

PAUL AS PASTOR: THE LETTERS TO THE THESSALONIANS VIEWED THROUGH A PASTORAL PRISM - 1 Thess 2.4b-12

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1. Paul – a pioneer

Paul was a pioneer, with an eye always on fresh fields to conquer.

Paul was an inveterate church planter – always on the move.

The only time he seems to have stayed a length of time in any one place was Ephesus: there he spent two years holding discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19.9).

But after that he moved on.

Paul clearly had not heard the benefits of pastoral longevity. As a rule of thumb, it is today generally reckoned that ministers will not see any fruit for their labours until after they have been in a church for five years! But Paul clearly was an exception to that rule!

He seems to have been happy to leave the ongoing care of his infant congregations to others.

So writing of his experience of church planting at Corinth he said: “**I sowed the seed, Apollos watered the plant**” (1 Cor 3.6).

Paul could never settle down – he always wanted to break new ground.

Writing to the church at Rome, he said; “**My ambition has always been to proclaim the Good News in places where Christ has not been heard of, so as not to build on a foundation laid by someone else**” (Acts 15.20). The only reason he appears to have wanted to visit Rome, was that it would provide a staging post for him to evangelise Spain (Rom 15.28).

Paul always had the world in view – in this respect I find him a great *challenge*.

Paul longed to see the world won for Christ – do we?

Alas, all too often we are ‘settlers’ – settling for the status quo

Would that there were more pioneers among us!

Would that we were more ‘driven’ for the sake of the Gospel

2. Paul – a pioneer with a pastoral heart

Paul was a pioneer - and yet Paul also had a pastoral heart. Hence his letters.

His letters were a product of his pastoral care, for through them Paul exercised a pastoral role toward the churches, which he or his converts had founded.

Paul was not a one-eyed evangelist, intent only on winning people for Jesus Christ, and then forgetting those whom he had helped to come to faith; rather it was his concern to remain in relationship with the churches he planted.

I sometimes wonder whether we distinguish too much between evangelists & pastors.

A friend of mine once said: the difference between an evangelist & a pastor, is that an evangelist has no manners. There is some truth in that remark: evangelists tend to confront people with the claims of Jesus.

And yet it seems to me that evangelists need a pastoral heart.
It is not enough to win people to Jesus – people need to be disciplined – people need to be helped to go on and grow in the Christian faith - people need to be pastored.

Incidentally, do notice the way in which pasturing is linked with nurturing.
All too often when we think about a person engaged in pastoral care, we think of a person caring for the sick and the elderly; but for Paul pastoral care was about enabling people to grow in the faith!

Here is a challenge to all those of us engaged in pastoral care in our church.

Well – enough of an introduction. This evening I want to look at how Paul, the pioneer church planter, fulfilled his role as a pastor – and to do so with a particular reference to the church at Thessalonica. We shall look at Paul the pastor through the prism of his letters to the Thessalonians.

3. Paul’s planting a church in Thessalonica

Ancient Thessalonica is modern day Salonika.
200 miles north of Athens, it has become the gateway to holidays in Northern Greece

Today Thessalonica is *a major city* – it is the second largest city in Greece (after Athens)
In the ancient world Thessalonica was also major city - not just in the Roman province of Macedonia, but in the Roman empire as a whole. At one stage it even rivalled Constantinople.
In Paul’s day it had a population of 200,000 people.

It occupied a key trading position.

In part this was due to its *harbour*, which commanded trade across the Aegean Sea.
But even more it was due to *its position on the Via Egnatia*, which was the key land route between east and west.

It is no exaggeration to say that the world’s traffic passed through Thessalonica.

It was as the Roman writer, Cicero, put it, “*in the lap of the Roman empire*”.

Thessalonica was an important town in the ancient world.

The story of Paul’s mission to Thessalonica is found in Acts 17.1-9

It was probably precisely because Thessalonica was perceived to be a strategic town that around AD50 “**Paul and Silas**” moved on from Philippi, by-passing the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia and “**came to Thessalonica**” (v1)

If Thessalonica could be won for Christ, Paul may have reasoned, then Christianity could best be planted at the very heart of the Roman Empire.

Luke tells us that “**according to his usual habit Paul went to the synagogue**” (v2).

As today, so then, there were more *Jews* outside Israel than in Israel itself.

At one stage over half the population of Thessalonica was Jewish.

Indeed, even in recent times the Jews formed a quarter of the population of Salonika.

I.e. Paul wouldn't have preached to a half-empty synagogue. That synagogue must have numbered 1000s in its membership.

But it wasn't simply to the Jews that Paul preached the good news of Jesus.

Around every synagogue many *Greeks* used to attach themselves.

These Greeks had become dissatisfied with the many gods of paganism and with the loose morality of pagan life. In the one God of the Jews and in the accompanying strict moral code they found something that lifted life to a new level.

It was to these Greeks that Paul also preached the good news of Jesus.

Sadly Paul's stay was limited to only three weeks

According to Luke: **"Some Jews were jealous and gathered worthless loafers from the streets and formed a mob. They set the whole city in an uproar"** (Acts 17.5).

Eventually Paul & his companion Silas were forced out – but not before they had planted a church.

4. Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

After leaving Thessalonica Paul made his way to Athens, and then on to Corinth.

Not surprisingly *Paul was worried sick for the infant church* he has planted at Thessalonica. Would it take root? Would it withstand the persecution it was having to endure?

Paul **"tried to go back more than once, but Satan would not let us"** (2.18).

Was it continuing persecution? Was it illness? Whatever it was, Satan frustrated his plans – yes, Paul believed in the reality of the Evil One!

Later in his letter to the Ephesians he talks of Christians being engaged in spiritual warfare

Eventually he sent Timothy **"to strengthen you and help your faith, so that none of you should turn back because of these persecutions"** (1 Thess 3.2,3)

Timothy returned with **"welcome news about your faith and love"** (3.6).

But not surprisingly, in view of the relatively little teaching they had received, the Thessalonians were confused on one or two issues: in particular they were concerned about the fate of those who had died in Christ; they were also concerned about the timing of the Day of the Lord.

So probably within a matter of just a few months of his planting the church at Thessalonica, Paul wrote his first letter – scholars tend to date it around AD 50.

It was one of his earliest letters – only the letter to the church at Galatia was earlier.

A few months later Paul had reason to write a second letter. It would appear that the Thessalonians had been confused by some unhelpful teaching about the Second Coming, and Paul set out to correct this teaching.

If the truth be told, these two letters are not the most significant of Paul's writings.

They have been called 'the Cinderellas' in Paul's correspondence.

“They tend to be ignored because they are undistinguished by any great theological passage and because they contain a mixture of plain commonsense advice and [in the case of 2 Thess] some uncongenial apocalyptic” (AM Hunter).

And yet these letters say some important things:

- (i) We need to stand firm. The Christian life can be tough: **“Persecutions are part of God’s will for us”** (1 Thess 3.13)
- (ii) We need to hold fast to our hope of life after death: **“We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him”** (1 Thess 4.14)
- (iii) We need to be ready for the Lord’s coming – but in the meantime to busy ourselves with good deeds **“you, brothers & sisters, must not get tired of doing good”** (2 Thess 3.13)

5. Father Paul

Strangely nowhere does Paul describe himself as a pastor.

Instead *his preferred imagery for the pastoral task was found in the parent-child relationship.*

Paul regarded himself as the founding-father of the churches he had planted.

So writing to the church at Corinth he said: **“For even if you have 10,000 guardians in your Christian life, you have only one father. For in our life in union with Christ Jesus I have become your father by bringing the Good News to you. I beg you, then, to follow my example”** (1 Cor 4.15-16).

Three aspects of pastoral care emerge from this image of Paul being a father to his churches:

1. As a father to his churches Paul had to set an example

Just as in families fathers become role models to their children, so too pastors inevitably become role models to their people

To the Corinthians he wrote: **“I beg you... to follow my example”** (1 Cor 4.16)

To the Thessalonians: **“You know how we lived when we were with you... You imitated us and the Lord”** (1 Thess 1.5,6).

It is important to realise that the call to imitate him was not a mark of spiritual arrogance on the part of Paul, but rather an indication of his pastoral role.

I find that very challenging!

2. As a father to his churches Paul was a teacher.

Just as fathers in the world of his day were responsible for the education of their children, so too *Paul saw himself responsible for the education of his children.*

“So then, our brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to those truths which we taught you, both in our preaching and in our letter” (2 Thess 2.15).

I find it significant that later in his letter to the Ephesians explicitly couples the role of teaching with pastoring: the risen Christ **“appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers”** – not two different offices, but one.

A pastor teaches: I notice that outside Ebenezer, the Strict Baptist Church on New London Road, the minister of that church is described as a ‘pastor and teacher’. For me one of my key roles is to ‘teach’ – not least through my preaching.

3. As a father to his churches, Paul was an encourager.

So in 1 Thess 2.11,12: **“You know that we treated each one of you just as a father treats his own children. We encouraged you, we comforted you, and we kept urging you to live the kind of life that pleases God, who calls you to share in his own Kingdom and glory”**. “Perhaps more than anything else these young Christians needed to hear a fatherly word of encouragement, like the youngster splashing and spluttering in the swimming pool as he swims his first frantic strokes” (Eddie Gibbs).

I’ve known some pastors constantly harangue their people – but people respond best when they are encouraged.

6. Mother Paul!

Strange as it may seem, Paul also likened himself to a mother in his care for his churches.

So in 1 Thess 2.7,8: **“We were gentle when we were with you, like a mother taking care of her children. Because of our love for you we were ready to share with you not only the Good News from God, but even our own lives. You were so dear to us”**.

1. Pastoral care can be costly and time-consuming:

“We were ready to share our own lives”. “A bottle every four hours, washing lines always full, pram-pushing, broken nights. The whole daily routine has to be built around baby’s needs. Mother-love demands self-sacrifice. And most mothers give themselves gladly, because their love for their offspring is total. There is no true spiritual sharing without self-giving in terms of time and effort. It may involve the draining of emotions and nervous energy, agonies of disappointment and patient training and correction. Paul and his fellow-missionaries knew the pain of this kind of love” (Eddie Gibbs).

2. Pastoral care can be painful

It isn’t easy being a mother – it can be heartbreaking. It has been said that children begin giving headaches, but end up giving heartaches. In Gal 4.19,20 Paul expresses something of his pain: **“My dear children! Once again, just like a mother in childbirth, I feel the same kind of pain for you until Christ’s nature is formed in you”**. Actually the image is somewhat confusing: for whereas initially Paul envisages the Galatians as embryos still in the mother’s womb and yet to be delivered, Paul then moves on to represent the Galatians as the pregnant mother, with Christ as the developing embryo!

3. Pastoral care involves feeding

The maternal image is also found in 1 Cor 3.1-3 where Paul speaks of having to feed his converts with milk, and not with “solid food”. Remember that in those days babies were always breast-fed – fathers bottle-feeding their babies is a relatively modern development!

7. Paul cared for individuals, and not just for churches

Paul as a pastor was concerned not just for the corporate health of the churches in his care, but also for the well-being of individuals. People counted for Paul.

We see that in the final chapter of his letter to the church at Rome, where Paul took the trouble of greeting over 27 people by name.

We also see that in 1 Thess 2.11, where Paul declared: “**We treated each one of you as a father treats his own children**” – the implication was that he had concerned himself with his converts on an individual basis.

Of course the church at Thessalonica must have been pretty small – I can’t imagine that there were more than 35 people. It’s much more difficult caring for a church with more than 350 people in membership – and a host of others too associated with the church.

But nonetheless any pastor worth their salt must care for individuals, and not just for the well-being of the church as a whole.

6. Paul shared the pastoral task

Paul almost never operated on his own – he did not believe in the ‘monarchical episcopate’.

When he went to Thessalonica, he went with Silas.

Paul always surrounded himself with colleagues. If one adds up all the names found in Acts and in Paul’s letter, then at various times some 100 people were associated with him in his work.

Paul normally sent out his letter not only in his name, but also in the name of others: e.g. both 1 & 2 Thess begin: “**From Paul, Silas and Timothy**”

Not surprisingly therefore the church at Thessalonica did not have just one leader – but a number of leaders: see 1 Thess 5.12: “**We beg you, our brothers and sisters, to pay proper respect to those who work among you, who guide and direct you in the Christian life**”.

I thank God for my colleagues – I thank God for my deacons – and in particular I thank God for the pastoral team and for all the care group leaders.

8. Paul expected every Christian to be engaged in pastoral care.

We see that clearly in 1 Cor 12 where Paul develops the metaphor of body ministry: “**all of its different parts have the same concern for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness**” (1 Cor 12.25, 26).

But we also see that in his letters to the Thessalonians;

E.g. in the context of bereavement he writes: “**Encourage one another and help one another**” (1 Thess 5.12). A few verses later he writes: “**We urge you, our brothers and sisters, to warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone**” (1 Thess 5.14).

Paul believed in the ministry of all believers - and so too do I!

All of us should be in the business of pastoring one another
And remember – pastoring is not just caring for the weak – it is also caring for the strong.
It is about helping one another to grow and develop in the faith!

Here too is a challenge for us.