



The Successful Gospel (1 Thess 1:1-10)

What sort of reputation do you have? I suspect most of us likes to have a particular reputation – honesty, fidelity, well-off, respectable, reliable and none of us like to think we have a bad one. Unless that sort of thing doesn't bother us.

Many of you have heard of the Radio/Film/TV/book *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. Our hero, Arthur Dent finds that his friend Ford Prefect is in fact an alien from outer space who is a researcher for an interstellar traveler's guide *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. Dent is appalled to find that Ford Prefect's entry for Earth is "Harmless", which admittedly he changed to "Mostly Harmless". Why. Because nobody in the universe thought Earth was an important enough place to warrant saying anything else about.

What is our reputation in Swaffham? Quite easy that one. Apart from the few who have had something to do with us, the rest of the population would say "Mostly Harmless". Jesus Christ, faith, God, churches, the Baptist Church just don't enter their minds.

In contrast, the church at Thessalonica had a great reputation. Everybody knew them and what they stood for. *The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it.*

What about us. Need to have a new reputation in 2006 – a church with success in the gospel. So what was the secret of Paul's and the Thessalonians' success?
The success of the gospel was due to:

Power

4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit

Where do we need to start if we want to see people coming to Christ in this church in 2006. It starts with the power of the Holy Spirit. If you think that we can plan our way out of this, and plan our way into growth, then you've put the cart in front of the horse. That's why we have the Way Forward and the first thing we did was re-establish prayer meetings. We need to spend time with God, and listen to His words. We need to discern His plan and purpose. Then the gospel goes forward in power. It's a simple principle.

Passion

Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction

The second way in which they saw success in the gospel was through passion. Paul had a deep conviction. It wasn't just a case of simply following God blindly, but having a passion for what they were doing. Seeing success in mission isn't just about discerning God's will but having a passion and a heart for what we are doing. Seeing people born

again should be our hunger, our desire. God's desire to redeem mankind was the death of His dear Son. How far are we prepared to go to see people saved? For many believers, they can't even get to praying for those who are lost, let alone trying to reach out to them. Don't you think that God is serious when He says He is going to judge each person? Don't you think God is serious when He says – verse.

I first heard of Swaffham Baptist Church nearly four years ago. I found myself ministering here seven months later. I came because it was the desire of the church to change and move on. We've seen change, new people, new ceiling – but so far we have seen little in the way of people coming to Christ. If we are to see lasting change, we need to be a church that welcomes people into the kingdom. Gone are the days when we could just take it for granted that people would come to church. The church is in decline. This church is in decline. We have run hard to stand still. Yet I was not called here to maintain what we had, but to lay down the foundations of growth and to produce a sustainable fellowship for the longer term.

That is now our challenge as a church. Mine is a passion to see people come to Christ. It's a passion that makes sacrifices, takes risks but in all things seeks the power of the Holy Spirit.

2006 is crunch time. We've seen this building transformed, but churches aren't buildings. We are church, and we need some renovation work to make use more effective in reaching those who don't know Christ – this is God's heart for Swaffham. After all we don't need reminding – joy in heaven quote.

If our desire is to see people come to Christ – then our passion must be to seek Him and discern His way. That's what The Way Forward is all about.

We're going to meet again on Tuesday. We're going to pray. We're going to discuss the ideas we have been presented with. But what we're going to be doing is seeing how we reach our community and bring them to Christ, and grow them into mature people in Christ.

It's our calling as a church and we all have a part. Be there. Last month's meeting was an intro – this month we start the practical work of discussing where God is taking us forward.

Presence

You know how we lived among you for your sake.

What made Paul so successful? He lived among them for THEIR sake. The first old practice that we need to put to death – that people should come to us to receive Christ so that everything should be church-based. It doesn't work. It hasn't worked for most people for a long time. Yes one or two may come but what about the other 7000 people? The gospel must go to THEM.

Why? The only way these people are going to experience Christ is through US. That's God's chosen way. It's a rarity to hear of people who get sudden revelation in the middle of the night or whatever. How did you come to Christ? Somebody told you – a friend, a relative, somebody you know. You are that person to a neighbour, or friend or relative.

Note that last phrase – we lived among you for YOUR sake. They lived among them. They chose to go to them and to take on their ways. How do we reach people? We don't just do, but we learn their ways, understand their lives, communicate on their level for their eternal sake. Too often we want people to conform to what we want to do.

The Way Forward isn't just about being more effective in mission to some anonymous person, it's about real change as a church. We want to see people? Then our language, how we worship, how we do church – must all adapt in a way that reaches those who are lost. What I don't mean is by watering down the gospel. Paul never did it because no-one will come to Christ that way. But so often we confuse the way we worship, the language we use, the activities we organize as somehow biblical when they're not. Paul adapted himself to the people. He sacrificed his Jewish practices and customs for a personal that would communicate with ordinary people- he did their jobs, dressed their way and read their literature. He changed but the Gospel never did.

Do we want to see people come to Christ? We need to change to reach them. It doesn't mean we have to lose what is already valuable. Our willingness to welcome people is a good thing. But we do need to examine everything that we do and ask the question – why are we doing this? Will this bring people to Christ? Will this help them to grow into mature believers? If the answer is no then we have to change or replace it.

I know that talk like this makes people feel uncomfortable but if we believe that as a church we should reach the lost and that it is God's mission and our mission; then we've got to do it. I guess my next point isn't going to be helpful if you are uncomfortable.

Perseverance

6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

This is even more important. The Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and Silas. Paul did it that way so the church at Thessalonica did it that way. And what did it bring them – trouble because that what it brought Paul.

The path of change is going to be more uncomfortable than you think. It isn't just a case of identifying God's path and doing it and living happily ever after. It is going to be a difficult path. It will demand perseverance and commitment. We need to commit ourselves to people. To pray for them without ceasing. To stick with them. To stick with what God has given us and not just give up after the first hurdle.

I've already found a bit of that here. We had a joyful time welcoming Peter Manson last January but I was saddened how that had changed to disappointment by the end of the year and the way that some people have not been very positive about some of the things we have been trying to do. There are some who say "we have our ceiling, why can't we just leave it there". Because we are called to build the church. That's my call. That's why I was called here and that's what we are going to do. And it's going to take perseverance. We need to give up some time between now and March for the Way Forward.

Worse than that, you called a Minister to take you forward three and a half years ago. The Thessalonians imitated Paul. They followed his lead. You chose me because I am committed to seeing churches grow. In promoting the Way Forward, I'm doing the job that I came to do and which Home Mission, who subsidizes us, expects us to do. It's cost me - literally – to minister here. And it's cost you as a church to go in this direction. And you have so far been up to it in the way

It's crunch time folks. We started down a road three years ago and like Paul and the Thessalonians, the only way of success is to persevere in it and go at it despite the suffering.

But don't get despondent. If we are doing God's work – and now I hope you see why I was so emphatic about the need for prayer and discerning God's will right at the beginning of what I had to say this morning. If we know God's way, then we'll put up with the suffering and like the Thessalonians you'll say ; *in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit* It will be a message we welcome and those that receive it will welcome to. It will be joyful. No pain, no gain the old saying goes. Nothing was ever achieved without perseverance. It's something we learnt from James last year and something we need to remember. God refines us in the fire so that we may be pure and effective for Him.

Purpose

7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Finally, everyone involved had a clear purpose. And people looked to them for inspiration! They knew the message and they knew what to do with it. We know the message we need to discern the way to make people to turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God. That's our call. That's our destiny.

So at this start of 2006, I lay a challenge down to you. Our call is to be a church which is to grow and be sustainable. To do it is going to cost. It will cost us time. It will cost us energy. It will cost us commitment. It will cost us money.

It's not a new message from me. It's the same one you've had for three and a half years. It's already cost. We climbed the steep slope of getting the ceiling fixed. Now we have the steep slope of bringing people to Christ and making an environment for them to grow. It's a steep slope and one most of us have never climbed. But at the end there's joy.

Perhaps you are thinking – it's not for me. Well, why did you call me three and a half years ago? You want to grow. You can, but it's a hard road that just got harder. But at the end there's joy!

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8/1/06
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