

EMBEDDED

There is no greater force for change or cultural influence than the local church. The church in Thessalonica is a powerful example: it's one of the farthest-flung churches Paul is able to plant. From there, all of Europe is reached for Christ. Though the people of this young church have serious questions about the reason for their existence, Paul reassures them in 1 Thessalonians that they are fulfilling God's purpose just by being present in the world. Because they are **Embedded**, they stand as a witness to the power and love of Jesus Christ. They are examples of the faith, hope, and love that characterize the Christian life. The church embedded is an insurgency, toppling the kingdoms of this world by sharing the reality of the Kingdom of God.

ALWAYS FAITHFUL • 1 Thessalonians 2:1-7a • Tim McConnell • May 7, 2017

Nobody likes to stand out. We are herd creatures. If you don't believe me, go to a football game. I was invited to a Georgia Tech game in Atlanta a few years ago by my buddy who is an electrical engineer with one of the biggest outfits in the city and who knows how to connect with the right tickets at the right time. I'm used to going up high in the stadium, section 450ZZ, where the players are bigger if you watch the game on your phone. But we entered Bobby Dodd stadium and went down, down, closer and closer. I looked at my buddy and he said, "Yeah, I got these tickets from the owner of the company!" I started to feel a little out of place, not only because the seats were so nice, but because I realized I was the only person not wearing gold, the team colors. I had given it no thought, and besides who owns a gold sweater? But things got worse when the opposing team ran out on the field, in the exact colors I had on. And they got even worse when the Yellow Jackets blew the lead in the fourth quarter and lost the game. I can still feel the weight of those glares! There was no way to explain... I don't even root for that team!

Nobody likes to stand out. But if you are going to be a Christian, if you are going to stand faithfully for Jesus in a world like this, at a time like this, in a culture like this...you're going to stand out. In fact, you are supposed to. Your presence is God's purpose. You have been embedded to shine like lights and bear witness to Jesus. There is purpose in your being here and purpose in your standing out. The question is can you stay faithful? Can we stay faithful to Jesus in a world that pulls us away from Him? Can we stay in contact, stay embedded with a world opposed to Jesus and change the whole by being a part? That's the challenge, isn't it? Stay in contact and stay faithful. How do we do that? That's our call; that's our purpose. Why? Because the best argument for the gospel is a people who believe it.

The church of Thessalonians in God in Christ, they were feeling this tension. They had converted, we learned last week. People knew they converted and talked about them. Verse 1:9, "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." That's radical conversion. Turning from this to that, from a life of worshipping dead idols, a life where they valued and pursued things with all their heart—things that always demanded more and more, and always delivered less and less—useless things. That's what they pursued, valued, worshipped. They turned from that to the true and living God, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came from heaven and died and rose again and now is awaited. Conversion is

a radical shift. It changes a whole life, a whole lifestyle; and people notice. Have you experienced conversion? Have you stopped pursuing empty things and started pursuing the living God? If you had, you'd know. It changes everything about you.

And it had changed everything about the Thessalonian believers. They suddenly felt a little awkward. Things felt a little odd, a little different at work. They felt a little different at school—they used to fit in and go with the flow, run with the herd. Now they stand out. Things maybe felt different in marriage, where one person knows Jesus and has radically shifted what their life is all about. Maybe the wife has met the Lord and her heart is devoted to Christ, but the husband is still pursuing other things. It feels different in your closest relationships. Suddenly you feel a little like a square peg in a round hole. Like a Big Ten fan at a Georgia Tech game. Like a Raiders fan...well, anywhere.

The point is your inner life changes, your spirit changes, you belong to Jesus, and you start to feel a little out of place in your own world. It's meant to be that way. The difference is on purpose. Paul wrote to another group of believers that felt out of place in their city, in Romans 12, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) That tells us there's a pressure coming our way, a mold being pressed upon us from the outside, and we are to resist that mold, to oppose that pressure, to keep the new shape Christ has built in us. "For you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit"—even in the middle of pressure, suffering, attacks, the message got to them and got in them and they knew Jesus and were saved—"And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere." (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8) Now you stand out. Now you feel different. Hang tough and stay faithful and keep your Christian shape. The pressure is on purpose and the difference is intentional to reveal a contrast—you have been embedded. Your presence is God's purpose. Why? Because Christ's strongest case is Christ's faithful community; the best argument for the gospel is a people who believe it. And if you believe it, and if you are part of a community that believes it, then people get to see the change. They notice the change and the change becomes a proof, you become a case for Christ—just by being his and being in the world you are an argument for Jesus. Not that we want to win an argument; not that we are out to win a case. No. I heard Bob Goff say recently, "I

don't want people to meet my opinions; I want them to meet Jesus." We don't stand to win the case; we stand for Christ to win the soul. The best argument for the gospel is a people who believe it.

But as we see, those who don't see God don't see God. If you don't believe in God, you can't understand the changes God makes in the heart of a believer. This is what happened to Paul and the church in Thessalonica. Paul had done well in Philippi, but also suffered there at the end and was beaten and tossed out. The same happened in Thessalonica. The people who don't know God don't know what God does, how God works, or what is happening when people stop being who they were and start being something new. They don't get it. But of one thing they are certain: It can't be God! Paul's opponents were sure whatever Paul was trying to do, it wasn't anything about God. Why? Because it can't be God. So, Paul, they ask, what is it about *really*? What's it really about? They assumed it was about the things they assumed everything was ultimately about: power, fame, impure motives, and money. Paul answers: "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness." (1 Thessalonians 2:3-5) They accused him of impure motives. If that sounds lurid, it's meant to. Paul ministered to women and men equally, and one of his greatest converts in Philippi was Lydia the widow, who then set up a church in her own home. Now his opponents try to make it seem improper. Have you come to lure our women away Paul?

We have all seen when ministries fall apart. The leader, or the ministry itself, lost track and got to being about something else. It's very tempting to go after the applause and glory of contemporary culture. "I want to be a Christian, but I do want to be thought well of. Maybe just a small omission, a small fudging on doctrinal clarity, a few pages pulled from the Bible and left behind in the trash can, and we can stand right in line with our culture and its values." It is very tempting to trick people in ministry. Some of the fastest growing churches in the world are prosperity gospel churches, hiding the cost of discipleship and offering bold and fraudulent blessings—"Give a dollar here and you'll get a hundred there, I swear it!" Huge damage is done. But we are not here to trick, or to become popular, or do to anything else but stay always faithful, always open, always true to Jesus. Look, here's the thing. If you are entrusted with the gospel, if you are approved by God, if you know you have a message to

share about Jesus, a message God has given you, and it's God who tests your heart—if all that is there, then you must decide right now: "Am I here to please God or to please people?" If you are a people pleaser, and your authority and influence and identity is coming to you through what other people think, and how other people feel about you...you will not stay faithful. You will not stay faithful. Decide now, decide today. Do you want to please people or please God? Decide for God, and you will have a message to give the people to bless them like they have never been blessed.

How do we stay embedded and true? How do we stay present in the world and faithful to Christ at the same time, so we can be a witness? We ruthlessly and relentlessly remove every possible motive other than Jesus. What's it about? It's about Jesus. Aren't you really after money? No, it's about Jesus. Isn't it power and influence you want? No, I want Jesus. Only Jesus. Aren't you just trying to trick me to get me under your spell, to gain the glory and applause of cheap fame? Ruthlessly remove every motive. It's about Jesus. What is it really about, Paul? What are you trying to do to these people? It's about Jesus.

In Acts, the only quote from Paul's sermons in Thessalonica is one sentence: "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah" (Acts 17:3). It's about this Jesus. What's it about, Paul? Fame? Money? No. Paul said in Ephesus, "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:24) It's about this Jesus, that's all. That's all my life is. Jesus. I was once against Him; I once opposed Him. Now it's only Him. "What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). Only Jesus. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) What's it about Paul? What's it really about? Oh, please make it about anything else, anything at all. Because then I can dismiss it. Make it truly about politics, or money, or impure desires. Make it really about power or influence or mounting a cause. I'll take anything. Make it about anything other than the reality of a living and holy God and where I stand in my relationship with Him. Make it about something else, please, so I can dismiss it and go my way. No, says Paul. It's about Jesus. Only Jesus. My beloved Jesus. He gave his all for me. My all I give for Him. It's about Jesus. He went to the cross for me; I stand in the world for Him.

James Davison Hunter is a world-renowned sociologist at the University of Virginia. Whenever someone uses all three names you know they're getting paid big bucks to be smart. James Davison Hunter. He wrote a book a few years back called *To Change the World*, a study on how things change. What he found is that things change because people in power change them, people with influence influence things. But he also studied moments in history when a small group of Christians changed the world. And what he found there was remarkable. Moments like the abolition of slavery, with William Wilberforce and his small bunch of friends. Or the Civil Rights movement with Martin Luther King, Jr., and his small bunch of friends. Or even the Protestant Reformation which celebrates its 500th year—Martin Luther, John Calvin, and a small bunch of friends. Hunter found, and argues, that a small bunch of friends, captured by a vision of heaven, held firm in Christ, willing to stay embedded and faithful, a small bunch of friends can change the world. He calls it "faithful presence." We call it "embedded."

I wonder if you have a small bunch of friends to keep you embedded and faithful, present to the world and true to Jesus. The best argument for the gospel is a people that believes it. That's who we are, church. And that's who we are going to be. We are not here to trick anybody; we are not here to win any awards or garner accolades; we are not here for the applause of men. We don't stand for our glory; we stand for Jesus. Only Jesus. And we are going to stand out, but we are going to stay faithful. When we feel odd we know that only makes sense. When we feel out of place we know we are in God's purpose. We are going to trust that we are embedded to point to Jesus right where we are. Our presence is God's purpose. And when the pressures push or the temptations pull and our feet start to slip, we will dig down and stand firm and grab a hold of one another—always faithful.

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STUDY GUIDE

"Embedded: Always Faithful" I Thessalonians 2:1-7a

Start It

- I tell a story in the sermon about winding up at a football game wearing the colors of the opposing team by accident. Boy did those folks look at me sideways! And there was nothing I could do to try to explain that it was an unintended accident. It never feels good to stand out. Maybe there are ways you have found yourself on the outside of the group, or standing out from the crowd in a way that felt uncomfortable. In some ways, being an embedded believer in a non-believing world includes standing out.

Study It

- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 and Acts 16. What happened to Paul and the team in Philippi? Should they have been afraid to share the Gospel in Thessalonica? Were they?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:3-7. There are few things more painful than wrongful accusations and attacks on character. List a few ways it appears that Paul's character was being attacked by his opponents. How difficult is it to defend one's reputation from attacks like these?
- Paul says he was not trying to trick anyone with his ministry. What ways can you think of, or have experienced, that a ministry can be a trick?
- Look again at verse 4. What is the basis of Paul's authority to preach the Gospel? Whose approval does he seek? (Cf. Galatians 1:10) What happens when we seek the approval of mankind over the approval of God?

Pray It

Almighty God, You have called Your church into being with a message, the Gospel, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, Your church has received it with joy. Grant, O Lord, that by Your power, all who stand to proclaim Your Gospel message might know themselves to be stewards of a message not their own, accountable to You for their faithfulness in keeping it, and empowered to preach Your Gospel with boldness and courage. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

The challenge is to stay both connected (embedded) with the world and faithful to Jesus. Watch for areas in your life this week where this is particularly difficult.