

# **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*

# CALLED TO BE SAINTS

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

### ***Part Three: Session Seven: Setting all Free!***

In Part Two of this year's study, we looked at three of the Apostle's central themes: the cross, justification by faith and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

In Part Three we turn to some of the practical themes that emerge from those key subjects. It is important to have some awareness of those 'doctrinal' themes in order to understand why the practical issues have such significance in Christian living.

Paul writes to his churches about many things, but usually he writes because there are certain points that need clarifying or problems to be solved or basic doctrinal deviancies to be corrected.

*For discussion:*

- 1. Before going any further, spend a few minutes considering our sources for deciding what makes for true or false, correct or incorrect, doctrine. You may say that scripture comes first – are there any other sources for making decisions about what is sound Christian teaching?*
- 2. Do we know the scriptures even well enough to make such important decisions? If not what should be done about it? It may be too important just to leave to the 'professionals'! How do you deal with differences in doctrinal approaches within your house group?*

3. *Decide what, as a group, you agree to be absolutely indispensable to Christian belief. Please make a note of your conclusions.*
4. *Does Christian freedom ever mean that we can all believe what we want?*

In this study “**Setting all Free**”, we will be looking particularly at Galatians. That is where Paul wrestles with the issue of freedom because the situation in the churches there required it.

Let me say something now about the background to Galatians, because the freedom which the Gospel brings was being challenged by Christians who came from the Jerusalem Church, where some of that church’s leaders were still unable to grasp the radical implications of the work of Christ on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit. They were seeing their Christian faith as something added on to Jewish belief and practice. In a sense it was that, but for Paul Jesus had superceded the Old Testament law and brought into effect the ‘law’ of love (see 1 Corinthians 13 for an explanation of that new ‘law’).

Those Jewish Christians now came into Galatia to try and correct what they saw as Paul’s bad teaching, his excesses, as they might have put it.

In particular, they tried to say to the fledgling Christians there that in order to become Christians, the males had to submit to Jewish circumcision. Only then could they be real Christians. They were also trying to make them conform to Jewish food regulations which among other things required a separation from uncircumcised Gentiles. Sadly, some of the Galatians church leaders were heeding their instructions. That is why

Paul writes such a strong letter ( in ch. 3. 1, he even says, “You foolish Galatians!”) to say that if the Galatians follow this ‘legalistic’ line, they would be denying the Gospel they had received and turning faith in Christ into a system of regulations and rules. He asks (3.2) “did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard (the proclaimed Good News of God through Jesus)?”

In chapter 2, v 11-14, Paul tells of how Peter (Cephas) came to Antioch, and ate with Gentile Christians until certain of the Jewish Christians arrived at which point even Peter separated from the Gentiles. Paul apparently challenged Peter to his face and accused him of hypocrisy. We know that from his experience with Cornelius in Acts 10, Peter should have known better.

So Galatians is particularly important for our understanding of the importance of the Gospel message that Christ has set us free from the constrictions of ‘religion’ in order to love and serve God and others.

*Read in the following order:*

***Galatians ch 4, v 4-7; ch 5, v 1 and ch 3, v 28-29***

*For discussion:*

5. *Notice how in ch 4, v 4-7 Paul sets out the basis for the Christian’s freedom, in ch 5, v1 he underlines that point in a simple statement and in ch 3, v 28-29, he applies it to the life of the church.*
6. *Looking again at Galatians ch 3, v 28-29, how would you interpret that and apply it to The Avenue? We may not have the Jew-Gentile divide, so are there any recognisably contemporary barriers that need dismantling?*

7. *Is there a point at which Christians should draw a line on freedom? Take Sunday observance for example: some of you may remember when Sunday was a day to be strictly observed as a day of rest and for religion with rules for what you should and should not do on that day. Now that those rules have largely disappeared are we in danger of going to another extreme? What is reasonable and how do we decide?*

It is worth noting in passing that in the early churches, a slave and his master might belong within the same congregation. Sometimes, the leader of the congregation would be the slave and his master a regular member sitting under his slave's spiritual leadership. That is what the Spirit was able to do in a socially divided society among deeply committed Christians. He was able to create a community of 'radical equality'. That really was a witness to the wider world.

*For discussion:*

8. *In what ways can Christians be radical witnesses to the freedom we have in Christ in today's world?*

In terms of the wider implications of this freedom, Christians become involved in the work of liberating human beings from the chains that bind. Those chains may be spiritual or social. Christians played a large part in the 'ending poverty' campaign and 'Jubilee 2000'. Now lots of Christians are involved in the "Stop the Traffik" Campaign which raises awareness of the massive traffic in people across the world - contemporary forms of slavery which require active abolitionists today.

**You may like to look at material from the website of  
Stop the Traffik ([www.stopthetraffik.org](http://www.stopthetraffik.org))**

9. *Discuss ways in which The Avenue could become more involved in such campaigns and ways in which we can keep such issues before the congregation.*

*End this session in prayer, asking that we may be able to discern those traditions and rules that are no longer helpful in our life as a church and which take energy and money that could be better used in our witness to the world.*

*Pray for all who are tied emotionally to religion as a tight set of rules and regulations and for whom religion is a form rather than a spiritual and moral energy that comes through adventurous faith in Christ.*

*Pray for all who are victims of economic slavery today and for those who are fighting for their liberation.*

*Pray that we as a church may be shown how to become more involved in setting all free for the sake of Jesus Christ our Liberator.*

# CALLED TO BE SAINTS

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

### ***Part Three: Session Eight: “Now for the Collection”!***

Another theme which takes a great deal of Paul's attention is the collection!

To see something of the way Paul's mind works, it is worth reading 1 Corinthians: ch 15, v 50 to ch 16, v 1a. There you will notice how from chapter 15 where he has been expounding both the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and its implications, ending on a wonderful note of triumph that seems to resound across eternity itself, he moves to the contrasting opening chapter 16. His mind moves seamlessly from that high declaration of faith to talking about the collection. (Remember that Paul didn't write in chapters, the letter was a continuous document. Chapters and verses came very much later from someone who, as here, seems to have wanted to divide up the spiritual and the practical, something the Biblical writers themselves don't do!).

*For discussion:*

- 1. Do you regard the Christian life as divided into compartments – e.g. Sunday is sacred, Monday is secular; faith is sacred but daily work is not. Is Christ only interested in what we do in church but not in what we do outside?*
- 2. Can you go with Paul's seamless narrative connecting the 'spiritual' and the practical as **both** integral to the Gospel.*

On a number of occasions in my ministry I have, from the chair, turned a Circuit Meeting into a prayer meeting because the occasion required it. Each time someone has made the comment that “this is a business meeting, not a prayer meeting”! Some Christians seem to find it offensive to bring prayer into discussions of finance, property and policy making! Thank the Lord the Bible makes no such distinction – nor must we! In Christ life is all of a piece, a seamless robe of worship and service.

Now, concerning the collection with which Paul, as some New Testament scholars have pointed out, was almost obsessed. That may be too strong a description, but he does have a very strong sense of the importance of this collection in all his Gentile churches.

*For discussion:*

3. *Read Acts ch11, v27-30 for the appeal for help in Jerusalem.*

*Then read Galatians 2, 1-10, esp. v.10; Romans 15, 22-33; 1 Corinthians 16, 1-4, to see*

*(a) the purpose of the collection,*

*(b) its destination,*

*(c) Paul’s instruction concerning the method.*

*As to the consequences, Acts 21, 7-36 records the visit to Jerusalem when Paul would have handed over the money and is subsequently arrested, as Jesus was, on trumped up charges.*

Paul has a deep sense of responsibility for the mother church in Jerusalem, and feels very strongly that the Gentile churches that he has founded should own some responsibility for the Christians (saints) back in Jerusalem, where there is famine and poverty.

*But there may be other reasons for Paul's collection:*

- a) Certainly to help relieve poverty but aware of course that this gift will not solve the problem but will at least help. So in a certain way the gift was also a symbol of solidarity.
- b) The gift was also symbolic of the faith they shared in Jesus. Because God has so freely given in the great gift of Jesus (see 2 Corinthians Ch 9, v 15 where Paul writes, "Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift"), so for Jesus' followers, giving for the sake of others is a **must**.
- c) The gift was a symbol of the unity of all Christians, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles, women or men, slaves or free (Galatians ch 3, v 28). Particularly in light of the tension between the Jerusalem church and Paul's Gentile churches that we noted in the session 7, this gift was, for Paul, a sign of underlying unity and reconciliation. It seems from Acts 21 that Paul was well received by the church leaders when he eventually arrived in Jerusalem even though the Jewish authorities had him arrested when they discovered he was there.
- d) Paul recognised that whatever responsibility we have for the care of people in general, there is a particular responsibility of care for one another (and that includes Christians across the world, wherever there is need).

Observe the fact that church property is not mentioned! There were no church buildings to be repaired or altered or propped up! No great organisational superstructure to be serviced! There was the straightforward expression of human care, and within that human care was the mission that God had given to the church.

*For Discussion:*

- 4. How far is God's mission today helped or hindered by church property and by the organisational superstructure?*
- 5. Looking into the future, do you see the church abandoning more and more of its buildings not simply because churches close but in order to release resources for mission. Do new churches always require new buildings?*
- 6. Are we doing enough at The Avenue to help Christians across the world who are experiencing poverty or persecution? How can we discover where the need is greatest and what can we do?*
- 7. Paul highlights the importance of giving to the work of Christ as one way in which we share our resources, show gratitude to God and express our Christian discipleship. How can our regular giving as church members better enable the Avenue to a) meet its commitments b) more adequately resource new initiatives in mission and, c) contribute to struggling churches and Christians both in Britain and overseas?*

# CALLED TO BE SAINTS

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

### *Part Three:*

### *Session Nine: Life Together in God's Church*

In this last session of the present series entitled, "Called to be Saints", we look at what the Christian life is like in the Church as Paul describes it in Romans 12.

#### *Read Romans chapter 12.*

Now go through the chapter again, noticing in particular the following features:

**v. 1.** "To present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Holiness and discipleship are practical, everyday disciplines. Worship of God consists in this. There is no qualitative difference between our special 'worship hours' and our daily work – daily living in Jesus' company is our true worship. As the harvest hymn says, "And what Thou most desirest, our humble, thankful hearts"

*For discussion:*

- 1. What do you consider to be practical Christianity?*
- 2. Is there any other form of Christianity?*
- 3. What place do those called to the monastic life of prayer have in the Christian cause? Some Christians down the years, called to a life dedicated to prayer, have described*

*prayer as work, hard work! Why do you think they might have used that description? (If you are interested in this subject, you may like to read the anonymous medieval document on prayer entitled, "The Cloud of Unknowing").*

4. *Where does discipline come in the Christian life? Can discipline co-exist with freedom?*

**v. 2.** This kind of living is the means of discerning the will of God in the midst of the secular world.

**v. 3-8.** We are the Church *together*, not in isolation. To be Christian means that Christ has work for us to do, a faith to share and a way of life to demonstrate and we need one another for that. He knows that and for that reason He created the Church. Notice how many of the gifts Christ gives to His people are thoroughly practical. (In the Old Testament, the carpenters and craftsmen working on the Tabernacle were Spirit-empowered to do the job!)

*For Discussion:*

5. *What about those people who profess to be Christians but have no desire to belong to a group of Christians? What gifts is God giving to the work of His church through your group?*

**v. 9-21** In this passage, can you see how spiritual truths bring forth practical works. Let love be genuine – that's spiritual; bless those who persecute you – only divine love within a person can bring forth that quality of living.

*For discussion:*

6. *What likenesses, if any, do you see in this description of the Christian life and what you know about Jesus, his life and teaching?*

7. *Can you see that the call to holiness or saint-hood is really the invitation from God our Heavenly Father, to become like Jesus and that in becoming more like him – and that'll keep us going for at least the rest of this life – we also become more truly human and more deeply happy?*

### ***In Conclusion***

As we end both this session and this series, it is worth just taking a moment to reflect together on why we may give a wry smile when we find ourselves described as 'saints'! Is it because we have been instilled with the view that it is those haloed figures enshrined in the stained glass windows of country churches or city cathedrals who are the church's saints? Is it because we have an idea that the real saints are the perfected people of God now in heaven? Or is it because we naturally want to shy away from the demands of perfection to which Christ calls His people? When all is said and done, it is in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), that impossibly demanding block of teaching, that Jesus, echoing the command of God to the Israelites through Moses, says, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5, 48).

*Discuss for a few moments how you feel about being addressed as saints*

Of course the Christian life is demanding and of course it is also true that God chooses to build His Church from the raw material of sinful people. It is also true, as Jesus shows in that sermon that God has a vision for us – for each of us individually and for us together as those who comprise The Avenue Church. That's who The Avenue Church is – yes there happens to be a building where we meet together, but the actually Church is us - together. What brings us together is

Jesus, our love for Him and our desire to serve Him with our lives. We are to be known as Jesus' people by our love for one another. That business of loving one another is part of the challenge of saint-hood – to respond to one another in love, even though there may be those we don't naturally like: "rank me with whom you will", we say in the Covenant Service; to bite our tongues when in frustration we could easily say the wrong thing!

Our calling to be saints, as Paul makes clear in Romans 12, is about everyday, practical living as conscious disciples of our Lord. It is our consciousness of sin that keeps us humble and drives us back to Jesus saying sorry and asking for His strength to love. *(If you get a chance to read Martin Luther King's little book of sermons entitled, "Strength to Love" I would recommend it as well worth doing).* That is also why taking time to pray and read a passage of the Bible each day with some commentary helps to keep us on the journey of holiness

*(You may find the USB daily Bible notes available at The Avenue helpful – feel free to take one. Or as an alternative, the Salvation Army's daily notes, "Words of Life" is also very good and available from Choice Words Bookshop in Queen Street).*

***End the session in Prayer:***

Saying sorry that we have often taken the call to be saints too lightly and often missed the mark.

Praying for strength for the daily journey of discipleship in these challenging days.

Praying for the fellowship of The Avenue Church, giving thanks for one another.

Resolving to walk daily in Jesus' footsteps as His disciples  
in the amazing and ever-available power of the Holy  
Spirit.

Conclude with the family prayer of the Church, the Lord's  
Prayer, and share the grace together.

Then finally share the peace with one another in the words,  
***"[name...] the peace of the Lord be always with you"*** and  
the response, ***"And also with you."***



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