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Marks of a Healthy Church - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott explains that while it is good to expect revival in the church, there are certain things that are necessary for this to happen. He shows that the church must firstly be healthy, and what constitutes a healthy church.

Transcript

Your faith is growing abundantly. Is that true? By the very concept of a growing faith is far into many people because they think of faith in static terms. Oh, I wish I had your faith, somebody says, as they might say, I wish I had your complexion or your color of hair.

As if faith was a good thing. As if faith were part of our permanent genetic inheritance, and you've either got it or you haven't got it. Other people say, pathetically, I've lost my faith, as might say I've lost my spectacles.

Welcome to the Bible for Today with John Stott. There are few evangelicals who have ever influenced the global church in the 20th century as much as John Stott, and it was Betty Graham who called him the most respected clergyman in the world. Always remaining faithful to the Word of God and unswayed by current trends, the person of Christ blazed from every sermon he preached.

Whilst John Stot impacted the church across the world, his home church was always all souls, laying in place on the heart of London's West End. And it's from 600 sermons he preached there that were marking his centenary with some of his most powerful messages.

[Music] Great Britain has seen some notable spiritual revivals over the years.

Revival is something Christian still desire, and there have been many dedicated prayer events for revival in our land. So as the world becomes darker spiritually, how will we see revival and renewal in the church today? John Stot believes it must start with a healthy church, and where to find guidance on that in the Bible is our study for today. The

renewal of the church is a topic that has been engaging the minds of many people in recent years.

There are many Protestant churches that are seeking a renewal of their life and some that are experiencing it. The Roman Catholic Church announced at the Second Vatican Council what it described as its "adjuvamento" which being translated, I believe, means renewal. Even the ancient Orthodox churches, steeped in their traditions, are in some cases beginning to open themselves to the possibility of change and reform, according to the word and spirit of God.

But what is renewal, especially in the local church? What are the marks of a renewed church which having been renewed is healthy? That is the question that is going to preoccupy us this morning. We begin this morning a series of five addresses from the second letter to the Thessalonians. Do you may like to take your Bible? And in a few moments I will read the first few verses which are our text this morning.

But before I do so, I think I need to remind you that this letter is one of the very first written by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey, probably the third letter he wrote. His mission in Thessalonika with Silas and Timothy had been only brief. It had only lasted a few weeks, possibly a few months.

And because of a riot or uproar in the city of Thessalonika, he'd had to be smuggled away from the city by night. Now he is in Corinth, further south. Already he has written one letter to this Thessalonian church and now a few weeks later having received further news about how they are getting on, he writes them another.

And in both these letters to the Thessalonians he gives us a glimpse of a young church in the middle of the first century AD in the first flash of its spiritual youth and enthusiasm and vitality. Say what did it look like? Read with me then if you will, or follow as I read the second letter to the Thessalonians, the first few verses again. Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To you in peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are bound to give thanks for you always, brothers and sisters, as is fitting because your faith is growing abundantly. And the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Therefore we ourselves best of you and the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith. In all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring, this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God that you may be made or counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering. Since indeed God deems it just to repay with affliction there is to afflict you and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven, etc.

We shall take up that theme next Sunday morning. Now there are two things I want to ask you to notice in this great word of God this morning and the first is Paul's description of a healthy church. But after his greeting to them in the first two verses on which I am not going to stay because it's his habitual greeting, we've often thought about it, he expresses thanks for the same three qualities which he mentioned at the beginning of the first letter.

There is the famous trio or triad, faith, love and hope. And this you know is the Christian's basic orientation. The basic orientation of the Christian church is towards God in faith, towards others in love and towards the future in hope.

And every Christian is a believer and a lover and a hoper. Now in the first letter Paul emphasized how productive these three qualities are because he spoke of your work of faith and your labor of love and your patience of hope. But now in this text he refers not to the productivity of these three graces but to the fact that all three are growing.

Let's take them one by one. "A" your faith is growing abundantly and no doubt along with their faith, the work of faith was growing comparably. Abundantly it's one of those hyper words of which Paul was very fond.

One of those superlatives, he was impressed by the truly luxuriant growth of the Thessalonians faith. Friends could we say that of ourselves or one another, your faith is growing abundantly, is that true? By the very concept of a growing faith is far into many people because they think of faith in static terms. "Oh I wish I had your faith," somebody says, "as they might say I wish I had your complexion or your color of hair." As if faith were part of our permanent genetic inheritance and you by the gothic or you haven't got it.

Other people say, "Pthetically I've lost my faith as I might say I've lost my spectacles." As if faith were a kind of thing or commodity that belongs to the lost property or the lost and found department. But faith is a relationship of trust towards God and like all relationships it is a living thing. It is a dynamic thing and it ought to be a growing thing.

Jesus our Lord very clearly taught this because he indicated on many occasions that there are degrees of faith. "Oh you have little faith," he once said to the apostles. So they responded on another occasion said, "Lord increase our faith.

We know it's little. We want more." To occasions Jesus spoke to a couple of Gentiles and said, "I haven't found so great faith even in Israel." So every healthy Christian and every healthy church has a growing faith. We're not content with the amount we believe when we first came to Christ in penitence and faith and were converted and born again.

No we want our faith to grow. It needs to be stronger, mature than it was years and even months ago. And insofar as we are disciplined as a church in coming to listen to the

Word of God read and expanded and coming to the Lord's Supper which is Augustine said is a visible Word of God in response to his Word preached and dramatized.

Our faith will grow. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Now the second part of 4th description of a healthy church concerns their love.

He says the love of every one of you for each other is increasing. Darkness also the labor of love in which love expressed itself. No doubt that was growing too.

But you know the problem is that our view of love like our view of faith is often too static. We assume, "Oh I love somebody or I don't love somebody." And that's that. But love is a relationship like faith.

It is a living thing. It is a dynamic thing. And it ought to be a growing thing.

Paul exhorted them in his very first letter to the Thessalonians in chapter 4. He said, "I know you love one another but I want you to do so more and more." He wasn't satisfied with the amount they loved each other. He wanted them to increase in their love. Well his exhortation was evidently heated because their love was increasing.

And it was increasing not only in its quality and in its intensity and in the concrete labours in which it was exemplified. But in its scope the love of every one of you for one another is the New English Bible puts it, the love of each for all and all for each. Now that is the second mark of a healthy church.

An unhealthy church on the other hand lets test ourselves, develops cliques and factions. And even tolerates them. And though externally and substantially it may be united some members stay aloof from the fellowship, others quarrel, slander one another.

And instead of forgiving one another they remain sour and alienated. But a disunited church or an unloving church is a contradiction in terms. What is the church? It's the new community of Jesus.

And it is a single community without any barriers, racial, social, national, permitted. It's the only united community there is, the only loving community there is. To talk about a disunited or unloving church contradicts the very nature of the Christian church.

By contrast in the Thessalonian church all the church members loved one another. And in their love for one another I've no doubt served one another. And the love of each for all and all for each was increasing.

And that brings me to the third part of Paul's description of the church. And that is you see it in verse four in the middle. He refers to your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

There is no explicit reference here to hope. The third of the triad, faith, love and hope.

There is a reference to steadfastness or patience which are the children of hope.

As he said at the beginning of his first letter. So in Thessalon I can evidently persecutions which are physical and afflictions which are more general pressures were increasing. But there's steadfastness and faith.

There is a believing constancy in enduring this increasing pressure was increasing also. Now suffering is the third mark of a healthy church who may be surprised to hear. But a church that is uncompromising in its loyalty to Jesus Christ, both in what it believes and in the standards of its conduct will always provoke opposition from the world.

And I have no doubt that if we compromise less as churches we would suffer more. Yet if suffering is a mark of a healthy church so is the steadfastness and the believing endurance with which we bear that suffering. Well there then is Paul's description of a healthy church.

Central to this healthy church is faith, love and steadfastness. Faith that is aware of the reality of God trusts him, comes together on the Lord's day to worship him. And once incidentally share the faith with others, faith, love in the fellowship, steadfastness as pilgrims as we suffer for the Lord on earth.

Not only are there three marks of the healthy church, but all three are growing. Your faith is growing abundantly, the love of every one of you for one another is increasing and so your steadfastness and faith in the midst of persecution. But as I meditated on this passage, I've been struck by something else that I believe is dominant in this passage.

More striking than Paul's description of the church is his perspective in describing it. And in particular the godliness of his perspective as he looks at their spiritual growth from God's point of view. So let's move on from his description to his perspective.

Paul cannot think of the church without thinking of God, whose church it is. He cannot think of the health of the church without thinking of the health giver. In verse 4 he refers to the church as the church of God and a number of local churches as the churches of God.

No doubt he was thinking of the church in Athens and the church in Corinth and the church in Barrieux, etc. Churches of God in these different cities. But in verse 1 he reverses it and talks of the church of the Thessalonians in God.

And in the Lord Jesus Christ, thus Paul recognizes that every church has two habitats. One is the town in which it's situated, Thessalonica, Corinth, Athens, New York, Sydney, Australia, London. That's one habitat in which we live.

But the other habitat in which the church lives is God. It's the church of the

Thessalonians in God. So you see every church can be described either as the church of God in Thessalonica or as the church of the Thessalonians in God.

Thus Paul sees God at work in the Christian community and he refers to this divine work in two particular ways. Firstly, he sees their faith, love and steadfastness and the growth of all three virtues as evidence of the righteous judgment of God. Now it's very surprising when we first read it and we may wonder what on earth it means.

Look if you will at verse 5 where Paul says it, this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God. J.B. Phillips what said these qualities, faith, love and steadfastness show how justly the judgment of God works out in your case. True, God was allowing the persecutors of the church a certain rope.

But it was in Thessalonians, Christians that God was at work causing their faith, love and steadfastness to grow and so preparing them for his eternal kingdom. That's what he says, doesn't he? In verse 5 it's evidence of the righteous judgment of God that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God. You remember, don't you how Jesus constantly taught that the road to glory is suffering? Suffering with the road to glory in his own case, he wasn't glorified until he'd suffered and died and he said it would be the same in the case of his followers.

And the apostles picked it up. Paul said on his first missionary journey to the Galatians he said it's only through much tribulation that you will enter the kingdom of God. When we come to the description of the redeemed company gathered round God's throne, they are described not only as having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, but as having come out of the great tribulation, which I believe refers to the whole Christian life.

It's the great tribulation. It says suffering and glory, tribulation and the eternal kingdom of God belong together. Suffering refines our Christian character.

Suffering is God's way of fitting us for his kingdom. Now I think probably the revised standard version is wrong in translating the phrase at the end of verse 2 that he might make you worthy of his kingdom. Because we can never be worthy of his kingdom in the sense of deserving it.

The kingdom of God is a free gift and we are never worthy of entering into God's kingdom. But we can be counted worthy in the sense of being made fit by God to enter into his kingdom. And then when Christ comes as he goes on to say in verses 6 and 7, he is going to reverse the fortunes of these two groups of people, the Christians and their persecutors.

He will repay with affliction the afflictors and he will grant rest or respite from affliction to those who have been afflicted. In other words, he will grant the kingdom of God to

those who have been prepared for it by their sufferings. Now, you know, it takes a good degree of spiritual discernment to see in a situation of persecution evidence of the righteous judgment of God.

Our habit is to see only surface appearances, and so we make very superficial comments on the state of the church. When it's persecuted, we see the malice and the cruelty and the power of evil men who oppose the church. And we see the sufferings of the people of God who are opposed and ridiculed and who are harassed and tortured and driven underground, etc.

In other words, what we see is injustice. We see the wicked flourishing and the righteous suffering. And we attempt it to complain against God because of this miscarriage of justice.

We say, "Why doesn't God do something?" Paul's answer is he is doing something, but you haven't seen it. And he's going to do something more. At the moment he is allowing his people to suffer in order to fit them for his eternal kingdom.

And at the moment he's allowing wicked people to flourish. But it's only temporary, and his just retribution is going to fall upon them. So Paul sees evidence of the righteous judgment of God in the very situation in which we might only see injustice.

Faith, hope and love. The Hallmarks are the healthy church that are necessary for revival and renewal today. Johnstott will continue to show us the hallmarks of a healthy church at the same time next week.

This message is just one of a series that John gave at all souls church on how things will be for the church in the end times. It's a fascinating series which you can enjoy by visiting their website. Many of Johnstott's sermons were the basis of commentaries he wrote in the highly acclaimed The Bible Speaks Today commentary series.

Thessalonians, which we've been studying today, being one of those. You can find details of this and also videos by Johnstott preaching by visiting premierchristinradio.com/Johnstott The legacy of Johnstott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of Johnstott who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership.

To find out about this and other ministries Johnstott founded go to premier.org.uk/Johnstott Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for today with Johnstott.

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