

MATERNAL LEADERSHIP

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12



We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” (1 Thessalonians 2:7,8)

Have you ever thought of church leadership being described in maternal terms? Here St. Paul characterizes his church planting team as behaving “like a mother caring for her little children.” Yet I have never seen this kind of church leadership promoted or publicized. Why not? What does St. Paul’s model of leadership have to teach us today?... God raises up leaders to meet the needs of the moment. “Men and women of faith have always been people of action. It is impossible for leaders to act in passive role. This implies that such people are decisive in nature. Leadership action demands faith. The setting and striving of and striving for goals is an act of faith” (Ted Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader*, p.20f). The Bible gives examples of various models of leaders with differing personalities and gifts. The situation dictates the best style. Studies of churches show that growing congregations are led by positive, confident, cheerful and goal-oriented leaders who try to involve as many people as possible. St. Paul gives us this insight into his style of leadership with the churches he founded. We may call it the maternal style. It has four components.

Christian leadership is gentle. ‘Gentle’ describes a teacher who is patient in the nurturing process, or of a nursing mother with babies. It is also a botanical term which describes the care and feeding of a young plant so that it grows properly to maturity. You have to handle plants and babies delicately for they are fragile creatures which do not respond to harsh and rough treatment. They can be damaged so easily. The kingdom of God is a gentle environment of which the church is a manifestation. We need to be gentle with one another because we do not know what is going on in the lives of those around us. They may be vulnerable and fragile. We cannot assume that they are sturdy and strong. They may require delicate handling, a discernment of the Spirit, and tender care....

Christian leadership is loving. “We loved you so much....” The love of God is communicated to us through loving our neighbor. If we say that God loves us then we will show it by loving one another. Love is translated into deeds. We care for one another. We pray for one another. We bear one another’s burdens. “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins... Each should use whatever gift he has received to serve others” (1 Peter 4:8,10). We love by serving one another because love is setting aside our prerogatives in order to meet the needs of others. Love is unselfish — there is no place for ego. Christian leadership is servant leadership, as Jesus demonstrated in washing the feet of the disciples. “Love is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrongs.... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13). This leadership dynamic creates an organization and community different from the competitive business world.

Christian leadership delights in sharing the gospel. The family of God is conceived and born through the sharing of the gospel of God. The church is not just a social organization of high-minded people dedicated to good works, it has a mission to reach people with the gospel. We have a passion for communicating the good news of the coming of Christ, for witnessing to Jesus as the key to meaning and purpose in life, for making known the empowering gift of the Spirit, the Comforter, the promise of the Resurrection and the reality of eternal life. A mother wants only the best for her children. The best gift we can give anyone is the unsearchable riches of Christ. It is sharing the treasure hidden in a field, and the pearl of great price. The Christian leader is unashamed of the gospel for it is the power of salvation to all who believe. It is *good* news in a world filled with bad news. It is healing medicine of the soul. We are fearless in our communication of the gospel. The Christian may be gentle in manner but also resolute in action when it is a matter of life or death.

Christian leadership is personal. “*We were delighted to share with you...our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*” Christianity is not just an intellectual exercise in learning information, or the sharing of ideas. It has to do with relationships: a relationship with Jesus, the Son of God, and with one another as members of the family of God. We are not hypocrites, living behind masks, acting a part. We seek for authenticity in our relationships with each other. We admit our failings and our needs. We each are on a journey through life, a pilgrimage that has many pitfalls and challenges. None of us is perfect. None of us has arrived. But we share what we have learned and how we have grown in grace and the knowledge and love of God.

This maternal model of leadership is rooted in God’s relationship with us. “*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you*” (Isaiah 49:15; 66:13) What a wonderful reassurance of the nature of the love of God as seen in the Gospel of Jesus.¹

¹ <http://www.virtueonline.org/maternal-leadership-1-thessalonians-278>

OPEN IT

1. What was your childhood like? Describe your parents, focusing in on their parenting philosophy.

What did they do well and in what areas would you do things differently?

EXPLORE IT

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 2:1–12

2. How were Paul and his companions treated in Philippi?
3. How did Paul and his team treat the people in the Thessalonian church?
4. According to verse 9, what did Paul do during his time in Thessalonica?
5. In what three ways did Paul and his team help the church to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord?

GET IT

The physical suffering was not the worst part of the treatment received. Paul more strongly resented that he and his co-workers had been shamefully treated, grievously "insulted." Gross indignities had been heaped on them in the way they had been treated – arrested on a false charge, stripped of their clothes and publicly beaten without a trial, and thrown into the inner prison with their feet in the stocks as though they were the most dangerous criminals. They had suffered not only bitter cruelty but public humiliation. Paul was deeply conscious that his

social status as a Roman citizen had been outraged. The treatment accorded them was contrary to Roman law. His desire to reverse this mistreatment caused Paul to demand that the Philippian magistrates come personally to conduct them out of prison (Acts 16:37).²

6. **When have you endured malicious attacks for doing what was right? What truths can we learn from Paul's example of endurance amidst such suffering?**

7. **Put yourself into the shoes of Paul and his companions in Philippi. Would you continue in ministry after enduring such hardship?**

8. **As Christians, how can hardships help grow our faith and heart to serve? In what ways can such troubles negatively impact gospel ministry?**

*In the ministry, there is always pressure to mitigate the message, to be inoffensive to sinners, to make the gospel acceptable to them. But such a compromise had no place in Paul's strategy. Instead, he had full confidence in God's power to overcome all opposition and achieve His redemptive purpose. The servant of God preaches the true, unmitigated message God has laid out in His Word, not some other message. He does so for the sake of truth, not for personal popularity. And when **opposition** comes, he trusts in the power of God and stays obedient to his calling. All that was true of Paul and his companions. As with all dedicated preachers of the gospel, they counted the cost of faithfully confronting sinners with the truth and rested boldly in the sovereign, supreme power of God.³*

9. **In verses 3–6 what specific accusations was Paul defending against?**

² Hiebert, D. Edmond: 1 & 2 Thessalonians: BMH Book. 1996

³ MacArthur, John: 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Moody Press

a. Which one of these accusations might you be accused of?

b. How can you show people that you're serving them out of gospel motives and not selfish ones?

10. Paul shares that he did not come "to please men" or share "words of flattery." What makes people-pleasing such a temptation to compromise godly principles?

a. When has people-pleasing caused you to compromise?

b. How are we to overcome this tendency?

As an apostle, Paul was a man of authority; but he always used his authority in love. The babes in Christ sensed his tender loving care as he nurtured them. He was indeed like a loving mother who cared for her children. It takes time and energy to care for children. Paul did not turn his converts over to baby-sitters; he made sacrifices and cared for them himself. He did not tell them to "read a book" as a substitute for his own personal ministry ...A nursing mother imparts her own life to the child. This is exactly what Paul wrote in 1Thessalonians 2:8. You cannot be a nursing mother and turn your baby over to someone else. That baby must be in your arms, next to your heart. The nursing mother eats the food and transforms it into milk for the baby. The mature Christian feeds on the Word of God and then shares its nourishment with the younger believers so they can grow (see notes 1 Peter 2:1; 2:2; 2:3). A nursing child can become ill through reaction to something the mother has eaten. The Christian who is feeding others must be careful not to feed on the wrong things himself... if we do not nurse the new Christians on the milk of the Word, they can never mature to appreciate the meat of the Word (see notes Hebrews 5:11; 12; 13; 14).⁴

⁴ Wiersbe, W: Bible Exposition Commentary. 1989. Victor

11. Why do you think godly leaders need to have personal affection for the people they serve?

a. What might happen if leaders fail to show this type of affection?

b. Why are the “motherly” qualities in verses 7–8 so important to growing disciples?

c. Why are the “fatherly” qualities in verses 11–12 so important to growing disciples?

It goes without saying that we are not apostles as Paul was. Yet, at the same time all Christians are called upon to nurture other believers, helping them come to spiritual maturity. We use words like: discipleship, pastoral concern, mentoring, encouraging, and fellowship to describe this process. The passage before us is an excellent model for us to copy.⁵

d. Which qualities are more prevalent in the church today? Concerning these qualities, what unintended consequences can come if a church is unbalanced when it comes to these qualities?

e. What people in your life have ministered to you as a spiritual mother or father? Can you give practical examples of how people have been a part of your spiritual parenting and lived out these attitudes found in verses 7–8, 11–12?

⁵ <http://sbcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Thessalonians.pdf>

- f. **How have you been encouraged in your spiritual parenting? How has this week's passage helped you sharpen your spiritual parenting skills?**
- g. **If ministering to a church is often like parenting, where does discipline fit in within a church setting?**

*Paul did manual labor (likely making tents) in order to give the gospel without charge. He wanted to avoid any appearance of self-serving in their evangelistic ministry (or **pretext of greed** 1Thessalonians 2:5). Paul and Silas did not preach in order to secure money for their support. They earned their sustenance by their own labor most likely by making and selling tents (Acts 18:3). They performed manual labor in order to give the gospel without charge. In a Jewish setting, there would have been nothing unusual about this, since every rabbi had a trade. However, in Thessalonica it would have been remarkable, since non-Jewish traveling lecturers were often less scrupulous, and the Greeks generally despised manual labor.⁶*

12. **Paul wrote often about the responsibility of the church to support her leaders, yet Paul often worked a trade to support himself while he preached. In supporting himself, what kinds of things did Paul communicate about his motives to churches like the baby church in Thessalonica?**
13. **Paul wrote in verse 4 that he was "entrusted" with the gospel. What are our responsibilities as stewards, or caretakers, of the gospel message?**

- a. **How does our walk impact the gospel, with which we have been "entrusted"?**

⁶ http://preceptaustin.org/1thessalonians_27-9.htm

- b. **In the first twelve verses how many times is God mentioned by name? What does this suggest?**

- c. **If our life is to be a gospel without words, what type of gospel story is your life sharing with others?**

- d. **What things must change in your life so that you can be confident you are “walking in a manner worthy of God”?**