

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Five Core Values for a Gospel People

We are entering a special and exciting period of the life of our church. Last week we celebrated our fiftieth anniversary, and within the next few weeks we will have a new minister! Times like this give us good opportunities not just for looking back at where we've come from, but for looking forward and asking what kind of church we'd like to be in the future: what we'd like to stay more or less the same because we're doing it reasonably well; what we'd like to do better, perhaps much better, than we're doing at the moment; what we'd like to be doing that we're not yet doing – because we've not been mobilised or empowered to do so.

Some years back, the Baptist Union published a document called *Five Core Values for a Gospel People*. The five core values flow from who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and what Jesus wants of us, his people. We are going to look at those five core values today.

But we have also said that, before we think about the core values for a gospel people, we need to take a step back to see what it means to be a 'gospel people' in the first place. In fact, we have said, it's only as we put the gospel first that everything else falls into its proper place. We make proper sense of what it means to be the *people* of God only in the light of the *gospel* of God. So, last week, we considered three foundation stones for a gospel people.

We looked at 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, where Paul talks about the gospel, and we saw that the passage tells us at least three things about being a gospel people. It tells us that a gospel people will be *focused on Christ*, particularly on his death and resurrection; it tells us that a gospel people will be *rooted in Scripture*; and it tells us that a gospel people will be *saved by God*. Three foundation stones for a gospel people – focused on Christ, rooted in Scripture, saved by God.

Of course, there's a lot more that could be said. Foundation stones are crucial, but they are meant to be built on! Buildings need foundations, but foundations aren't themselves the building. We see this in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We have looked at what Paul says 'of first importance' about the gospel in chapter 15; but that passage comes towards the end of a long letter to the church at Corinth where Paul shows how the gospel works out in transforming our attitudes, our morals, our relationship with people inside the church and outside the church. In other words, the gospel makes a difference to the way we think, the way we behave, the way we relate. There is little point in saying we are a people who are focused on Christ, rooted in Scripture, and saved by God if, in fact, there is no real evidence that we are building on those foundations, if there is no hard evidence that the gospel is bearing fruit in our daily lives.

We know from reading 1 Corinthians that the church there was divided into certain factions, each with their own hero – Peter, Apollos, Paul, Christ. And Paul has to tell them that this is not how the gospel should work itself out in the life of their congregation.

Paul shows the Corinthians in chapter four that there is no place for triumphalism in the church, and certainly not at the expense and the shame of others. That is to misunderstand the implications of the gospel.

In chapter 5, one of the implications of the gospel is that the church is to exercise discipline where there is ongoing sexual sin. The gospel produces holy lives.

When people truly believe the gospel, Paul tells us, in chapter 6 that relationships are transformed by the gospel, so that bringing fellow Christians into conflict with each other before pagan courts becomes unthinkable, and casual sex is recognized as a complete denial of Christ's lordship.

And so the letter goes on: chapter 7 on marriage, divorce and remarriage; chapters 8-10 on how believers interact with the wider culture; the ways in which the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated in chapter 11; the ways in which spiritual gifts are to be exercised in chapters 12-14, with the way of love (in chapter 13) being at the heart of how we relate to each other in the church. A church where believers are not patient and kind, a church where believers are envious, proud, boastful, rude, easily angered, and keep a record of wrongs shows a church where the gospel hasn't taken proper root.

These things are challenging, to be sure. But the gospel brings about growth and change: we are a Jesus people, a Bible people, and a saved people, to be sure. But let us also be a people who are transformed as a result of those things, let us seek to become that temple in which God's Spirit is pleased to live (see Ephesians 2:19-22).

This is what the five core values help us reflect on. They help us think about what sort of people we should be – what sort of church community we should be – given that we are people of the gospel. How should the gospel work itself out in our corporate life?

With all that in mind, then, let's look briefly at the five core values.

1. A prophetic community

Prophecy is often associated with predicting the future. In fact, however, most of the time the prophets confronted the people of God and the nation with where they were going wrong, where they were abandoning their side of the covenant agreement they had made with God.

When we think of the prophets in this sense, we should think of the prophet Nathan confronting King David over his adultery with Bathsheba; we should think of the prophet Elijah confronting Ahab and Jezebel over their injustice. Amos and Hosea and other prophets spoke out against economic oppression and social injustice; they reminded the people that it was no good having their worship and sacrifices in perfect working order if they were

neglecting to show mercy to the poor and the outsider.

In his ministry, too, Jesus confronted evil and injustice and hypocrisy; he challenged ideas of power and wealth and status and security. He called his disciples to seek first God's kingdom and to do the things God asks of his people, which often means going against the grain of today's world, being counter-cultural.

All this begins in church, of course, in the relationships between us. It also means we will be the sort of people who take seriously issues of injustice and exploitation in the world today, and supporting people who may not be able to support themselves. In all these ways, then, we want to be a *prophetic* community.

2. An inclusive community

Once again, Jesus is the model here. He cared for the needy, those who were excluded from wider society – because they were sick, or a prostitute, or a tax collector, or a low-life – those who had no voice and very little power. And he calls us to do the same, so that our life together will cross barriers, and that we will welcome and accept people from the margins of life.

Those in the Baptist Union who put together the five core values document wanted to encourage churches to follow Jesus in crossing barriers of gender, language, race, class, age and culture, to identify with those who are rejected, deprived and powerless.

That means we might need to listen more to people who are under-represented in the church or its leadership; it means we will want to welcome and affirm those who dress differently or speak differently from what we consider to be 'normal' or 'acceptable', to make sure our church is a place where people feel they can belong. We want, in other words, to be an *inclusive* community.

3. A sacrificial community

Jesus himself took a journey that led to the cross, where he offered up his own life on behalf of others. He calls us to do the same as his disciples. The framers of the five core

values encouraged us to follow Jesus in accepting vulnerability and the necessity of sacrifice, in reflecting the generous, life-giving nature of God. This means that we live as those willing to offer ourselves for each other, being willing to sacrifice even our comfort for others, forgiving each other, sharing what we have with others, supporting those who are suffering and oppressed and denied freedom, even if it's costly to ourselves. We live, in short, as a *sacrificial* community.

4. A missionary community

God has always been a missionary God. He has always had a plan to bless all the nations and all creation. We see him putting that plan into action as he calls Abraham and promises to make him a great nation and through him to bless all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). And then, through the Son of Abraham, the one who would fulfil the promise to bring blessing to all nations, Jesus commanded his followers to go to all nations and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 1:1; 28:19-20). So, of course, we want to be a missionary community. We want to help bring other people to a knowledge of Jesus; we want to help them be equipped to be a disciple of Jesus.

That's why, as a church, we're committed to helping people who are working overseas. But not just overseas; on our own streets too. We want to be a missionary congregation in the sense that we get to know the community around us; we want to share our Christian convictions with others in our street and in our neighbourhood. And not just some of us: we want the whole church, *all* of our people, to be doing this wherever we find ourselves. We want to be a *missionary* community.

5. A worshipping community

In all of these things, we recognise the importance of worship and prayer – both on our own as individuals and together too. The sort of worship that opens our hearts, the sort of worship that renews our minds, the sort of worship which forms us so that we obey his word and honour his Spirit in all we say and do.

Jesus himself spent regular times in prayer, and gave his disciples a pattern of prayer to pray ('Our Father, in heaven...'). And 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.

Being a *worshipping* community means that we commit ourselves to regular worship of God, that we affirm the importance of worship and prayer in the Christian life and the local church, that we recognise the importance of baptism and Lord's supper, that we pray regularly for each other for our everyday issues and needs, that we develop a greater appreciation for different approaches to prayer and worship that might be represented among us. It also means, more widely, that we explore more ways to worship with other local churches. Because, we want to be a *worshipping* community.

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The Five Core Values will be reflected in Charmaine's induction service on 4 October, where – as a church – we will take these words on our lips and make promises about the kind of community we would aspire, with God's grace and mercy, to be. But let's pray about these issues beforehand too. Let's use the core values as a prayer of commitment to and for Charmaine as she takes up her task in this place, and of ourselves as we seek to be the gospel people God calls us to be. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 21 September 2008.