

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Three Foundation Stones for a Gospel People

This sermon was preached on the occasion of the church's 50th anniversary.

What kind of church do we want to be as we move forwards? What would we like to be known for? What should be our main concerns? Churches often and rightly ask those sorts of questions, and a few years ago, the Baptist Union published a document to help churches think through some issues, called *5 Core Values*. At the heart of these values is the idea of 'following Jesus'.

They said: we want to follow Jesus in confronting evil, injustice and hypocrisy. We want to challenge worldly ideas of power, wealth, status and security – just like Amos and Hosea did in their day. In short, we want to be a *prophetic* community.

They said: we want to follow Jesus in crossing barriers of gender, language, race, class, age and culture. We want to identify with those who are rejected, deprived and powerless. In short, we want to be an *inclusive* community.

They said: we want to follow Jesus in accepting vulnerability and the necessity of sacrifice. We want to reflect the generous, life-giving nature of God. In short, we want to be a *sacrificial* community.

They said: we want to follow Jesus in demonstrating in word and action God's forgiving and healing love. We want to enable people to experience the love of God for themselves. In short, we want to be a *missionary* community.

And they said: we want to follow Jesus in engaging in worship and prayer which inspire and undergird all we are and do. We want to explore and express what it means to live together as the people of God, obeying his word and following Christ in the whole of daily life. In short, we want to be a *worshipping* community.

They're all crucial things, aren't they? How far are they reflected in our prayers for the future of this church? Next week, as part of our preparation for Charmaine's induction service on 4 October, we'll be exploring these core values in more detail.

This week, though, as part of our golden jubilee celebrations, I want us to start further back. We need, I think, to see that there is something more fundamental even than these things. In fact, the Baptist Union implies this too. The document they produced is actually called *5 Core Values... for a Gospel People*.

Beyond anything else, whether past or future, we are a *gospel* people. If God has preserved us this far, he has preserved us as a *gospel* people. If God will continue to keep us, he will continue to keep us as a *gospel* people.

Of course, we want to be prophetic, and inclusive, and sacrificial, and missionary, and worshipping, and a lot more too! But we can only be those things as we are first and foremost a *gospel* people. In fact, we discover that when the gospel comes first, all these other things fall into their appropriate place. We make proper sense of what it means to be an inclusive community and a missionary community, and so on, when we understand what it means to be a gospel community.

Of course, all this begs one crucial question... what is the gospel?

Although there are many dozens of passages we could go to in the Bible to find out about the gospel, we will look at four verses at the start of 1 Corinthians 15:

'Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...' (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

What Paul is going to talk about here, he says, is 'the gospel'; verse 1: 'Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the *gospel* I preached to you'; verse 2: 'By this *gospel* you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.'

Indeed, what Paul had passed on to them, he says in verse 3, was 'of first importance' – which is a way of telling his readers to listen and pay attention, for what he is going to say about the gospel lies at its very heart.

In fact, the whole chapter has much to say about what the gospel is, its nature and its characteristics. But we will limit ourselves to three things. Next week, we will look at five core values; this week we will think about three foundation stones for a people of the gospel, the things that have kept the church this far and will continue to keep us as we move forwards.

The first main word that appears in Paul's summary is 'Christ' – 'I passed on to you as of first importance: that *Christ* died for our sins...' Here, then, is a strong reminder that the gospel is focused on Christ.

1. Focused on Christ

The gospel is Christ-centred, and a gospel people will be Christ-centred. Wherever we go in the New Testament, we find this to be the case. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell his story. Acts shows the early church being his witnesses to the ends of the world. The letters explain his significance for men and women. In Revelation, he is the lion of the tribe of Judah, the lamb who is worthy to open the seals of the scroll, the king of kings and lord of lords. From the beginning to the end of the New Testament, the gospel is focused on Christ.

But the passage says more. In particular, and as a matter of first importance, Paul writes in verse 3, 'Christ died for our sins'. Earlier on in this letter, in 2:2, Paul wrote: 'I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except

Jesus Christ and him crucified'. And Paul ties Jesus' death to his resurrection, as the rest of the chapter makes clear. He cannot think of Jesus without thinking of his death, and he cannot think of his death without linking that to his resurrection. This is the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again.

Is this the Christ we serve? Is this the gospel we embrace? Is this the gospel people we want to be? Isn't it this, above all – Christ crucified and risen again – that will inspire us and empower us to be the sort of people who will be a sacrificial and a worshipping community?

The gospel is Christ-centred, and a gospel people will be Christ-centred. That's how it's been for the last fifty years; that's how it will be for the future.

But, if the gospel is Christ-centred, it is also biblically-based; not only focused on Christ, but rooted in Scripture.

2. Rooted in Scripture

What does Paul write in verses 3 and 4? 'Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*... he was buried... he was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures*'.

Jesus himself said that the Scriptures witnessed to him (John 5:39); several times after his resurrection, we find him explaining to his disciples what was said in the Scriptures about himself (Luke 24:25-27, 44-45). He is the word of God, the passover lamb, the great high priest, the suffering servant of the Lord, God's son, God's messiah, the wisdom of God, the one who brings to completion all the promises of the Old Testament, the one who fulfils God's promises to his people.

The gospel is rooted in Scripture; a gospel people are rooted in Scripture. We can be a prophetic community and an inclusive community only as we rest on the foundation of God's word. That's how it's been for the last fifty years; that's how it must be for the future – focused on Christ and rooted in Scripture.

One more thing from this passage. Not only is the gospel Christ-centred and biblically-based, it is also personally applied. A gospel people

are focused on Christ, rooted in Scripture, and saved by God.

3. Saved by God

Paul goes to great lengths to tell us that Jesus' death and resurrection are historical events, which reminds us that the gospel is historical. But they are historical events which bring about salvation.

How does Paul begin the chapter? 'Now, brothers', he writes in verses 1 and 2, 'I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are *saved*.' It's a historical gospel, to be sure, but it also saves us.

And of course, the one who saves us is *God himself*. The rest of the chapter makes it very clear that *God* raised Christ Jesus from the dead. That's of a piece with the rest of the New Testament that 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

And then, of course, what God saves us from, through Christ's death and resurrection, in accordance with the Scriptures, is our sins. It's a reminder that left to ourselves, we are not just broken and damaged, we're fallen and rebellious. We don't just need mending; we need saving. And God, in Christ, as part of his plan laid down in Scripture, reaches down to us, loves us even when we are his enemies, and saves us. And it is being a *saved* people, just as it is being a *Bible* people and a *Jesus* people, which shapes our core values of justice and inclusiveness and sacrifice and mission and worship.

Three foundation stones for a gospel people – focused on Christ, rooted in Scripture, saved by God – I know of no stronger foundation for the life of a church. As we look back in thankfulness for the past 50 years, and look forward in hopefulness to the next 50 years, let's do so as a people of the gospel. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 14 September 2008.