

Everyone loves a good story. One of my favorite stories is Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy that came after. Tolkien was a professor correcting papers when he was hit by sudden inspiration and wrote down on a blank sheet of paper, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." That turned out to be the first sentence of a great story in which millions of people were transported to Middle Earth and introduced to unforgettable characters like Bilbo Baggins and Gandalf, the wizard.

We all love stories. Businesses have stories. People have stories. And CPC has a story. This morning I want to ask the question, *Where are we at in our story?* Just like *The Lord of the Rings*, our story as a church had an inauspicious beginning.

Over 50 years ago a handful of families from Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto began meeting, thinking they might start a church. It wasn't long before a few more folks joined them and they called a pastor. Then in 1974 they scraped together the cash to buy two acres for \$50,000 in a new city built on landfill in the Bay. But it would be nearly 15 years before they met there on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile, they met at the College of San Mateo, the Hillside Inn, the Foster City Community Center, and Bowditch Middle School. It's almost like they were playing hide and seek with the surrounding community, but they did find us. And, by the way, CPC never believed the church was a building anyway.

By the time Steve Farrar became pastor in 1978 they numbered about 65. When Steve left and his brother Jeff took his place, over 200 people called CPC their church home. It was "simple church" at its best—they gathered for worship on Sundays and they scattered in homes during the week in what were called Community Groups.

And then, finally, as they grew even more they **did** begin building. This is when I showed up to lead our Community Group ministry and assist Jeff. We built this place in three phases: first, our offices; then, our Multipurpose Room and classrooms; and finally in 2001 this auditorium and our famous parking garage. Our increased visibility in the community and our commitment to be salt and light resulted in more growth and more ministries like Higher Power, Love Works, WBS, Men's Fraternity, MOPS and Twenties.

Then we woke up one day and realized we'd grown out of even this facility. We began to pray and dream about how to expand our reach. The Lord led us to start a campus in the North

Peninsula. We hired a young man named Rob Hall and soon a couple hundred CPC'er's were meeting at Mills High School. Four years later we started our South Campus in Redwood City. All of a sudden, this story that started 50 years ago mushroomed into an epic tale. Two weeks ago we commissioned our North Campus as New North Church with over 1,000 calling that their church home.

Through all this we've strived to stay true to our mission to make and mature more followers of Christ and to our Core Values.

- We value the authority of **God's Word**; the exposition of Scripture.
- We value **worship** that's heartfelt, true to the historic Christian faith, but also accessible to our contemporary culture.
- We value **evangelism** (mission), believing the good news of Jesus transforms lives, families and cities; it's the hope of the world.
- We value **community**. The church is about more than showing up on Sunday, but it's connecting in relationship with others and using our spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ.
- We value **grace**. This is a place where lost and hurting people are welcome; where we can be transparent about our brokenness.
- Finally, we value the **leadership of elders**. Jesus is the Chief Shepherd (Senior Pastor) of this church, but he's entrusted its care and protection to a group of under-shepherds called elders who submit to the Lord's direction for his church.

This brings us to today. Here we are. And, again, I ask you, Where are we at in our story? Are our best years behind us or ahead of us? What will the next 50 years look like for CPC, if the Lord hasn't returned? You should know, the odds are against us. Churches like ours, more often than not, are like shooting stars in the night's sky. We either disappear altogether or just stagnate. Very few have a trajectory of continued growth and impact in their second half.

Some stay stuck in the past and just kind of age out. They have their heyday but never move beyond 8-track tapes and overhead projectors. A core group that started in the church in their 20's now reach their 70's and wonder why their kids are going to

other churches. Things you often hear in those churches when the idea of change comes up are, “We’ve never done that before” or “We tried that and it didn’t work.”

Other churches experience what’s called “mission drift.” They change too much, not just in their methods and strategies, but in their core beliefs and values. Little by little they accommodate to the culture and soon their “saltiness” is lost.

Still other churches just become complacent. A kind of self-satisfaction sets in, contentment in how things are. There may still be a veneer of activity, but they’re just maintaining the status quo. There’s no burning passion or vision.

Any one of those things could cause our best years **not** to be in front of us but behind us.

## Excel Still More

What’s very interesting is there was a church much like ours found in the New Testament. I’m talking about the church at Thessalonica. Like the SF Peninsula, this city was wealthy and strategically placed in the capital city of Macedonia. The Via Egnatia passed through it, linking it with several other key cities. Cicero described it as “situated in the bosom of our domain.”

Not only that, this church had a great beginning. At the start of his first letter to them Paul praises them for their *“work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1:3). In the 2nd chapter says, *“we constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God”* (2:13). Then in chapter 3 he says, *“For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account”* (3:9). This is an impressive and influential church.

But then we come to chapter 4 and you can almost feel the tension in Paul. He doesn’t want them to make the past a hero; to become complacent. So twice in verses 1-12 he repeats the same three words: *“Excel still more.”* Look at verse 1.

**“As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.”**

Then look at verse 9:

**“Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.”**

That word “excel” means to overflow, to abound, to exist in full quantity, to get better.

It’s like my high school football coach. We were an undefeated team winning a game 28–0. I was the quarterback and he called a play where I’d hand off to the halfback who’d turn around and throw me a pass as I ran down field. There I was wide open

running into the end zone and he threw me a perfect pass but I dropped the ball. Honestly, I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. I mean, we won the game 28–0. But as soon as the game was over, my coach reminded me this was the first game we failed to score 30 points—all because of me! It was a big deal to him because he knew I could do better. That’s what Paul is saying, “You’ve played well, but you can do better. You can excel still more.”

Notice he’s not telling them to change what they’ve been doing. In fact, several times he refers to what they’ve already been taught. His instruction to them isn’t changing; he wants them to continue in what they’ve learned, but he wants them to do it better!

There are three areas Paul points out and these are worth noting. The first one is **personal holiness**. He says in verse 1, “Listen, I taught you how to walk and please God, and you’ve been doing that, but I want you too excel still more.” Then in verse 3 he gets very specific.

**“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;”**

That word “sanctification” means to be made holy, to be set apart. Has anyone here arrived when it comes to personal holiness? Maybe you’ve fought and won some battles. You’ve got your life in pretty good order. There are no monster-like sins controlling you. But there’s more ground to take. You **can** excel still more. We **are** a grace-centered church, but that doesn’t mean we take sin lightly.

The second area is **brotherly love**. Again, as we saw in verse 9 he says,

**“You’re quite aware how God himself tells us to love one another and you’ve been doing that.”**

Notice he says it’s not just love for the people you hang out with at church but the love you have for people all over Macedonia! That’s so true of CPC. You’ve shown love for the poorest of the poor in Niger by building a hospital for under-resourced women. You’ve served orphans in Honduras and the homeless in Houston. But can you do more in loving one another? Can you do better? Are there people, even those who call this their church, who need to be welcomed into your home, or invited out to lunch after church, or allowed to join your tight knit Community Group?

The third area has to do with our **witness in the world**; how we relate to people around us who don’t know Christ. In verses 11-12 Paul says,

**“to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”**

Some of them were lazy, thinking since the Lord could return at any time they should just quit their jobs and sing worship songs all day. Paul is mainly concerned about the reputation of

God's people in the world. You see, we live our lives in the world. People are watching us. The people you work with are watching you. Your neighbors are watching you. Your family members who don't know Christ are watching you. And you may be doing quite well in this area. I think of how so many people at our South Campus have served the homeless through Street Church. I think of our ministry to veterans, to people in the Tenderloin through Bags of Love, and to those in recovery through Higher Power. We've done well, but we can excel still more.

So let me ask you one more time: Where are we at in our story? Are our best years behind us? Or will we take these words seriously and excel still more? I know one thing—in 50 years I won't be here, and neither will many of you. But what kind of church will we leave for our kids and grandkids? My prayer is that it's a church that holds fast to our Core Values but doesn't make the past a hero. My prayer is that what happened two Sundays ago when we commissioned New North Church would happen again in San Mateo, and again in Half Moon Bay, and maybe even in another country.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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