

# Building A Church Of Thessalonica For The 21st Century | Part 6 | True Evangelism | Dr. Madana Kumar Series

**Contributed by Dr. Madana Kumar, Phd on Apr 5, 2024**

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 2:2, Acts 17:5-9, Acts 17:13, Acts 17:11-12, Acts 17:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Acts 17:1-2, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Acts 17:2-3, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8

**Denomination:** Evangelical/Non-Denominational

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**Summary: The success of Paul's short ministry at Thessalonica can teach us several lessons on how we can approach evangelism in the current context. In this final part of this series Dr. Madana Kumar brings out several lessons.**

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We are in Part 6 of the series on 1& 2 Thessalonians. We have looked into the historical background of forming the church at Thessalonica. We have established that the church at Thessalonica became a model church through their faith, hope and love. We saw that the Thessalonian church gives us several lessons on building a True Church. We have till now seen three pillars of what makes a true church namely True Transformation, True Ministry and True Fellowship.

Today we will study the fourth pillar of the True Church, namely True Evangelism.

Paul's letters establish the fact that the Thessalonian church became a center of evangelism. They found ways to make sure that the surrounding areas heard about Jesus, and soon the entire area had heard about Jesus though what happened to these Thessalonian Christians. Paul confirms this in 1 Thessalonians 1:8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

The question that the Lord has placed on my heart to examine along with you is this. How did the Thessalonian church become a centre of evangelism? There were no seminaries dishing out degrees and PhDs in Missions and Evangelism. There were no books or theses written on the topic. There were no evangelistic retreats that we are aware of. There are no mission conferences mentioned in the epistles. There were no mission associations that were helping member organisations to strategise on evangelising. So where did they learn how to evangelise? The answer is simple. What they had is something greater. What they had is the personal example set by the very first evangelists. All that they learned about evangelism was based on how they were evangelised. How they accepted the Gospel. So, we are going to learn about true evangelism from the way the Thessalonian pagans were evangelised, resulting in the True Transformation that we studied in Part 3 of this series.

The study of these epistles reveal several aspects around the two focus areas of True Evangelism. The Mission Field and the Methods.

Let us look at the mission field that Paul conquered for the Lord. Let us look at the demographics of the region when Paul landed there. From the book of Acts, we can surmise that the population of Thessalonica was a mix of several religious and cultural ethnicities. There were Jews settled there.

There were Greeks, Romans and people from various other ethnicities. Unconfirmed sources put the percentage of Jews around 10-25% at that time. So it is safe to assume that the majority of the population was Greco-Roman. Polytheism, idol worship, immorality, injustice and social injustice were prevalent in the culture. In part 1 of the series, we discussed that the geographical position of Thessalonica, right in the foothills of Mount Olympus, the abode of the Greek gods, had a great impact on the religious practices of the place.

It is to this culture that Paul bravely walks in. And he walks into this not from a place of great success. He walks into this hostile mission field, after having suffered at Philippi. Paul affirms this in 1 Thess 2:2 But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. We can get a taste of hostility of the Thessalonian Jews in Acts 17:5-9. The hostile Jews did not stop at persecuting Paul and team just in Thessalonica. They pursued Paul even to Berea when they heard that he was spreading the gospel in Berea. Acts 17:13 describes this pursuit. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds.

In contrast to the Thessalonian situation, when Paul reaches Berea, he finds that the Bereans are a lot more receptive to the gospel. Acts 17:11-12 says These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. The formation of the Berean church was a lot more easier than the formation of the Thessalonian Church. You can also see the similarity of the composition of the Berean church to the Thessalonian church. Luke uses almost the same words when he talks about he Thessalonian church in Acts 17:4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. Luke uses the term "many" when he describes the transformation at Berea, and he uses the term "multitude" when he describes the transformed group at Thessalonica. I mean no disrespect to the Berean believers, but it is a fact that it is not the Berean church that Paul applauds for "the word of the Lord sounded forth" and reaching all part of Macedonia and other places. It is the Church at Thessalonica that gets that recognition.

Right there is our first mark of True Evangelism. True Evangelism is not done in places where everything is comfortable, where there is support from society and government. True Evangelism is when the gospel is communicated even in the face of opposition, persecution and hurdles. In Part 4 of this series, we saw an analogy of the resistance bands and Harley Davidson bikes to understand that resistance makes us stronger. This must act as a challenge and comfort to evangelists in our country, where the situation is becoming more and more difficult. Acts 17:4 talks about "a multitude of devout Greeks" joining Paul and Silas. We look around and can find that we live among very devout people, isn't it? True Evangelism is when such devout people are transformed by throwing away their idols and start worshiping the true messiah. That is what happened in Thessalonica. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 confirms that the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,". Paul evangelised a city that was hostile. Paul evangelised a city that consisted of people known for their devotion to their gods. Paul evangelised people who were idol worshippers. And Paul did this among oppression and persecution and threats. If it can happen in Thessalonica, it can happen in our nation. So let us hold on to the hope and cling on to the promise of our Lord Jesus that He will build His church, right here in our nation. Let us continue to support and pray for the evangelists who, despite opposition and persecution,

continue to make efforts to share the good news with people around them.

So that is what we can learn from these epistles about the mission field for True Evangelism. Let us shift our focus to the methods of True Evangelism that Paul deployed in Thessalonica.

1. Cultural alignment: Acts 17:1-2 tells us that it was Paul's custom to start his evangelistic activities from a Synagogue. That is where he started in Thessalonica too. The reason why Paul chose the synagogue to start is the cultural alignment he already had. He was a Jew and thus he knew Jewish culture very well. Starting at a synagogue gave him the much needed head start. Paul emphasises his adaptation to the culture very clearly in 1 Cor 9:19-23. In that passage, Paul says that he became "all things to all men" so that they might be saved. To the Jews he became a Jew. To the gentiles, he became a gentile, to the weak, he became weak. That is the level of cultural integration that makes True Evangelism thrive. We can see this in the lives of the early missionaries too. Be it Willaim Carrey, Amy Carmichael, David Livingstone or Hudson Taylor. We will see one thing in common with all of them. They take time to integrate into the local culture before starting to share the good news. Amy Carmicheal immersed herself in the Tamil language and culture, wore Indian clothing and lived among local people, before establishing the Dohnavur fellowship. Cultural alignment is essential for True Evangelism.

2. Customised communication: Paul ensured that the gospel was communicated to the audience through contextually relevant means. He used reasoning where logic was required. Acts 17:2-3 says, Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." We need to understand that there will be people who need logical reason to accept the gospel message, and we need to be prepared to provide that logical reasoning to those who need it. The second customisation we can see in Paul's approach is hope. 1 Thess 1:5 says For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. Paul provided hope and assurance where it is required. He provided them with the ultimate hope of being saved from God's wrath and eternal life through Jesus Christ. 1 Thess 5:9-10 says For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. Paul is speaking the language of hope to those who were feeling hopeless. Thirdly, Paul communicated the gospel with love and care. He uses the analogy of a nursing mother in 1 Thess 2:7-8 to describe his affectionate relationship with the Thessalonians. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. 8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. Paul says that we were like nursing mother to you. We did not just give you the gospel but poured our lives into to you, so that you might be saved. Paul used customised approach to sharing the gospel. He used logic for those who needed reasoning, he gave hope to the distressed, he demonstrated love for the people by pouring himself into their lives. Customised communication is key to True evangelism.

3. Paul communicated the gospel through personal example. I have dwelt on this extensively in the earlier parts of the series. We dwelt on it specifically in Part 4 when we studied True Ministry. There are several places where Paul affirms that they lived exemplary lives. It is through their personal example that they were able to provide credibility to the message that they were communicating, the message of the gospel. I would like to clarify one thing here. When I speak about setting an example, I am not

talking about being perfect, I am not talking about being the embodiment of holiness before sharing the gospel. I am aware that all of us are sinners and all of us have got limitations. There are some people who do not share the good news merely because they feel inadequate. Because they feel that since they have not got it all together in their lives, they are not eligible for sharing the gospel. Let us remember George's message a few weeks earlier. We share the gospel not from our strengths, but from the strength of the Lord Christ. We share the gospel not because we are perfect, but because the one whom we worship is perfect. We share the gospel not to highlight our strengths, but to amplify Him through our weaknesses and imperfections. Setting an example is not about being perfect before we share the gospel, setting an example is about giving credibility to our message through our actions. We cannot convey hope, if we are hopeless, we cannot convey love, if we feel unloved. So let us set personal example, without trying to be perfect, and through our lives attract others to Christ.

Let us summarise the marks of True evangelism that we can learn from Paul through his letters to the Thessalonians.

1. True evangelism is not dependent on favourable circumstances. On the contrary, true evangelism thrives when there is oppression, threats and persecution. We have a great opportunity in our own nation right now. Let us pray for the evangelists who are bold to continue their work in times such as this.
2. True Evangelism needs evangelists to use appropriate methods, contextually relevant, culturally aligned and demonstrated through personal examples of the evangelists. We can focus on reasoning, hope, love or all of them to win over our devout neighbours.

This is the last part of the series, and I would like to wrap up the series by asking us to make changes in three areas. If we have learned anything from this series, it should strengthen us in the areas of Faith, Hope and Love. Let the message to the Thessalonians strengthen our faith. Let the explanation on the second coming of Jesus fill us with hope and anticipation, and let our love for each other grow to an unlimited liability level. I pray that this series would have touched some of you. It has touched me. It has been a blessing to me.

Let us pray.