

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Christian Ministry – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

We began looking at 1 Thessalonians by reflecting on different ways of thinking about the church – in terms of models from the worlds of entertainment, management, and therapy. Of course, along with those views of *church* go particular views of *ministry*, and expectations of pastors – which can be many. What should ministers be like? Well, we'd like someone who can be a *chairman of the board*, who can provide leadership and set goals for the future direction of the church, and organise and administrate, who can chair meetings and handle the budget. And then, we'd like someone who can be a *TV chat-show host* – confident, affable, witty, entertaining, moving smoothly from one interesting item to one funny item and back again, keeping the audience happy in the process. And then, of course, we'd like a *counsellor*, someone who is sensitive and caring, who listens to us and understands us, who has just the right words to ease our burdens and help us through our crises and neuroses. It's not too much to ask for, is it?!

As a church we've been thinking recently about the kind of minister we should look for. What qualities are necessary? What abilities are essential? What gifts are important? *What does Christian ministry look like?* We shall discover that just as this letter will help us understand what it means to be a Christian *church*, so it will help us understand what Christian *ministry* looks like.

The background of the passage is the host of the Hyde Park orators of that day – people of all creeds and countries, popular philosophers, magicians, astrologers, crack-pots and cranks; the sincere and the spurious, the righteous and the rogue, swindlers and saints – all of them jostled for the attention of people. Just like today. You can't walk through Leicester Square in London, or down the High Street in Harrow without being accosted by somebody who wants to get your ear for their cause, their

philosophy, their economics, their politics: whether it's to do with disarmament, AIDS, the homeless, nationalism, racism, sexism, the NHS, or the dolphins. If you want an opinion on something, somebody somewhere is more than willing to give you theirs!

So, when the Christians preached the gospel in Thessalonica, they were one voice among many voices, competing with other wandering preachers and teachers and philosophers of all kinds, many of whom were interested in reputation and money. And people, then as now, were inevitably cynical about their motives.

In this context, then, Paul wants to remind the Thessalonians what they already knew about him (see 2:1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11), which is exactly what *kind* of teacher he was. And the way he does that in the passage is by saying: 'I'm *not* like *that*... I'm like *this*...' Paul is not necessarily trying to defend himself against specific accusations that have been made against him; he's simply describing what kind of a teacher he is: both in *negative* terms ('we *weren't* like this') and in *positive* terms ('we *were* like this'). And as he does so, we get a picture of what Christian ministry looks like. So, what are its characteristics?

### 1. Boldness: helped by God (2:1-2)

Paul says that their experience at Philippi might have destroyed their confidence, might have made them lose their sense of mission, but they came to Thessalonica nonetheless. Why? Paul says they came because they were made bold by *God* to preach the gospel. Their Christian ministry was characterised by *boldness*, by a *freedom* to speak.

If someone got paid a lot of money for preaching the gospel, or increased their social status through preaching the gospel, or became very popular through preaching the gospel, that would be one thing. But if

someone was ostracised for preaching the gospel, or got beaten up for preaching the gospel, or put in prison for preaching, but *still carried on* preaching the gospel in the face of opposition, that would be something very different: that would be a confidence and a boldness that comes from being helped by God.

But their boldness in preaching the gospel came from their sense of God's approval of their work. And that's the second characteristic of Christian ministry that arises out of the passage.

## **2. Wholeheartedness: approved by God (2:3-4)**

Note that verse 3 is connected to the previous verse, with the first word 'for'. In other words, what Paul says here gives the reason *why* he had been bold to preach the gospel in the face of strong opposition (2:3). If their preaching of the gospel did originate in any of the things he mentions, they might not have been so bold. What things does Paul single out?

- *Not error* (2:3a) – Paul's exhortation to them to believe in Christ did not spring from error.
- *Not impure motives* (2:3b) – Paul's exhortation to them to believe in Christ did not originate from impure motives.
- *Not trickery* (2:3c) – And nor did it originate from deception or trickery. What Paul said to the Thessalonians was straightforward and clear, and was not intended to lead them astray.

These were the kinds of things some of the wandering philosophers of the day were accused of. But Paul wasn't like that. The negatives in verse 3 are followed by a positive statement in verse 4. Notice how the verse begins: 'On the contrary...'

- *But approved by God* (2:4a) – Paul has been approved by God, examined and found acceptable by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

And then there is another 'not like this... but like this...' statement in the second half of verse 4.

- *Not pleasing people but pleasing God and tested by him* (2:4b) – God continually tests their hearts.

Paul offers himself as an *example* of how Christians, and Christian leaders in particular, should be. We know how important integrity is, of 'walking the walk' as well as 'talking the talk'. And we know what kind of damage comes about when money, sex, power, or all three, get caught up in Christian ministry. Christian ministry should not be marked by error or impurity of mind or trickery or people-pleasing; it should be marked by a *wholeheartedness* that comes from being approved by God, examined by him, found acceptable by him to be entrusted with the gospel, pleasing him. So, although at one level Paul is obviously speaking of himself, at another level, what he says is designed to encourage this kind of character in *us* too – by reminding *us* that God tests *our* hearts to determine our motives and desires, that God would have *us* be people of integrity and wholeheartedness too.

## **3. Gentleness: inspired by God (2:5-8)**

Paul continues along the same lines in verses 5 to 8. Again, the opening of verse 5 connects the verse with what precedes with the use of the word 'for' (though the NIV Bible translation does not include it). Verses 5 and 6 explain further what Paul means when he says at the end of verse 4 that he did not seek to please people but God.

- *Not flattery* (2:5a) – Flattery was so common among street-corner philosophers in Paul's time that it was used in stereotypes of them. But Paul didn't flatter people or pander to them. That kind of talk didn't normally land you in prison! He's already told us that his speech was marked by boldness and freedom (2:2). Using flattery would compromise the integrity of his message and call in question his motivation in preaching the gospel.
- *Not greed* (2:5b) – Moreover, Paul did not speak from a motive of greed. He's probably referring to money here. And he's quite clear: he was not out passing the hat around the market-place in Thessalonica after he'd spoken.

- *Not seeking praise from people* (2:6) – The activity of Paul and his friends among the Thessalonians was not motivated by the desire to gain a good reputation either from their converts or from the outsiders.

Paul and his so-workers deliberately refused to do the things that might lead people to doubt the integrity of the message. And then comes the contrast in verses 7 and 8...

- *But gentle, caring, loving, sharing* (2:7-8) – Again, the verses provide a model of what true leadership and ministry should be in the Christian community. Paul was not self-serving, manipulative, or arrogant when he worked among the Thessalonians. He wasn't out to gain anything from them.

For the sake of the gospel, Paul put aside his rights, and acted with gentleness. He uses the image of a mother cherishing and nurturing her children, and it shows his deep love and concern for the Thessalonians, his feelings of tenderness towards them, his sense of wanting to protect them. Paul says he wanted to share with them his whole life, his energy, his time. He committed himself totally to the Thessalonians in the same way a loving mother is totally committed to the well-being of her baby. And that example of love for, and devotion to, his converts establishes a standard for Christian ministry.

Paul and Silas and Timothy knew how to take care of people; they knew how to feed them, protect them, bring them up. They didn't handle them roughly, or with a bad attitude. They treated every individual as important and deserving of special love and attention and care. They shared their whole lives with these young believers: bottles every four hours, washing machines always on the go, pram pushing, cradle rocking, broken nights, daily and weekly routines all designed around baby's needs! They showed them the kind of love that demands self-sacrifice; the kind of love that drains emotions and nervous energy, not to mention physical energy. Paul and the missionaries were not remote figures, sending out their instructions from some plush mission headquarters hundreds of miles away; they

were right there with their hands in the nappy buckets!

That's what Christian ministry looks like! But there's a final thought...

#### **4. Blamelessness: worthy of God (2:9-12)**

I've divided the passage here, because once again, verse 9 begins with the word 'for' (again, not found in the NIV), which means Paul is linking and explaining in more detail what he's just said. His claims that they were not a burden on them is confirmed by their lifestyle.

Verse 9 tells us that Paul supported himself by working rather than making financial demands on his converts. Paul has more to say later on in the letter about working (see 4:11-12), and in 2 Thessalonians as well (3:6-15).

Paul could have asked for financial support. In fact, sometimes Paul accepts support from churches, and it's clear from other letters that he expects Christians will pay their leaders. But in other situations, Paul will not accept payment. He will not accept payment if it risks making the gospel look like something that can be bought and sold. He will not accept payment if it means that people think they have him in their pockets, that they hold Paul's purse strings, and that they who pay the piper get to call the tune.

So, sometimes Paul receives support and on other occasions he supports himself: he works with leather, making tents. Most likely, he would have rented a workshop where he would be in daily contact with people, and so his integrity as a worker would have been open to the public eye. And the workshop was a recognised place for discussion; it's highly likely that Paul did a lot of teaching while he was working.

Not only did Paul and his fellow missionaries pay their own way while doing their mission work, but their behaviour was beyond reproach (2:10). There's the group of key words – holiness, righteousness, blamelessness – any of those would do for the heading of this final section.

And Paul individualises what he is saying – ‘you know that we dealt with *each of you*’ – which means this applies to everyone in the community (2:11-12). They were not only *mothers* to the Thessalonians, they were *fathers* too. What do fathers do? They encourage, comfort, and urge; they’re loving, indulgent and concerned for their children, bringing their children up to walk worthy of God, not keeping a long list of rules, but becoming a character of holiness and blamelessness which in turn trains and nurtures and encourages others to walk the same way.

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Paul offers himself as a model and example of how Christians should be, a role model for leaders in the congregation – a model which is no less crucial for Christian ministry today than it was in Paul’s day.

Here, then, is Christian ministry. *Boldness*: a clear sense of priorities in serving God, even in the face of opposition if necessary. *Wholeheartedness*: a strong concern for the integrity of the gospel, so that no accusation might be brought against motives for preaching it. *Gentleness*: a deep love and nurturing commitment to those to whom we minister. *Blamelessness*: a real desire to see the growth in those to whom we minister, such that we will not minister for a great reputation, or to boost our ego, or win approval; but that we may finally be found worthy of God. Amen.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 30 September 2007*