

## Traits of True Faith

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Throughout the New Testament, we read about the impact of a new-found belief: Jesus was the Messiah. This belief was transforming people's lives and altering communities. Of course, this belief was not discovered by chance. This belief was the result of God raising Jesus from the dead, the Spirit guiding the apostles, and the news of a resurrected Lord being preached.

As faith in Christ took root, certain characteristics began to emerge among believers and the churches they formed within their respective communities. Consider the following traits of Christians and churches in the New Testament.

**1. Faith in Christ produces a counter-culture.** It seems every generation has a counter-culture movement of some kind. When I was growing up, there were people who wanted to dress in black, pierce their ears, and get tattoos. They wanted to be different. How they presented themselves reflected an attitude which rejected authority.

The irony of this counter-culture group was that there was a similar group a generation earlier. Not surprising, then, is that similar attitudes are present today. There always seem to be people who want to be different; however, the more they try to be different the more they stay the same. Worldly-minded people behaving in worldly-minded ways is not new. It's as old as Adam and Eve.

The counter-culture group produced by faith in Christ is a far cry from a group of young people acting out against authority. Christians were counter-culture from a religious and moral perspective. Of course, religion and morals are closely related. Morals are directly connected to religious perspectives.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, idolatry was the dominant religious persuasion. The relationship people had with their idols was mainly transactional: i.e. the people would offer a sacrifice in the hopes of the gods giving them a good harvest. The character of the idols themselves reflected the character of the people who invented them. Therefore, the morals and ethics of the idols and the people were unrestrained.

Christians rejected idols and began to restrain themselves morally and ethically. In Thessalonica, believers in Christ turned from idols to serve the true, living God (1 Thess. 1:9-10). They were learning how to practice self-control by emptying their heart or vessel of lust and refilling it with love (1 Thess. 4:1-4). The Gentiles lived to gratify every evil desire because they did not acknowledge God; whereas, Christians were pursuing sanctification (1 Thess. 4:5). Sanctification is the only path to becoming counter-cultural in every generation.

**2. Christians encounter hostility.** The communities in which Christians emerged did not go unnoticed. The neighbors and co-workers of Christians observed their new patterns of daily life. Critics of the faith noticed how Christians did not attend the temples or worship the town's

patron god. They noticed how Christians pledged allegiance to a new king: Jesus instead of Caesar. Charges of treason and sedition were often made against Christians. These charges were made against Paul in Thessalonica and Ephesus (Acts 17:3, 19:23-27).

Such strange patterns of belief and behavior were often considered suspicious and threatening. The neighbors and co-workers of Christians frequently disassociated themselves from Christians. They would not engage in business and commerce with Christians. Worst of all, they would enact physical harm on Christians.

Jesus warned of believers encountering hostility. In the Sermon on the Mount, He spoke of persecution and false accusations begin made against believers (Matt. 5:10-12). At other times, He warned of the physical violence the disciples would face as they preached the Gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 10).

Eventually, Christians began to encounter hostility just as Jesus had warned. The Jews killed a highly regarded Christian, Stephen. Afterwards, they expelled Christians from Jerusalem (Acts 7-8). The Sanhedrin council, a political body which served as a liaison between the religious leaders of the Jews and the Roman government, hired Saul of Tarsus to stamp-out believers. The book of Acts documents much of the violent reaction people had towards believers in Jesus.

Christians encountering hostility is not a thing of the past. While we live in a rather tolerant country, Christians in other parts of the world face real and present dangers. There are nations ruled by godless people. Without a conscience tempered by the knowledge of God, they rule by fear and oppression. Being wise as serpents, Christians in such countries are forced to be clandestine and inconspicuous in their kingdom work. As long as sin is in the world, somewhere there will be Christians being persecuted.

**3. Christians engage the world by love, motivated by hope.** Being part of the only true counter-culture the world has known and suffering hostility as a result makes being a Christian difficult. Why would Christians want to save the very people who antagonize them? Why would Christians continue in their work of faith?

Answers to these types of heart-wrenching questions are answered by love and hope. The Christians we read about in the New Testament were reshaped through an understanding of their Creator's love for them shown through the Messiah. By the love of God, they did what few are willing to do: love their enemies (Matt. 5:34-43). They engaged the world by love and sought the salvation of the people in their communities.

For example, Paul was unjustly arrested in Jerusalem. In time, he was brought before King Agrippa for inquisition. Paul passionately tried to persuade Agrippa to become a Christian. Realizing what Paul was doing, Agrippa said, "*In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?*" (Acts 26:28). Notice Paul's loving response to his captor: "*Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains*" (Acts 26:29).

When Christians encountered hostility, they endured such treatment motivated by love and the hope of eternal life. They were unwavering in their faith. They were willing to endure persecution. After all, their Savior had endured similar treatment. They trusted in God's promise of eternal life and worked to have others share in this promise.

### **Conclusion**

The New Testament's account of Christians is both inspiring and humbling. The writer of Hebrews said of the faithful from an earlier era that the world was not worthy of them (Heb. 11:38). Well, the world was not worthy of the first generation of Christians either. Seeing traits of an emerging counter-culture, unyielding resilience, and love in the lives of these first saints demands reflection in our lives.

In a country which loosely describes itself as "Christian," can we really describe ourselves as counter-cultural? In religiously tolerant communities, do we really have excuses for not being able to practice and promote our faith? In a society which increasingly defines itself by competing political, racial, and socioeconomic ideologies, is love and hope really transforming the way we view and engage people who are different than us?

These are important questions that we urgently need to answer. Idolaters and Christians have two very different ways of answering these questions. If we do not think and honestly reflect on the meaning of the Gospel, Christians will answer these questions like idolaters.

The first generation of Christians transformed their hearts and minds. This transformation was evidenced by how they separated and distinguished themselves from idolaters. Then, they passionately sought to make believers out of idolaters. We must follow in their example.