

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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AUGUST 7, 2011

SERMON: THE SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH
TEXT: II THESSALONIANS 1: 1-4

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

With apologies to St. Paul, I must confess that with a topic this broad it was difficult to find a single text that would cover the subject, so I decided to use Paul's introduction to I Thessalonians as a spring board into the subject. I'm not sure I like that but otherwise we would have to make this into a 12 week sermon series, interesting but more than I bargained for.

Paul was perhaps the first person to really embrace the church. Not that he did it to begin with. He thought that congregations of worshipping believers were a very short interim creation that would lead into the second coming of Jesus. At least that is what he believed when he started his ministry. Slowly, as time passed and Disciples died, he began to believe that the church was going to be here for a lot longer and be a lot more important than he had thought before.

In I Thessalonians he wrote to the church a word of welcome and encouragement. In it he lifts up the fact that their faith is growing as is their love for one another and that they were steadfast in the faith in spite of persecutions. It was as lavish in praise as Paul allows himself to ever be.

Jumping into what makes an effective church is interesting because there are so many different kinds of church. There are churches who, paraphrasing Avery Dulles in his book "Models of the Church," attempt to be an institution, or a mystic communion, or a sacrament, or a herald, or a servant. I can't imagine that those phrases convey any real information but what I do hope to convey is that there are

some really different ways of being the church. **There is no one cookie cutter which we are supposed to use. This makes our task more difficult but not impossible.**

Influenced by countless books, seminary professors, and lay leaders of my churches for the past 35 years, let me tell you what I think are the 12 salient characteristics of an effective church.

i. Centered on Jesus Christ

First and foremost, that the church is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. You would think that would be a no-brainer but no. I'm talking about centering every aspect and every group on Jesus. **Take, for example, the Board.** It is not enough to say a prayer before or after the meeting. Centering on Christ means actively, intentionally considering what Christ would have us do in our business decisions, staff issues, and our programming. **A great example of Christ-centering would be our Wednesday Night Live dinner** where we begin by raising up all our needs and joys to Christ. That action colors the entire dinner and all who participate. All groups, all activities, all classes should consider just how to become Christ centered.

ii. Love One Another

Second, an effective church encourages people to love one another. Another no brainer, right. Sadly not. A lot of congregations are not visitor friendly and that is only the tip of the love-one-another iceberg.

Love is not waving across the pew or shaking hands or saying welcome, though any of those actions can contain love. **Loving one another is opening up a place in your heart, in your home, at your dinner table for others.** Not just our buddies! Not just people who look like you or me. We are called to love strangers even when their strangeness makes our eyebrows rise and our jaws drop! Love is an essential characteristic of an effective church.

iii. Focus Outward

The third characteristic is that an effective church focuses its life and ministry outward. This is **in direct contrast from churches that somehow become country clubs who work hard at serving the member's needs and not worrying about others until there is need for some new members to fill the coffers.** Churches which are effective at being the community that Jesus intended them to be organize themselves for outsiders. That is such a radical idea! Allow me to cause you to think about one example. **What if, what if Mark Graham were to choose every selection of music, hymns and all, based not on what we like or what makes us feel good but for their ability to attract new members.** What if our music ministry was a sub-ministry of the evangelism

committee? Isn't that a radical idea. **The same could be said about the preacher not preaching FOR you but for the people who might come in looking for a church home?** I know people who do this but it would be a change for me. You can take this too far, like the church whose marketing research led it to believe that marriage enrichment was the #1 concern of the people they were targeting so on Easter Sunday the sermon was about marriage enrichment. Too far, absolutely, but churches who focus outward attract a lot more new members!

Think of asking each group in our church to focus outward - to reach into our community not just for evangelism but also to offer help to those in need. That is what an effective church finds ways to do. It does not turn inward.

iv. Effective communication

An effective church has excellent communication. When members need to know about an illness or a pressing need there is a way of getting them enough information for them to act on in time for them to act. There is also good communication between the pastor and the people; people need to feel free to talk to him about things that require confidentiality or about things he might not agree with. Good communication is also required to the community whether that is by a website, radio spots, newspaper ads, or other. If they don't know what we have to offer them then how can we be effective at reaching out to them?

v. A Dynamic mission statement and specific, concrete missional objectives

An effective church has a dynamic mission statement which is the driving force in what the church attempts to do and how it goes about it. **A mission statement that every member of the church can quote.** Then the board, at an annual workshop or retreat (not a board meeting) works out the concrete, missional objectives for the coming year, assigns them to various groups, and then sets a budget that will fund the church's priorities.

vi. Dynamic worship and challenging preaching

An effective church will have dynamic worship services filled with excellent music and it will have challenging preaching. Sermons that cause people to snooze because of delivery or content don't make the grade. Music that makes people sleepy doesn't make the grade. Worship is NOT entertainment but it should be something that people look forward to all week long. If it's not then an effective church will fix it!

vii. Several competent programs and activities

An effective church will have several competent programs and activities. In short, it has groups or programs for people to join and grow through. Places to play. Places to study. Places to grow friendships. And places to share one another's burdens.

viii. Effective, streamline governance

Effective churches have an efficient, streamline governance. Countless volunteers and volunteer hours are not lost endlessly debating what color to paint the bathrooms when they could be used to do real mission work.

ix. Multi Ethnic congregation

Effective churches are...multiethnic. Ethnically pure churches are a thing of the past – the younger generations won't go there.

x. Vital mission opportunities

Effective churches provide opportunities for its members to engage in hands-on ministry on a local level. I know that it is often easier to write a check and that some people cannot physically engage in doing ministry – but **there are entire generations who have much less money, more time, and a desire to be apart of up-close, hand-on ministry for Jesus.** And effective church shouts “amen” and helps them to get busy.

xi. Spiritual growth priority/opportunities

An effective church is intentional about people's spiritual growth. Yes, spiritual growth happens in worship – but doing nothing more is like telling people that taking **an apple a day will keep the doctor away.** A church that takes spiritual growth seriously doesn't hope it will happen – it plans for it, recruits leaders for it, and budgets for it. That's what an effective church does.

xii. Sound stewardship

An effective church is financially undergirded by people who see stewardship not as giving to a budget or a church program but as a spiritual discipline which God has instituted. A church is never effective unless its people will put their money where their mouths are. Some churches go so far as to making stewardship a prerequisite to holding any church office. Effective churches and their members see stewardship as a spiritual discipline.

Whew! That's my twelve salient characteristics of an effective church.

Let's see if I can condense them into a top ten list plus two?

An effective church:

1. Revolves around Christ like the earth revolves around the sun.
2. Gives love a chance
3. Circles the wagons and look outward!
4. Shares information at the speed of Twitter.
5. Knows exactly what it wants and has a plan to get it.
6. Never sends people home from worship bored
7. Has more Velcro spots for people to stick to than Home Depot.
8. Doesn't waste its best volunteers in meetings!
9. Is an M&M congregation - lots of colors and full of nuts!
10. Is a place where you can get your hands dirty for Jesus.
11. Is a place where people's spirits grow more than their waists
12. Loves God and isn't afraid to use what's in their wallets to show it.

If we master those 12 items, we will be writing the next bestselling book on being an effective church.