

It is unwise to consider the Gifts of the Spirit in isolation from the fruit which the Spirit produces. They belong together, again for the building up of the body of Christ, the Church.

**Discussion:**

*Describe the picture of the Church that this study of the Holy Spirit has painted for us?*

*How are we doing at The Avenue in relation to our answer to that question?*

*Then ask, first what more must we be doing as a Church and secondly, ask yourself, what more must you be doing as an individual believer?*

# **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*

am, what a pity about you!"). They are gifts given to individual believers by the Holy Spirit who is eager to build up the whole Church as God's saving community in the world. It is this that makes the Church into a unique community of people. It is this that also influences the world in love. At this point it would be helpful to see what Paul tells us about the 'most excellent way', or the best gift of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 13.

**Read** from 1 Cor. ch.12, v. 31 to the end of chapter 13.

Notice the way in which the discussion comes back again to the Christian's witness in the world, and the Church's influence in society. The Holy Spirit is, as Gordon Fee, a New Testament teacher says, "God's empowering presence". He empowers the Church to be what God intends. God intends that the Church will not exist for herself but in order to save the world. In this the Holy Spirit is indispensable.

### ***The Fruit of the Holy Spirit***

Recall my illustration about the shop steward Ted and the discussions about witnessing in the life of our secular world. Consider now the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in the lives of Christian believers.

**Read:** Galatians ch. 5, v. 22-23. and Philippians ch. 4, v. 8-9.

### ***Discussion:***

*Discuss each fruit in turn and see how they develop a Christ-like character.*

*Do you recognise this fruit in the character of Jesus? Can you think of examples from the Gospels?*

*What must the Christian be doing to nurture this kind of character?*

staff, they, engrossed in their 'Christian talk', got up and left theirs on the table for the staff to clear up. Sounds very simple, almost insignificant, but they left an impression of Christians to others. Can you guess what that impression was?

### **Discussion:**

6. *Who were the contagious Christians in these examples and why? Can you add your own examples?*

### **For Further Reading:**

*If you are interested in following up the idea of being a contagious Christian you may be interested in Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Community Church in the U.S.A. simply entitled, "The Contagious Christian".*

## **For a Follow-up House Group Meeting**

### **Gifts of the Holy Spirit**

Paul has much more to say about the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, for example, he has much to say about the Spirit's work in the life of the Church. He has empowered the Church by 'gifting' its members with some aspect of His own life and work.

**Read:** 1 Corinthians ch. 12, v. 4-11.

**Read also** Romans ch. 12, v. 6-8

If time permits, you could look at these passages. It is important, though, to notice that the significance of the spiritual gifts is not to do with an individual's special favour with God above the rest of the Church (as if to say, "see how spiritual I

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

#### **Part Two: Session Four: The Scandal of the Cross**

In this second part of the series "Called to be Saints", we will be looking at three key themes about which Paul writes to the churches. So central are these themes to his teaching that he keeps on referring to them. We will look at the first today under the title "the scandal of the cross". The next two sessions will discuss what Paul has to say about God's free and unconditional acceptance of all who place their trust in him (sometimes referred to as 'justification by faith') and then thirdly we look at the saving work of the Holy Spirit.

Please resist the thought that this is mere theory and look deeper because we are dealing with the driving force, the power-house that makes the whole of the Christian message the life-changing reality that it is. Take these themes away, something Paul could never have done, and you are left with a home-made religion of rules and regulations or with no religion at all, merely good advice without any power to change lives. As the Congregational preacher P. T. Forsyth once said, even, "lofty ideals are not mighty to save". These themes take us to the engine room of the Gospel: the cross, justifying faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Without these truths, not only is there no distinctive Christianity, humanity itself is ultimately lost.

### **Discussion:**

*What, for you, is the significance of the death of Jesus on the cross. Do you find this a difficult part of Christian belief or is the heart of the matter for you?*

## Read what Paul is saying to us:

1 Corinthians ch. 1 v 18 to ch. 2 v. 5

### Discussion:

*Using your combined imagination, describe the situation in the Corinthian church that would have evoked this way of applying the meaning of the cross in their situation. Do you see any parallels today?*

It has been said that Paul was the ‘apostle of the crucified Lord’. In other words, for him, the cross was absolutely central to the Gospel message. In fact, he had come to know it, not by learning that it was so, but because it was central to his experience. In fact, by persecuting the first Christians prior to his conversion, he was persecuting Jesus himself. You might say he was crucifying Jesus all over again.

**Read:** Acts ch. 9, v. 1-5

However, through his conversion experience, the complete transformation that took place in his life becomes a kind of crucifixion itself. His old self was crucified and the new being he became was like a resurrection. He says it himself in Galatians 2. 19b-20:

*“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

### Discussion:

*Consider the implications of the saying, “Jesus died on the cross **for me**”. Why did he do it? Why didn’t he choose a safer way, a more direct way to save the world, like bringing an army to force us into line? Refer back to 1 Corinthians ch1., v.18-25.*

- 4. How important is it that in preaching or in teaching the Christian faith, young and old are able to ‘catch’ something of this experience in what is being taught? How important is it that Christian faith is ‘caught’ rather than simply ‘learned’?*
- 5. If the Christian faith is an ‘experience’ rather than a ‘theory’ or a ‘good idea’, why do you think it is not more contagious in the general life of the world in places where Christians live or work or perform their leisure activities?*

### Take two examples:

As a workplace chaplain over the years, I have met a number of ‘contagious’ Christians within a secular situation. I think for example of Ted. He was a shop steward in a huge factory where prestigious aircraft engines were made. His trade unionism was important to him because he saw it as being about justice and fairness for people at work. But his sense of those values was informed by his deep love for Christ. When I visited that factory from time to time I marvelled at the way he lived out his Christian life. It wasn’t that he went about telling everyone, or pea-shooting Bible quotations all over the place. He simply was Christ’s person. The way he spoke, the high esteem in which he was held by fellow union members and managers alike, and his demeanour was both approachable and straight. He was trusted.

I can also recall in another workplace situation, a lunchtime meeting with a group of Christians who met to study the Bible. After the study session we all went for lunch in the works canteen. This group was good at quoting the Bible and they enjoyed being Christians with one another. But I couldn’t help but notice that when everyone else in the canteen collected up their crockery and took it to the counter to help out the catering

Holy Spirit enables us to call God “Abba”! It is the case indeed that the Spirit himself bursts forth from the heart of the believer with this great affirmation that we too are God’s children.

**Read:** Galatians ch 4, v. 4-7 and Romans ch 8, v. 1-17

**Discussion:**

1. *Look at the references in these passages to the Holy Spirit and discuss what Paul is teaching us about the work of the Holy Spirit.*

I think Paul’s way of writing reveals that for him this was not first and foremost an idea in his mind. It was an experience. It is not, for us either, simply a point of doctrine – it is an experience of the love of God shed abroad in our lives. If it is hard to understand it is simply because the experience of being united with God is hard to put into words. All our expressions of Christian doctrine are attempts to put into words what God has made known to us in our experience.

**Discussion:**

2. *Review this journey of faith as we have so far followed in these three sessions: the cross of Jesus, the acceptance of God, the Spirit’s cry within us that makes us in to God’s children. Can you see how these themes follow one another?*
3. *Is anyone in the group able to affirm this experience of the Holy Spirit in their own lives and to share their experience with the group? It would be a great encouragement to the whole group to hear of this personal experience.*

So far then, Paul has been saying that in the death of Jesus on the cross, God has chosen to be weak in the world to disarm the strong, that by resisting the use of force in any form, God has demonstrated in Jesus a better way for human beings. That way is based on love, not hate or bitterness.

**Discussion:**

*Do you agree that real power was revealed in the seeming weakness of Jesus on the cross? Can you think of people who have lived in this way, even though in the end they may have died because of it?*

*This way of describing the cross places God firmly alongside those who are powerless and vulnerable in society – who are the powerless in our society and how can we, God’s people be there with Him as agents of His love?*

Paul has also said in our readings that there is a special sense in which Jesus died on the cross for each one of us. It was while we were sinners, when we humans were at our worst that Jesus died for us out of His love for each and every one of us.

**Read:** Romans ch. 5, v. 6-11

On the cross Jesus took on our sin. He absorbed all the venom we throw at one another, all the hurt we inflict on others and He took it onto Himself and only He was able, as God’s unique Son, to crucify our worst selves, leaving our sins pinned to the cross when He Himself rose from death to declare that by His crucifixion, we sinners have been reconciled again with our God. Forgiven, we have been given a new beginning. Because He died and rose again, we have new life, real quality life, in a right relationship with God and one another.

*“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin, He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in!”*

**Read:** Colossians ch. 2, v. 13-15

**Discussion:**

*If what Jesus offers through His cross is true life, forgiven, reconciled and full of hope, how can we get this across to our violent society where (at the time of writing) 12 teenagers have been killed by knives and 8 shot dead on the streets of our cities since the beginning of 2007? Is the problem political, moral or spiritual?*

*How should the community of the saints in Christ (the church) respond in the light of the cross?*

In the end, we can never fully understand the cross. It is too deep for human minds to comprehend. We can only “see Him stretched on yonder cross” where “faith cries out, ‘tis He, ‘tis He, my God that suffers there”, recognise anew that He died *for me* and bow down in worship, prayer and praise.

**Group Devotions:**

*So, end this session with a time of extended prayer. Use Paul’s testimony in Galatians 2. 19b-20 (quoted above) as the basis for silent reflection, applying those words to ourselves. Then pray for the needs of a violent world that is gasping for pure air yet struggling to get by without the oxygen of God’s love. Then finally, read or sing together this verse from Isaac Watts’ hymn (Hymns and Psalms 180):*

***“Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”***

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

#### **Part Two: Session Six: The Empowering Spirit**

In this, the third session of this part of our study, we continue to listen to Paul’s teaching about the heart of the faith the saints have in the Risen Jesus Christ. You will recall that we have considered the centrality of the Cross in Paul’s teaching because that is where Jesus enabled a right relationship with God our heavenly Father to open up for sinful people even though it meant Jesus great suffering even to death. That is the sense in which His death was ‘for us’. To confess that Jesus has died ‘for me’ is the beginning of faith.

We moved then to see how Paul describes this personal response to what Jesus has done for us through his death as the way in which God accepts sinners, treating them as righteous because of His own Son’s sacrifice. When we make our personal confession of faith, we *accept* for ourselves that God, the creator the world, the beginning and end of all things, the judge of all people, has *accepted* us. Many people have found joy to overflow, tears to rise up in their eyes and a deep peace to envelope them as they allow themselves to accept the forgiveness and the acceptance of our heavenly Father.

This is precisely where Paul recognises the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables the person who has found joy and peace in accepting God’s forgiveness to “cry out: Abba! Father!” That is the word Jesus used in his prayers as we learn from his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14, 36). It the intimate way in which a Jewish child might address her/his father. Paul says that the

*to The Avenue is spoken to and is taken and bought a coffee (provided of course that they want to stay for coffee!) and making sure that no-one is left on the sidelines in the coffee room?*

8. *As winter draws on, how can we best demonstrate God's acceptance by helping those people who come off the street, often at the end of services seeking train fares or money for food or even blankets remembering that giving money isn't usually the best way of helping? (it is worth noting that our supply of blankets has depleted!)*

***Please make notes on your response to these questions, they could doubtless become projects that the whole congregation can be invited to participate in.***

***And finally...***

This central theme of 'acceptance' or, to use the technical term 'justification' is important to understand - better still to experience - and anyone can experience that by simply, in the quietness of their own hearts thanking God for Jesus and humbly accepting his forgiveness.

It also means that the experience of God's accepting love has a practical outcome. This is what makes Christianity not just a religion, but a promise that is at the same time a thoroughly practical, though demanding way of life.

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

#### **Part Two: Session Five: Accepting God's Acceptance!**

Throughout part two of this series, we are trying to hear what the Apostle Paul is wanting to say to God's people in Newton Abbot who are "called to be saints" about the heart of the Christian message.

Paul was a fine apostle, obedient to Christ's call to him to the end of his life. It was as if Christ had said to him, "Paul, now that I have found you, claimed you and called you to be my apostle to the non-Jewish world, I want you to stand up and start walking. I want you to walk as far around the Roman Empire as you can in the time I give you and I want you to make my name known and my message clear to as many people as you can!" Paul was obedient to that call. His central task was to call women and men from sin to salvation. You may say that the equation he recognised – the one that was true for him was that *one who is a sinner meets one who is a Saviour and becomes one who is a saint!*

**Read:** Ephesians ch 2, v. 1-10

#### **Discussion:**

1. *What are the main points of this passage? Make a note of them and keep them in mind as the session proceeds.*

The message, as we saw last time, has its central focus in the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul never tires of saying that. What Jesus, through his cross actually does is to make us right with God our heavenly Father.

To make us 'right' (i.e. in a right relationship) with God, is the only way that God is able to begin the work of salvation within sinful people.

This is sometimes known by the term, "justification by faith". That is God's action, God's initiative. It isn't about good deeds (although they follow), it isn't about status or wealth or race or gender. It is about God's grace (i.e. his undeserved love towards us even though we haven't deserved it) and it is received by faith (i.e. simply and humbly accepting that God loves 'me' and, through Jesus, has given himself for me). It is essentially God's action out of love for every person and every person has to accept it for themselves, no one can do this for us. That is the point at which the 'I' becomes the 'we' as we are brought into the communion of saints – the community which begins here and now and finds fulfilment in heaven.

Another way of describing it is to say that through his death on the cross where Jesus, God's own sinless Son, took our sin and its deadly consequences onto himself and there declared that we, who deserve the deadly consequences ourselves, are accepted by God and forgiven just as we are, warts and all!

So accept that you are accepted by God!

To understand something of what this means:

**Read** Romans ch 8, v. 31 - 39

### **Exercise:**

*Spend a few minutes in prayerful reflection on this passage.*

*Consider the promises here; think about what it means that whatever life or the world throw at us, there is this deeper reality at work so that there is nothing now that can separate us from God's love in Jesus.*

### **Discussion:**

2. *What might be the modern equivalents of the list of things that worry people in verses 35 and 38-39a of Romans 8?*
3. *How easy or difficult is it to really believe in our hearts that life's worries don't finally need to worry us because God has claimed us and has hold of us?*
4. *Is anyone in the group able to testify to the joy that, "letting go and letting God..."brings into one's life?*

### **Being Accepted**

If the Christian life begins when we accept (that's faith) that God has already accepted us just as we are because of the death and the forgiveness of Jesus on the cross (that's his grace, his undeserved love towards us), it follows, therefore, that we should accept one another in the same way.

**Read:** Romans ch 12, v 3 to the end

### **Discussion:**

5. *Being **accepted** by God means that we become God's **accepting** people. How good are you at following Paul's practical advice in daily life, among those you do not naturally like?*
6. *Are there ways in which we can improve at accepting people who come to our congregation for the first time – what is the experience of group members?*
7. *Whether the answer to No 6 is yes or no, what can group members do next Sunday to make sure that every visitor*