

Trinity Baptist Church

Sunday 3rd July 2022

Andy Banks; How Can We Support New Christians? Paul's Example.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; 2:7b-8,11-13,17-18; 3:1-6,9-13

We're continuing our series based on the Christian Life and Witness Course. We've looked at *why* we should share our faith, at the effective *Spirit-filled* life that must underpin our evangelism, and at *how* we should share our faith. Today, we turn our attention to how we can *support new Christians*; in particular looking at Paul's example, as outlined in 1 Thessalonians. We'll read a few sections, beginning at the start of the letter.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; 2:7b-8,11-13,17-18; 3:1-6,9-13]

1:1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work of faith, your labour of love, and your endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction ...

***2:7b** Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well ...*

***11** For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12 encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe ...

***17** But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. 18 For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way ...*

***3:1** So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.*

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

***9** How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

[Pray]

This is how Jeff Lucas insightfully describes *his* first visit to a church:

“My heart was beating wildly against my chest as I stepped into the crude, tin-roofed building. I stepped suddenly into a strange, alien world. A song leader with wild, windmill arms wrestled with a smile that threatened to possess his whole face. The congregation had eyes that were moist, and some of them had their arms raised up in the air.

Hands up? Who were they waving at? Were they asking for permission to slip out to the toilet: one hand if you need to go a little, two hands if you need to go, *right now*? Eyes shut tight now, some murmured quiet amens, others appeared to know how to speak Russian, or was it German? By now, I was succumbing to confusion, but it was to get worse. Abruptly the song ended, everyone sat down, and it was then that I saw it. Who in their right mind would build a miniature swimming pool in their church building?

The minister appeared, resplendent in a long black gown, with fishing waders up to his thighs – an aquatic Dracula. Now another man joined him in the water. Suddenly, the Reverend Dracula grabbed the hapless guy and pushed him under the water. He had been baptised, and I'd had enough. I fidgeted through the sermon, made a mental note of how many people were desperate for the loo during the final song, and made a run for it. Sitting outside in my car, I decided: Christians were crazy. I would have nothing to do with them, ever again. Then I realised that I had left my coat in the church building ..."

Sometimes we need reminding just how alien Christian culture is to outsiders, and how scary it is to walk through those doors for the first time. Even though I went to an Anglican Church as a child, when I first found myself being drawn back to God and chose to go back alone one Christmas Day, I spent most of that service asking for God's forgiveness because I didn't know my way around the service book! As if God minds! It was a year and a half later that I began going to a freer Anglican Church with my brother every week of his summer holidays. But, when he returned to university, I still didn't feel like I *knew* anyone – who would I sit with? Did they even want me there?

Fortunately, my best friend also went to a church. Only that was a *Baptist* Church, and I really didn't know *anything* about *them*. Were they even Christians or some weird cult? I reasoned, since the church my brother had taken me to was called St. John the *Baptist*, maybe they *were* alright, and I went. My friend and his family sat with me and helped me to follow the service. They introduced me to other people who took an interest in me. So, I stayed. And some months later I became a Christian. I was invited to join a home group, and so, I made *more* friends, and I grew in my faith.

How can we support new Christians? Some of us find this idea even less palatable than evangelism! Perhaps because we don't feel we know our Bibles well enough, perhaps because we have forgotten what helped us at the start of *our* faith journey, or perhaps because our time priorities are elsewhere, not on nurturing the growth of young Christians. I confess that, even this year, in *my* busyness, I have failed in this regard. So, when I did the Christian Life and Witness course, this section on "follow up" was a real challenge to me. It is true that the Parable of the Sower warns us that some new converts will fall away, but it is also true that some fall away not because they are not good soil, but because the Church does not nurture their faith.

So, how can we support new Christians? Paul's method was effective in his day, and the principles remain so today. And one vital truth undergirded *all* he did: he *loved* them. He loved them with a sacrificial, aching, compassionate, persistent, fatherly and motherly, "agape" love, that was itself driven by his own experience of God's overwhelmingly gracious "agape" love to him, in calling *him* – a persecutor of the Church – to faith in Jesus Christ.

1) Paul Gave Himself

So how did he nurture new faith? In 1 Thessalonians, Paul shares a number of ways. And the first and most important is that he did not merely share the *gospel* – the good news about Jesus – with them, he shared *himself* with them. 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-8: "Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our *lives* as well."

As a pastor, I have always sought to minister out of who I am, so that my public ministry is a mere outworking of my private devotion to God and my character as he is shaping it. So I share my weaknesses as well as my strengths, that you might see that I grapple with faith as you do. I hope, by that, to present the authenticity of the *gospel* itself. And authenticity is what new Christians need too. Of course, we should be selective in the struggles we share with them – we certainly don't want

to dump the rubbish we've accumulated over the years on them – but we need to show them *real* Christian faith, not the sanitised “everything's always happy and glorious” image of fantasy.

And more even than what we *present* of the *gospel*, new Christians need our *presence*. Someone who gets in touch, someone who goes for a coffee with them, someone who looks after the children so they can have an evening out. They don't just need the gospel, but ourselves! Jeff Lucas found Jesus when he went back into that church to get his coat, because he met people who loved him. He stayed in the Church because of that love. I stayed in Holly Lodge Baptist Church in Ipswich because I was loved and helped to meet Jesus. But this takes an intentional commitment of time. Ultimately, it's about what matters most to us.

2) Paul Prayed Earnestly And Persistently

Secondly, Paul *prayed* for them earnestly and persistently. He prayed for them *before* they came to faith, and he *went on* praying for them *after* they came to faith. 1 Thess 1:2: “We *always thank* God for all of you and *continually* mention you in our prayers.” 2:13: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God.” 3:10: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.” Paul also writes a prayer for them – God hears written prayers just as he hears spoken ones! 3:11-13: “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”

So, in his prayers, Paul thanks God for these Christians, specifically for the faith that God has awakened in them; he prays to be able to see them again, that they will love one another increasingly as God is love, and that they will grow in holiness as God is holy. New Christians – and old Christians for that matter – need our prayers to grow in these characteristics.

3) Paul Told The Whole Truth

Thirdly, Paul did not hesitate, in love, to share with them the whole truth of the gospel. He refused to hook them deceitfully by sugar-coating what it means to follow Jesus. 1 Thess 3:4: “In fact, when we were with you, we *kept* telling you that we would be *persecuted*.” Being a Christian is hard! Some of us may have known or witnessed persecution. I served on a holiday club in Islington with a Sri Lankan man who could never meet any of his family (except his mother), because he had converted to Christianity from Hinduism, and they wanted to kill him. Those of us who have lived all our lives in the UK probably haven't experienced such persecution! But we may have known ridicule, isolation, pressure to conform, misunderstanding or pigeon-holing as a bigots. New Christians need to be prepared for the truth that people may turn against them because of their new-found faith, and to be given resources to deal with this.

4) Paul Sent Others (1 Thess 3:2)

But, although Paul shared his life with the Thessalonians, his work meant that he could not be with them to nurture their faith nearly as much as he would have liked. That wasn't merely a *practical* issue; it was also a *spiritual* issue – Paul tried again and again to visit them, but, he says, “*Satan* blocked our way” (1 Thess 2:18). That shows how important this nurturing of new faith is. So, Paul found ways around the problem. He sent representatives – trusted people who could do the work on his behalf. 1 Thess 3:1-2: “when we could stand it no longer [do you hear the passion there?] when we could stand it no longer ... we sent Timothy ... to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.”

Some people imagine that, if the Pastor sees them or prays for them it will somehow have more effect than if anyone else does the same. Respectfully, I say to you that is not a biblical belief. God listens equally to the heartfelt prayers of *all* his children. What matters is not our status, but our faith, our heart, and most importantly, God's *grace*. That's why we *share* around the load of pastoral care in this church. Because with the best will in the world, I can't be everywhere at once – I'm not omnipresent! And more importantly, sharing in service helps us each to grow as Christians. The ideal situation is when

the whole *church* engages in pastoral care for one another, whether through small groups or informally visiting or contacting people.

5) Paul Wrote Letters

Paul also wrote letters when he couldn't be with them physically, so as to let them know he was thinking of them, to answer their questions and help them understand Jesus better. In this letter, for instance, he answers the Thessalonians' questions about what happens to Christians when they die, and about Jesus' Second Coming. Writing materials were expensive in those days. You didn't waste papyrus on unnecessary communication. You certainly wouldn't have found Paul sharing status updates on his lunch or his favourite sportsman's achievements! But building the faith of new Christians was well worth the cost!

6) Paul Visited And Encouraged

Of course, a letter was no substitute for in-person conversation. So, when Paul had the opportunity to *visit* the churches he planted, he took it. He tells the Thessalonians of his prayers day and night that he might see them again in order to supply what is lacking in their faith (3:10). This was his regular practice to revisit and encourage the churches he had founded. And he did revisit Macedonia, of which Thessalonica was one of the capitals, so it seems this prayer was answered (e.g. Acts 19:21-22 and 20:1-6).

So how can we support and nurture new Christians? Firstly, and most importantly simply by investing time in them. Each of us taking responsibility for this task, but especially for those we know. Secondly by earnestly and persistently praying for the development of their faith. Thirdly, by sharing the whole truth of the gospel to prepare them for the road ahead. Fourthly, by visiting, and encouraging them as you read the Scriptures together. Or if that is not possible, there is always the option of letters, emails, phonecalls, zoom calls, or someone going on our behalf. What all of this takes is sacrificial *love* (love both for Jesus and his gospel and for the people who come to faith in him) and intentionality (making the making of disciples our first priority). We hope and we pray that we will have many new Christians joining us after the God Loves You Tour. If they are going to stay and grow in their faith, it will take the whole church embracing them, not just the minister or the leaders of the Discovery groups. And, while we're about it, there are others who have joined us in the last couple of years. I wonder, how many of them have you got to know?

[Pray

Offer opportunity for prayer ministry]