

37 years ago I had the privilege of being ordained as a minister in the Church of England. It is now just over 19 years ago that that privilege was translated into being vicar of Holy Trinity and St. Wulstan's. Now, as I stand just weeks from retiring from this great task I find myself preaching from 1 Thessalonians – a letter where Paul, above all other letters, bares his soul as he looks back on his ministry and reveals the man behind the role. Paul knew he was not only assessing himself, the Christians in Thessalonica were making their own judgements in the face of criticism against Paul in his absence. In Acts 17 we read about how, after suffering terrible attacks and humiliation, Paul arrived in Thessalonica and, over several weeks preached the gospel resulting in a few Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and several prominent women becoming Christians. Unsurprisingly, the Jews reacted badly to this and Paul once again fled for his life.

In his absence Paul was criticized as a self-interested charlatan and here, in this passage we get some of his defence. We will look at in 4 headings:

Integrity of the Man

Integrity of the Message

Integrity of his motives

Integrity of his methods

Integrity of the Man

In verse 8 Paul describes how he didn't live a life set apart – teaching from a position of superiority - but rather he lived openly amongst the people sharing love and compassion as well as teaching. Three times Paul was able to say, "You know" because they hadn't just experienced him as a preacher, but a man who lived amongst them – they could see that he lived out what he preached – The good news of God's love wasn't just something he told them about – it was something he lived every day. Because they knew and loved each other they knew that the Paul in private on his own, was the same as Paul at the marketplace, was the same as Paul preaching in the synagogue. Over the years I have heard lots of courses about sharing our faith. Some of them have been very good, but quite a few try to give formulae for presenting the gospel to people we hardly know. It is my experience that sharing faith is far more effective when we make friends with people and love them for who they are – not because they might respond to the gospel – From that friendship circle some will never be interested, but some will see the way that our relationship with Jesus impacts every aspect of our life and want to know more.

Not only was Paul's life consistent, it was also sacrificial. The NIV translates the first verse as "Our visit to you was not a failure" but it would be better translated "not without purpose" Although Paul was not there long and faced similar opposition to that which he had just experienced in Philippi, God had enabled him to dare to preach the Good News of Jesus

Both in Philippi and then in Thessalonica, Paul had shown himself willing to face all sorts of aggression and humiliation. Even those who disagreed with him couldn't deny that only someone as convinced as he was about the truth and necessity of the gospel would have been willing to undergo all this.

Integrity of his Message

In verse 3 he simply says that his message did not come from "error!" Paul had a tremendous knowledge of what we refer to as the Old Testament. After meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road he went back to look again at what the Old Testament taught and found that Jesus was indeed the Messiah they were waiting for – not only that, he was the potential Saviour for all people, not just the Jewish nation.

If Donald Trump doesn't like something, he declares it to be Fake News and, in doing so, he is picking up on a blurring between personal and definitive truth which is becoming more prevalent. Now, I may look at a picture and say its beautiful, whilst someone else might see it as hideous. The beauty of the picture is a personal truth which some will share, and some will not. If I accidentally put my hand too close to the gas ring on our cooker, I will feel the pain and pull it away. That a gas ring burns is a definitive truth. Many people refer to religion as personal truth – *"If it works for you that is great – this is what works for me!"* Paul knew that Jesus really lived, died, rose again and fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. The central features of our faith are not just personal truths, they are historical realities. There are bits round the edge we debate, but the central truths of the gospel remain constant.

Integrity of his Motives

That people will use the gospel to meet their own ends has always been true - the recent report of abuse of children in the Church of England reminds us that it is as prevalent now as it was in Paul's day. Paul was very clear that his motives for sharing the gospel were pure and not motivated by greed or selfish gain.

Integrity of his Methods

Paul had a confidence in the truth of Jesus and the power of the Spirit to convince people of the truth. There was no place in his preaching for trying to trick anyone into believing.

I was listening to a radio program about how people had been misled by adverts trying to create the impression that their goods were something much better than they were. It made me wonder how often we share just part of the Good News – perhaps talking about what Jesus can do for us, but not talking about the cost of following him.

We cannot argue or trick people into the Kingdom – our responsibility is simply to live and speak with integrity of personality, Message, Motive and Method – and leave the result to the work of God's Holy Spirit at work in those we love and care for.