

Protagonist Corner

An Invitation to I Thessalonians

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One must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found—and it is found in terrible places. . . .For nothing is fixed, forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.¹

In extending his invitation to these pages, the editor said, “This is an opportunity for you to say what you believe the church needs to hear.” Suffering from mid-July heat delusions, and with deadline not until January, I accepted.

The same day, the coordinator of our congregation’s men’s breakfast asked, “Could you provide us with an overview of I Thessalonians at 7:00 A.M. on September 6?” With few recollections of that letter other than the inherited tradition that it is the earliest writing in the New Testament, I agreed to try.

In the ensuing months, I have come to believe that what the church needs to hear is in I Thessalonians. Violence at abortion clinics, nauseating political campaigns with scary results, slaughter in Bosnia and Rwanda and inner cities and private homes in the United States, AIDS, various disputes within and among Christian bodies, aging, the apparently limitless directions and dimensions of unreality (“virtual” reality is still *not* reality!) on the information superhighway—all place the church under stress and even siege. What do we need to hear?

Paul and the fledgling congregation at Thessalonica had been separated because of persecution. Paul sent Timothy to visit, and Timothy’s return with glad reports over the fidelity of the congregation prompted the letter. Here is a word for life within a church, rather than a proclamation for those outside the church. Paul writes to bolster a group under stress, to reassure them in their anxiety over death and the return of Christ, and to urge them toward exemplary behavior among themselves and in this way be witnesses to the world.

The apostle Paul offered several pieces of good news in this brief, early letter. (1) *God has created a sense of connectedness and instills a tone of encouragement*—“We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers. . .” (1:2). Whether people in the church agree on any specific issues or agenda items, the first invitation is to thanksgiving and prayer. One wonders whether nastiness and violence can exist for long wherever there is thanksgiving, and whenever there is some encouragement.

As the secular writer and prophet James Baldwin put it, “The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and

the light goes out.” Much violence stems from isolation, and from people who have received little encouragement along their way.

James Baldwin left the church of his childhood and youth because of the abusive and inflexible attitudes of his minister father and others; but, thankfully, Baldwin never lost his sense of connectedness with other human beings, even those in the church. The titles of many of his writings are taken from his African-American spiritual tradition (“I’m going to sit at the Welcome Table/I’m going to feast on milk and honey/One of these days”). The church must be thankful that by God’s grace there is yet a Welcome Table of encouragement.

(2) *A confession of idolatry leads to freedom*—“you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1:9). For faithful people, “justifiable” ends, moral purity, political correctness, church growth, even efforts at relating to and with the downtrodden, can become idols. The apostle Paul, exhorter though he was, continued elsewhere to recognize that at best we are no more than earthen vessels. It is folly and idolatry to expect perfection in others or to pretend it exists in ourselves.

(3) *The church is called to be qualitatively different from other groups*—“We were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children” (2:7). At the end of the day, either the church will be gentle, or will cease to be at all. “*Aspire to live quietly, to mind your own business*” (4:11). Action without clamor, contemplation without condescension, and respect without recrimination are signs of a vital community of faith which will bear clear witness to a hostile society.

(4) *A confidence even in the face of death is bestowed upon us*. “We shall always be with the Lord” (4:17). To live as Jesus did could even mean to die as he did. To live as Paul enjoined, in a violent and vitriolic age, could lead to persecution or imprisonment or death. But none of this ultimately matters much in view of the hope of Christ.

(5) *The most difficult call of all may be to “see that none of you repays evil for evil”* (5:15). The armed militants at abortion clinics, the self-assured and righteously indignant members of the U.S. Congress of 1995, and the schismatics in the church have apparently strayed from this authoritative Word.

Ferrol Sams lately published what undoubtedly will be one of his more controversial short stories, and called it “Epiphany.”² In the story, a patient who is a former convict confides to his wise physician that he has decided against killing two of his adversaries, although a reasonable case could be made for self-defense. (Self-defense had also led to his initial eight-year incarceration.) The patient, Gregry Clark McHune, experienced an epiphany of sorts when he remembered a conversation between his grandfather and step-grandmother: “It was the craziest thing; all of a sudden I heard Miss Lila’s voice, and I had about quit ever even thinking of her. She said, ‘Mr. Metters, two wrongs don’t make a right.’ And I heard Mr. Metters say, ‘That’s a crazy way to live when somebody’s done you wrong, Miss Lila, but I guess it’ll do till something better comes along.’ And all of a sudden I realized that I was all twisted up in my thinking.”

What we need to hear is I Thessalonians. First things first. Render to no one evil for evil. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (5:28). It’ll do till something better comes along.

NOTES

¹ Richard Avedon and James Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), as quoted in David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 227.

² Ferrol Sams, *Epiphany* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1994), 117.