

Northolt Park Baptist Church

A Christian Church – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

Next year, probably on this very weekend, we will be celebrating our fiftieth birthday as a church – we're nearly fifty years old! But the church at Thessalonica was barely a few months old when they received this letter.

Acts 17:1-15 tells us about the beginning of the church. Paul, Silas and Timothy didn't want to leave the Thessalonians on their own when they were so young in the faith, but they were forced to do so. Some of the Jews in Thessalonica hired a gang of muggers to attack the house of Jason, where Paul was staying. Because Paul wasn't there, poor Jason was dragged to the local authorities with charges of treason and trouble-making. The city authorities required Jason to hand over a sum of money as a deposit which he would forfeit if there was any further trouble. So, for the sake of Jason and the Christians in Thessalonica, the missionaries left for Berea and then Athens. You can imagine they would have been wondering how the Thessalonians were doing, wondering what was happening, whether they'd suffered any more, whether they'd even decided to renounce their faith. And when Paul could bear it no longer he sent Timothy back to see how they were doing, and when Timothy eventually returned, it was with great news – the Christians had survived the hassles, and were, in fact, growing and thriving! Paul writes with thankfulness and joy the letter we now know as 1 Thessalonians.

What do we think of when we think of the church? What picture comes to mind? We understand there are different ways we can speak about God (such as 'shepherd', 'rock', 'fortress'). But, what model should we use for the *church* and for church *ministry*? It's an important question, because the kind of model we adopt affects the shape of our whole understanding.

For instance, if we think of the church's ministry using an *entertainment* model, we think in terms of performance of the people up

front, on the stage – and the slicker it is the better it is! We think in terms of audiences being mesmerised by what we have to offer. We think in terms of the technology we use having to be cutting edge. And we dare not commit the worst sin of all – being boring! So, church services need to be fun, *amusing* preferably, and we would best advised tailoring the length of the sermon to the attention-span of people who are more used to watching music videos than listening to monologues. Is that what church should be like?

Or, we might think of the church in terms of a *management* model. If we do so, then we think about business, a chairperson of the board, management, budgets, accountability, cost-effectiveness, productivity. With a managerial model, we might buy into the notion of outcomes, efficiency, benchmarks, and meeting customers' needs: we need to discover our target market, work out what the people want, and then give it to them. Is *that* what church should be like?

And then another option is the *therapy* model. Have you seen the size of the self-help sections in bookshops recently?! Lots of people, it seems, want to find self-esteem, want to feel significant, want to know how to be successful, want to know 'how to win friends and influence people', want to know 'how to get what they want and want what they have'. People feel the need to be stroked and soothed. And the church, according to the therapy model, should address these felt needs of people. Is *that* what church should be like?

Even if we might not hold out a lot of hope for any of these ways of thinking about the ministry of the church, there remain aspects we might want to take on board. We *should* be sensitive to personal needs, we should address today's concerns, we should relate to where people are at; it's not wrong to set targets, to make plans for the future. It's right to do the

best we can in terms of our use of technology, and so on. It's even okay to laugh in church occasionally – really it is!

But it doesn't take much thought to realise that all these ways of thinking about the church and the ministry of the church risk making the gospel a commodity to be marketed and sold. It risks confusing people's *felt* needs with their *real* needs. My *felt* need for self-esteem might smother my *real* need for a Saviour. My *felt* need for a sense of fulfilment in my life might mask my *real* need of Jesus in my life. It's a little like patients writing prescriptions for themselves all the time having no idea of what's wrong with them.

So, whatever helpful insights might come out of these models, the church is not ultimately entertainment-driven, or management-driven, or therapy-driven, or culture-driven, or consumer-driven, but *God-driven, Christ-driven, Spirit-driven, word-of-God-driven, bread-and-wine-driven, gospel-driven.*

What should a Christian church look like? In part, the whole of 1 Thessalonians helps us answer that question. It'll be interesting and helpful to see what sorts of images and models Paul uses to describe the church in the letter. But the first three verses get us off to a good start. And there are three points to develop briefly as an introduction to this letter.

1. The church is a gathered community of people (1:1)

The letter comes from Paul and his co-workers – Paul, Silas and Timothy. And they write to the *church* of the Thessalonians (1:1).

It's become clichéd to say that the church is not a building, but as with a lot of clichés, it's true. When the New Testament uses the word 'church', it never has in mind a building. So, what does it mean? In fact, the word used in the New Testament wasn't even a particularly religious word. It was used in secular contexts to refer to a gathered assembly, a political body, perhaps, or a more general gathering, where the primary focus is on the *people who gather.*

Interestingly, the Old Testament uses the same word for *Israel* as the assembly of God's people. This suggests that now the Christian community, the new people of God, are the gathered people of God and of Christ. The people of God are now radically re-formed and re-made by Christ.

That's who the letter is addressed to, and by God's grace comes to us today. As we read and study this letter, then, we can expect that it will have some things to teach us about our own life as a gathered community of people. But, Paul makes it clear this is not just any gathering of people...

2. The church has its identity in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1)

The words 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' makes certain exactly which gathering of people in Thessalonica is being addressed. The Christian community was *brought into being by* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Its origin, its identity and existence was determined by God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This little word 'in' is important. In Paul's thought, 'in Christ' is sometimes contrasted with 'in Adam' (see, e.g., Romans 5:12-21). Once, as men and women without Christ, we found our identity *in* Adam – his way was our way, his sin was our sin, his destiny of death was our destiny of death. Now, as believers, we are *in* Christ, and so find our identity in him – his way is our way, his death our death, his resurrection life our resurrection life, his destiny our destiny. What does Paul say elsewhere? 'If anyone is *in* Christ, they are a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). What else does he say? 'There is now no condemnation for those who are *in* Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). Because of what God has done through Christ, we have been brought into a community of people in which we are related to Christ and to each other in a new way. To be in God and Jesus means to be united with God and Jesus, with each other, through the Spirit, which creates not a lifeless organisation but a living organism.

Do we think of ourselves this way? It's only as we find our identity in God the Father and in

Jesus Christ that we, like the Thessalonians, find the salvation we need, the life we need, the wholeness we need, the security we need, the stability we need. We gather together because we all belong to God and to Christ Jesus the Lord, and we all belong together.

And then there is a third thing to notice...

3. The church is marked by faith, love and hope (1:2-3)

Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians. Why does Paul give thanks? He gives thanks not for their varied programmes, not for their excellent facilities, not for their relevant services, but for what matters most of all – for their faith, love, and hope (1:2-3).

Again, we should recall that the church at Thessalonica is barely a few months old. They are recently born babes in Christ – not even toddlers, not even out of spiritual nappies yet. They've not managed to read much theology. They haven't even gone through one set of *Daily Bread* notes. Most of their beliefs about Jesus are fresh; new moral standards, perhaps, have only just been adopted. What is more, they are being taunted by their neighbours in the city, perhaps even suffering persecution. What kind of situation would we expect to find them in? But Paul begins with joy and thankfulness and confidence. Particularly, Paul remembers their faith, love and hope – a triad which crops up elsewhere in Paul's letters, even later on in 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

Importantly, although faith, hope and love sound rather abstract, dull and boring, they have concrete, practical results. Paul speaks about their *work* of faith, their *labour* of love, and their *endurance* of hope. Faith works, love labours and hope endures. Each of these virtues is productive. Their faith, love and hope made a difference to their lives. They weren't a set of clothes they took out of the wardrobe on Sunday morning for church, and then put away on Sunday evening before the rest of the week. They were Christians of faith, love and hope twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Faith, love and hope were not just interesting theological words for the Thessalonians. They were translated into their lives.

The temptation would be to see our faith as something merely *intellectual*, that we *believe* certain things. And there is an intellectual component to our faith. But faith is not just about believing the right things, or reciting the right creeds; it's about being a *disciple* of Jesus, which is not passive believing but active following. If we are to be people of faith, let's be people of faith like that.

The temptation would be to see our love as something merely *emotional*, a warm, friendly feeling we have for each other which we hope won't be challenged too much when people get on our nerves or irritate us! And, of course, there is a crucial emotional dimension to love. But the word Paul puts with love is *labour* – which suggests loving is hard work, and leads to hard work, the kind of hard work that doesn't give up, the kind of hard work that is willing to be inconvenienced, the kind of hard work that can leave you feeling exhausted because you invest so much in the welfare of another person. If we are to be people of love, let's be people of love like that.

The temptation would be to think of hope as wishful thinking. But hope in the Bible is always concrete. We're absolutely convinced that something is going to happen, but we're living in anticipation of it because it's not happened yet. Hope is not about sitting back and waiting for something better to come along, but a confidence that leads to endurance and patience and resilience in the face of difficulties. If we are to be people of hope, let's be people of hope like that.

Paul mentions these at the start because he's going to come back to them as the letter goes on. So we'll see in more detail what faith, love and hope might look like. For now, we want to note that these are the marks of a church – quite different from the models we mentioned at the start.

Here then is a Christian church. May God help us to be a community of people grounded in God and Christ, displaying faith, love and hope. And may Christ receive all the glory in his church. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 16 September 2007