

**Discussion:**

*How does the conflict between Law and Grace express itself today's church?*

*How do Christians overcome the all-too-human trait of dividing around personalities or the formation of cliques or different ways of expressing the faith and ensure that genuine love reigns and that everyone feels that they belong in Christ's community?*

Then there is the question of how the Christian congregations relate to one another. Remember that while Paul writes to "the church in....Corinth, Galatia" etc, it was probably the case that not one but several congregations meeting in different parts of the area would make up *the* church in that area or city.

**Discussion:**

*Is there more that the saints in Christ at The Avenue can do to contribute to the life and work of Christians Together in Newton Abbot?*

Finally, there is the specific task of the church/churches in relating to the wider community of Newton Abbot.

**Discussion:**

*What specific issues or problems confront Newton Abbot and its people at this time?*

*Share the different ways in which group members are involved with community activities outside church life.*

*What distinctive gifts might they be sharing with the community because they are Christians?*

**Please make a note of the key insights that have emerged from this session.**

# **CALLED TO BE SAINTS!**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Welcome to this year's study programme for The Avenue House Groups!**

The theme this time is "**Called to be Saints!**" This is the way St. Paul often addressed the congregations to whom he wrote and this particular phrase come from the opening paragraphs of his letter to the Romans.

"Called to be Saints!" - do you recognise yourselves? Well, you should because that's how Paul would have regarded you!

We have been misled into thinking that saints are those special people enshrined in the stained-glass windows of great cathedrals, all with shining haloes around their heads. Undoubtedly those figures do have an honoured place in the history of our Faith for many different reasons but that's not how Paul see things and I doubt those figures would even recognise themselves!

Paul describes the saints as those faithful Christian people who love their Lord and who have made Him the centre of their lives and seek to live in His way. They didn't always get it right, as we will see in the course of the studies, but they remained faithful to Jesus and loyal to one another in the community of His faithful people.

We will focus this year on the teaching of Paul in the New Testament as he writes to his churches and because his writings have been recognised since the beginning as a part of our scriptures, we will consider what the Spirit is actually saying, through those writings, to us in Newton Abbot today!

These studies come in three sections of three. The first three are introductory; in the second we will reflect on three key themes concerning how God makes saints, and finally, we look at three key themes that emerge from Paul's letters that have a particular relevance for today.

Don't worry if you don't manage to complete a study in one meeting, use the material as best suits your group. But please note where you are asked to jot down the main points of the discussion because those points will be worth sharing when we have our two house group services during the coming year.

May we learn, may be challenged and may we be inspired as we hear what the Spirit is saying to the Christians of Newton Abbot who are **'called to be saints!'**

*Edgar Daniel*

drinking were threatening to divert the saints there from their walk with Christ. They were trying to say that Jesus wasn't really a human being – he may have been divine, but never really human because God could never have anything to do with this material world which, they said, was dirty, evil and from which we needed rescuing.

In Galatia, it was a group of Christians from Jerusalem who were instructing Paul's converts to become Jews first, obeying the Old Testament Law and all the rules that went with it if they wanted to be real Christians. In other words, where Paul had said "Christ has set you free", they were burdening these Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians with ever more rules and regulations.

In Corinth, Paul found fickle people who were mesmerised by charismatic personalities, by spectacular spiritual gifts like healing, tongues, prophesy, but they were ignoring the one gift common to all true saints, indeed without which no one could be a saint – the gift of love! So the church in Corinth had divided around the personalities of the church leaders who had influenced them – Peter, Paul, Apollos. Then there were those who, with a holier-than-thou attitude said, 'well, we are for Christ and we have His favour – what a pity about the rest of you!' So Paul has to try and extract himself from this pantheon of charismatic figures and does all he can to make sure he does not court popularity. So he preaches Christ crucified, the central Gospel message that disarms the spectacular and defies popularity because he needs them all to be united and to embrace one other in the humble, self-giving love of Jesus. How else could they be models of God's love for everybody in that great cosmopolitan city where a highly permissive morality maintained? **Read: 1 Corinthians 13 together.**

So in one church, the problem was heresy (false teaching); in another it was the conflict between Law and Grace; in a third, it was about relationships, divisions and a loss of love.

## CALLED TO BE SAINTS!

### Letters from the Apostle Paul to the Saints in Newton Abbot

#### **Part One, Session Three:**

#### **Dual Location — ‘In Christ, in Newton Abbot’**

In this session, we will look at a quite specific topic: being Christians - being Christ's saints, His holy ones, in Newton Abbot. Notice how Paul opens his letter to the Colossians,

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae [Newton Abbot]: grace to you and peace from God our Father” (see Col. 1. 1-2).

Note: “In Christ, in Colossae” or “In Christ, in Newton Abbot!”

#### **Discussion:**

*What comes to mind when you first read this greeting?*

When Paul writes to his churches, it is usually for a very specific purpose. Each of his churches was different, there were different problems, different concerns, they faced different dangers. Take three examples:

#### **Discussion:**

*What do you think were the main problems confronting these three churches when we read about: Colossae – read Colossians 2.8-19; Galatia – read Galatians 2.11-16; Corinth – read Corinthians 1.10-17.*

In Colossae, a strange teaching based on a mixture of what we would call ‘new age’ ideas and rigid rules about eating and

## CALLED TO BE SAINTS!

### Letters from the Apostle Paul to the Saints in Newton Abbot

#### **Part One: Session One: Using the Imagination**

It is permissible to use our imagination when we read the Bible. That is how it can often come alive for us and help us to see how it applies to us today. So, when you read the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke chapter 2, imagine you are there. Imagine what Mary and Joseph may have looked like, how they might have felt in such surroundings, especially with so many uninvited (at least by them!) visitors. Smell the stable and the animals...and so on. Using our imagination as we read the Bible helps to humanise the stories and the people. When we come across the ‘baddies’ in the story, like Peter in the courtyard when he denied Jesus or Paul when, from his background as a strict and utterly dedicated Pharisee, he wants to stamp out the new heresy among those who regarded Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah – he believed passionately that he was doing God a great service. We have to ask ourselves whether we would have acted differently given the same circumstances.

#### **Discussion:**

*Does the use of our imagination and life-experience help us in our reading of the Bible?*

*How can it help us to think of ourselves as involved in the Bible's story rather than thinking of the Bible as an ancient book that is remote from our experience?*

*Try using your imagination as you describe one of these passages: Mark ch 1, 16-20, John ch 19, 25b-27.*

*Picture the scene, describe the emotions at work, put yourself into the place of the main characters.*

That exercise is by way of an introduction to this present series of studies. During this year, we will be considering what it means to be a Christian and what being a church member means by looking at the letters of St. Paul. Our theme comes from Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 1, verse 7, where he describes the church members there as, "*called to be saints*".

### **Discussion:**

*Are you a saint?*

Actually, Paul uses the word "saints" frequently in his letters to describe the members of the churches. For Paul, to have accepted Jesus as Lord, to have become a Christian and a member of the church *is* to be a saint!

### **Discussion:**

*In your group, share what you know about Paul. Write it down because it may come in handy as the study progresses.*

This is where the imagination comes in. We know that Paul's passionate purpose was to tell the world about Jesus. He wanted as many people and as many communities to know Jesus as possible. But he believed time was short because he believed at first that Jesus' return was imminent so there was no time to lose.

His mind was always working faster than he could practically cope with and it is not impossible to surmise that he wanted to reach the wild extremities of the Roman Empire with the Good News. He tells us in Romans 15. 24 and 28 that he had plans to go to Spain and that he wanted the well-established Roman church to support that incredible venture. Of course he never makes that journey because he is arrested and eventually

encounter with the Risen Christ, his life took a different direction. Life changed for him. His calling to become a saint of Christ began in a thorough re-evaluation of his ambitions, his work, his values, everything. He became, as J. S. Stewart, the Scottish preacher said, "a man in Christ". Paul spoke often in his letters about this transformation and he looked for evidence of transformation in the lives of those who became believers.

### **Discussion:**

*In what ways have the lives of group members changed since they became Christians? Has anyone in the group found themselves making practical changes in their lives and life-styles because they became followers of Jesus?*

Following his conversion, Paul's considerable intellectual skills were put to work in the service of Christ. He seems to have had the kind of personality that pursued stated objectives with a relentlessness bordering on the obsessive. We notice that in the way he pursued the Christians before his conversion – to their torture and death. Remember – he watched Stephen's stoning approvingly and even looked after the cloaks of those who threw the stones! Now, through his encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul pursues his new commission tirelessly, to the ends of the earth. **Read: 2 Corinthians 6, 4-10.**

### **Discussion:**

*Look again at the list above and discuss practical ways in which you, individually and as a group may be able to 'lift the rhythm' on items a-e.*

Please make a note of the insights and practical recommendations that have emerged through this session.

They pray ( 1 Cor 1.4; Eph 6.18; 1 Thess 1.2; 5.17)  
 They share a spiritual togetherness (1 Cor 2 Cor 13.12-13;  
 Rom 12.5)  
 They care for one another in love (Col 1.4; Rom 12.10; Phil  
 2, 1-5)  
 They give towards the relief of poverty in far-away  
 churches (1 Cor 16.1-4)  
 They share in God's ministry (Eph 4.12-13)  
 They suffer in the cause of Christ (2 Cor 4.8-12)  
 They work (1 Thess 4.11-12; 2 Thess 3.6-13)  
 To them God has unlocked the long-hidden secrets of His  
 Kingdom (Eph 1.9; Col 2.2-3)  
 They share a glorious inheritance (Col 1.12; Eph 1.18)  
 The life of the Spirit is manifest in their lives (Eph 3.20-21)

**Discussion:**

*How are doing individually and together in the light of these characteristics? Do they inspire you, frighten you or challenge you towards a deeper relationship with Christ?*

Being God's people, called to be saints is a very practical matter though rooted in deep spiritual power.

**Discussion:**

*Think again of those saints in Christ who influence your Christian life. Try and identify how their practical faith expressed a deep inner spiritual experience.*

For Paul, the Christian life began on the road to Damascus where he experienced a radical transformation of his life. He was going in one direction and following that dramatic personal

spends his last days in Rome and was probably martyred when Nero blamed the Christians for the great fire that swept through Rome.

But what if Paul had made that journey into Spain? What if he then decided to establish a mission, similar to the ones he had already accomplished from Antioch and from Ephesus, this time from Spain into the northern far-reaches of the empire – into Gaul and then across the channel into Britain? What if a congregation was established in whatever Newton Abbot was then called? What if Paul subsequently wrote to that congregation? What would he have said?

That is conjecture of course...but only in a certain sense. Paul never came to Newton Abbot, but his and the other apostles' writings are vital to the nurture of Christians everywhere even today. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that when the first Christians met together, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2. 42).

**Discussion:**

*Can you see how that description in Acts of the first Christian gatherings is still the basic diet of spiritual growth?*

*How do you think the "apostles' teaching" comes into Christian worship and fellowship today and why is it important?*

So this is the way in which saints are nurtured once they have claimed Jesus as Lord.

In the New Testament, the saints are also described as 'the holy ones' and they are called to be holy (see Leviticus 19. 2 and Matthew 5. 48) because they are God's people.

God Himself is holy, that is a basic theme running right through the Bible and it means that God is 'other than us': "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord...my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55, 8 &9). So to be associated with God is to be called to live in His light.

A famous philosopher was, as a child, taken by his father to learn music from the great composer Mendelssohn. When the composer asked what he wanted the boy to learn from him, he was told, "just let him breathe the very air you breathe"!

Breathing the very air Jesus breathes, basking in His presence, growing in His love, his values, his truth is to live in God's light, to share His life in the world, to be His special people in our own time and place.

#### **Discussion:**

*How do you think Christians are meant to be holy, in other words, other than the world while still living in the world? If possible, share examples from your experience.*

*How important is it that we are part of a community of believers rather than trying to be Christians on our own? Is it even possible to be a growing Christian alone?*

*Is it important to you to be regular in worship and in fellowship with fellow Christians and what should regular mean?*

In this session we have begun to explore the theme of our studies. The journey has begun and in the coming weeks we will see how Paul helps us, through his letters, in our calling to be saints in Newton Abbot!

## **CALLED TO BE SAINTS!**

### **Letters from the Apostle Paul to the Saints in Newton Abbot**

#### **Part One, Session Two: Characteristics**

There are 61 references to the 'saints' in the New Testament, mostly in the writings of Paul and only one in the Gospels and that reference relates to the impact of Jesus' death on the cross.

This shows us that the saints are referred to in the context of the effect of the death of Jesus the Son of God and in the light of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. That is significant because it underlines the fact that saints are made, not by doing all sorts of good things, nor because they have achieved celebrity status – a quality our present society might value, nor indeed because they are among the heroes of Christian history enshrined in stained glass windows. They are ordinary human beings made into saints by the unique work of Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection and by the purifying work of the Holy Spirit made effective in their lives by their trust in Jesus.

#### **Discussion:**

*What place, in any, do the heroes of Christian history have in our own living of the Christian life? Share your stories of 'saints' who brought you to Christ and helped you in your Christian growth?*

In those references to the saints in the New Testament mentioned above, we observe a number of interesting characteristics. Here are some, you may think of others. You may like to look up some of these references: