isn't just the internal health, though that is crucial, but also our capacity to compel with world with the message of Jesus. It seems to me that, particularly in the cultural moment we now find ourselves, there's so much anger, polarisation, and anxiety, that relational beauty... will be so magnetic, so needed, so unusual, and so attractive to people who might not like what we believe but who find that kind of relational beauty hard to resist.'*

- Ray Ortlund

### The Importance of Godly Love

*We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.'* - Demosthenes

What we do sexually shapes who we are and it shapes how we represent Jesus to the world.

Healthy churches take sexual ethics seriously...

...Because...

...the purpose of church is for its people to be sanctified.

### The Subtlety of Godly Love

God Teaches us to Love

Sanctified: Transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. - 2 Thessalonians 1v3

Love other Churches

Our love attitude to God's people - including those who express faith differently to us - is more important to God - and therefore our church culture - than our strategies, plans and emphases.

Lead a Quiet Life

So that... You Will Gain Respect from Outside & Live In Healthy Independence

### Session Summary:

We see in this passage that healthy church culture is often about the things that are not immediately obvious - and not the things we might be tempted to think will reap quick results. What we do sexually, how our personal desires are sanctified, how we love others in subtle or less obvious ways, all come to the fore here, because it matters enormously to the health of the church.

### Discussion Questions:

- How can we make an openness about our desires (sexual or otherwise) with one another a normal part of church life? What benefits would this have?
- When we think about practically loving other people, there might be certain things that spring to mind. This passage shows us some things that may be less obvious. But are there other ways to practically love that the church forgets or ignores? Are there ways in which others could love you better than they may not be aware of?
- Spend some time praying that our church culture would reflect more of the values in this passage.

### **Part 4 Notes:**

## Part 5: Healthy Forever (1Thessalonians 4v13-5v11)

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. (Excerpt from The Apostle's Creed)

*'The fact is that you cannot live well if you are not living in light of Jesus' return.'*  
- Ligon Duncan

### Why The Future Shapes Church

Return

Resurrection

Rapture

Reunion

### Therefore...

Be Awake

Be Sober

Be Dressed

Be Encouraging

### Because...

God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### How The Future Shapes The Church

Service over Speculation

Anticipation over Apprehension

Contentedness over Covetousness

Focus over Frivolity

*'Jesus's repeated command that we be awake, ready on guard, watchful and vigilant is not because the second coming will take obedient disciples off guard but because spiritual stupor results in being oblivious to what is happening in the world, and thus being surprised and trapped and ruined'* - John Piper.

### Session Summary:

*The need for a church to know and celebrate the future return of Jesus is vital in shaping its day-to-day culture and contextualising our experiences, in either joy or suffering. The importance of this passage is summarised well by a quote from Michael Holmes: 'A proper understanding and awareness of the return of Jesus will energise us in the present, as we comfort and encourage one another in the midst of difficult circumstances, confident in the hope of a salvation grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus'. - Michael Holmes*

### Discussion Question:

- Being ruthlessly practical: how are individual Christians - and whole churches - supposed to live differently in light of Jesus' coming return?

## Part 5 Notes:

# Overall Summary: 1 Thessalonians and Church Culture

## Churches with a Model Culture...

- Understand their identity in terms of being 1) in Jesus and 2) in family relationships with one another.
- Emphasise good theology heavily - but always practically.
- Start with the Gospel and turn it into practical wisdom on how to live.
- Have leaders who love and invest in people with great sacrifice - but (somehow!) count it as their great joy.
- Put good character above all other human traits and talents.
- Expect but contextualise suffering, especially in terms of Jesus' coming return.
- Put more emphasis on Christlike culture than particular projects.

*Robert Morris writes... 'Having a church culture is not optional. You will have one. You can either be intentional and purpose driven about what kind of culture you create, or you can just let 'what will be will be'.*

### Discussion Questions:

- Based on today, what IS church? Has your view changed or modified at all?
- What does MCC need to grow in culturally? How can this be achieved?
- What are you excited about after today? Is there anything particular you want to be involved in?
- Based on today, what is your prayer? How do you want to lead differently? What further teaching, training and encouragement do you need?

## Health Check: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

*'I'm not willing to pray and suffer and labour and give my life to maintain an ecclesiastical institution that isn't beautiful. But I am willing to labour and suffer and pray for and give my life to the creation of a beautiful church that can astonish this generation. Sign me up for that. That's Gospel culture.'* - Ray Ortlund

The last section of 1 Thessalonians is a load of practical advice that builds on everything that's been said so far. After looking at the good things of the past and talking about love, good relationships and the return of Jesus, Paul gives a checklist of ways to live life well. Each aspect of this list is designed to cultivate healthy individuals within a healthy church. It is a mix of very 'spiritual sounding' stuff, very down to earth stuff, and important basics about relating to people well.

### The Living Practicalities of Healthy Church

Be a family who:

- Acknowledges those in leadership
- Takes the initiative to be good news to other people (warn, encourage, help)
- Pursues a vibrant spiritual life
- Expects God to sanctify you
- Is visibly a caring community

*Having a church culture is not optional. You will have one. You can either be intentional and purpose driven about what kind of culture you create, or you can just let 'what will be will be'. - Robert Morris.*