

Adult Spiritual Formation

Outline for Scripture Exploration of 1 Thessalonians

Zoom Meeting on Wednesday April 22, 2020

Gathering 6:30 p.m.

Learning/Exploration 7:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

1. Background Information

- a. Authorship (with discussion of Paul's witness & experience of Christ and how this shaped his relationship with Jesus and lived out in his formation of the Christian faith communities)

Who was Paul? How did he come to believe?

1. One of the earliest witnesses to the resurrected Christ.
2. Roman citizen
 - a. Jewish leader- persecutor of the Jews
3. Paul never knew Jesus in the flesh. He only and forever knew the Risen Christ.
4. Damascus experience, drew him away from a narrow religion into a universal vision.
5. Started with Christ and rather quickly made a full identification with Jesus, whose voice he heard on the Damascus Road.
6. Witness to both personal and cultural transformation
7. Damascus Road experience
 - a. 3 days blind – symbolizes a time of necessary transitioning to a new knowledge
 - b. Lived in a liminal time
 - c. Moved from self-love to group love to universal love really quickly
8. Worked the rest of his life building a bridge between his beloved Judaism and this new sect of Judaism, as he clearly first saw it.
9. Because Paul didn't know Jesus, and based his life and belief on his experience with the Risen Christ – makes it helpful to us – a perfect voice to name the Christ experience for all of us who came after Jesus.
10. Beliefs that shaped his teaching
 - a. Only corporate goodness could ever stand up to corporate evil – led to his emphasis on community building and “church” – he expected and hoped for so much from those first Christian communities.
 - b. Paul intended that his new people “live in church” as it were – and from that solid base to out into the world. – we live in the world and go to church, rather than live in church and to into the world.

- c. Believes the Risen Christ is a new life-style, a life energy, a worldview that really believed in liberty, justice for all.
 - d. When Paul referred to the church, he wasn't talking about the building, but rather denoted primarily a community or assembly of people.
- b. Context (historical, geographical)
 - i. Paul's letter to a Christ-community in Thessalonica, capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia, province in northern Greece
 - ii. Written to a community in Europe, which was largely Gentile (even though the movement's origin was among Jews in the Jewish homeland)
 - iii. Historical context
 - 1. According to Acts, Paul's mission to Europe began with a vision of "a man of Macedonia" urging him to "come on over and help us"
 - 2. Thessalonica was Paul's 2nd stop
 - 3. According to Acts,
 - a. Paul went to the synagogue and converted some Jews and a "great many of the devout Greek – or Gentile God-lovers (or fearers)"
 - b. Then riots broke out because of Paul- left the city and went to Athens & Corinth
 - 4. From the letter itself, we learn
 - a. While in Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (300 miles away) to find out how the community was doing.
 - b. Timothy reported back
 - 5. 1 Thessalonians is Paul's response to what he heard from Timothy.
 - a. Follows standard format of a Greek letter (sender's name, then addressee, brief greeting (often a blessing), thanksgiving, body of the letter, and closing
 - i. Body – Paul, responding to Timothy's report, wants to maintain his relationship with the community. Full of gratitude, probably glad they still want to be in touch with him despite his absence.
- 2. Date of writing- around 50 CE –

3. Key Items for Teaching/Exploration/Discussion

a. “New Family” Imagery

- i. Letter filled with family imagery.
 1. 14 times calls community brothers and sisters (Gk only brothers, but these communities included women)
 2. Brothers did not mean “men among you” but “all of you as siblings in the new family”
- ii. Shows up in the way Paul talks about his relationship with them –
 1. Like their mother or father
 2. Feels like an orphan when separated from them.
- iii. The relationship of members to one another is not based solely on intimacy or sentiment, but also on mutual support, including material responsibility for each other. This was a share community, just like a family is a sharing community.
 1. Sharing did not mean absolute equality of financial resources, but it did mean that the community would make sure that everybody was taken care of with regard to what they needed materially.
 2. “You will eat, and you will be taken care of”

b. A “Second Coming”

- i. Paul’s focus and expectation
- ii. Development of “Rapture Theology”
 1. This has become important in last century or so to two very different groups –
 2. Mostly independent Protestant churches
 3. Foundation of “rapture theology”- belief that true believers will be raptured from the earth 7 years before the 2nd coming of Jesus. They will be spared the suffering – trials and tribulations, plagues, wars, famines – that will engulf those left behind.
 4. Rapture theology – almost always accompanied by the claim that the 2nd coming of Jesus will be soon.
 5. 40% of American Christians believe it will happen in the next 50 years
 6. Rapture will bring with it those who have died already- the dead in Christ will rise first – then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.
 7. Rapture theology – lives on the premise that all of this will someday happen, because it hasn’t happened yet.
 8. Modern historical scholarship begins with a different premise – that this text tells us what Paul wrote to the Christ-community in Thessalonica around the year 50. Wonder what I meant for Paul and those who heard it read in community????
 - a. Reasonable question about those who have died in Paul’s absence and before the 2nd coming
 - i. Answered – the dead will be reunited and with the Lord forever – don’t worry
 - ii. AND pastoral – encourage one another with these words

9. Rapture theology – the notion that true Christians will be taken up to heaven 7 years before the 2nd coming and final judgment – is neither ancient nor traditional Christianity.
 - a. Thoroughly modern
 - b. Conceived in the 1800s by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) an Anglo-Irish clergyman active in Britain and North America.
 - i. Is the theological ancestor of the widely known “Scofield Bible”?
 - ii. Before him, no Christian had spoken of the rapture
 - c. Paul was not providing detailed information about a 2nd coming that is still future from our point in time, whose details are to be correlated with other biblical texts about “last things” –
 - d. Rather, using the imagery from his time, he assured his community in Thessalonica of one thing – we shall all be together.
10. He did think though that the 2nd coming of Christ would be soon—thought it would happen in his lifetime. – many Christians expected this.
 - i. Obviously didn’t happen.
11. How central this expectation was for Paul is a different question –
 - a. His passion was transformation, not preparation for the final judgment.
12. The fact that Paul was wrong about the nearness of the 2nd coming does not invalidate his thought as a whole.
13. Meant they hoped the culmination of what Jesus inaugurated would be soon – it is a statement of enthusiasm and confidence in Jesus finishing what Jesus began.
14. Answered question – if people died before Jesus’ return, if they were dead, how could they experience salvation?
15. Paul reassures them that believers who had died would be resurrected on the “day of the Lord” – a new age when the kingdom of God would be established and participate in the promised salvation.
16. Paul – avoid speculation about the date of the 2nd coming to live according to God’s will and trust that they will be saved because of their faith.

c. Biblical Interpretation

- i. Anglican 3-legged stool
- ii. Jesus’ teaching in parables – how they call us into metaphorical thinking Parables – taught us metaphorical teaching – always look within and beyond the story. Don’t take anything at face value – it’s always pointing elsewhere and toward God.
 1. Parable teaching is distinctive to Jesus.
 2. Mystery and misunderstanding are built into the structure of the parables- must look at the mystery

3. It's all about receptivity to the message – we must continue to make progression in our learning.
4. Must develop capacity to hear properly, not partially nor dry-ly
5. Syrophenician woman – first one to understand how to think metaphorically
6. Way to look at it – metaphors always lead to life
7. The faith journey is about hearing, accepting, and then bearing good fruit
8. Parables ask you to think of a world behind the one you see and in front of you – opens up a whole new reality.
 - a. Difference between technical solution and adaptive change
 - b. About exercising our imaginations
9. But, if you don't get parables, you don't get anything
10. About thinking metaphorically and imaginatively- must do this to understand or enter into the Kingdom
11. Things are not as they seem

d. Structure of Letter

- i. Greeting- formal address
- ii. Reviewing his relationship with the Thessalonians
 1. Thanks God, praises them for their faithfulness
 2. Reminds them of their time together
 3. Expresses his worry about them
 4. Purpose – to encourage them to remain steadfast in their faith as they await the 2nd coming or return of Jesus to judge and to rule
 5. And to clarify and reinforce the matters of belief and conduct that Timothy had noted
 6. Closing prayer – for the salvation of the Thessalonians.

e. Focus on “living a simple and unobtrusive life- with sanctification

- i. Paul looks to the future and instructs the Thessalonians regarding the behavior that will enable believers to be saved when Jesus returns
- ii. Focus on sexual morality, sobriety, maintenance of good relations both with the community and with other churches
- iii. Live a simple and unobtrusive life
- iv. Sanctification – or holiness – believers are called to be “set apart” by their conduct
- v. Encouragement to do more of what you are doing.
- vi. Live quietly, to mind your own affairs, work with your hands, so that you may behave properly toward outsider and be dependent upon no one.
- vii. Salvation of those who have already died – don't worry –
- viii. Prepare for the day of the Lord –

ix.

f. Diatribe against the “Jews who killed Jesus” – how to understand in context

- i. Reflects the tension between the Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and the early followers of Jesus, whether they were Jewish or Gentile.
- ii. Representative of classical Christian anti-Judaism thinking
 1. The Jews killed Jesus.
 2. The Jews persecuted Jesus’ followers
 3. Jews threw them out of synagogues
 4. Jews are all sinners. God has rejected and punished them.
- iii. Interesting – the Greek word for Jews has 2 meanings – Jews and Judeans.
 1. Paul’s wrath may be directed at this geographically limited group.
 2. Some scholars think these verses were interpolation – not consistent with Paul’s comments about Jews in Romans 9-11 nor integral to the letter.
 3. But all ancient manuscripts contain this language
- iv. Has implications for the emergence of anti-Judaism

4. Questions to Ponder/Explore

- a. Any questions, items which stood out, desire to explore more fully, “shimmered” for you?
- b. If you had never heard of Jesus, which was presumably the case of the Jews in Macedonia, what about Paul or his message would compel you to convert “on the spot”?
 - i. What has been your experience? What compels you to follow Jesus?
- c. How might you think conversion from Judaism (with a set of beliefs, rituals, and laws governing your heart and actions) to Christianity would be a different experience than converting from paganism (either no belief or belief in multiple gods) to Christianity?
 - i. Do you think it is easier to “let go” of former ideas? Or “re-orient” former ideas? Or take on completely new ideas?
 1. Since our journey in faith is an on-going process, where are you in this journey –letting go, re-orienting, re-imagining?
 - ii. How might the transition be thought of from a “head” spirituality or a “heart” spirituality?
 - iii. What examples might you have today of reaching people with very different ideas or those with none about faith? (“nones” – those with no belief)—what would be compelling to them about the Christ experience to enter a new way of living and accepting Christianity?
- d. Paul begins his letter with the phrase, “Grace to you and peace of Jesus to you” –
 - i. Where does this show up elsewhere in scripture?

- ii. Where does this show up in our worship on Sundays?
- e. The structure of Paul's letter is as follows: 1) address, 2) greeting and blessing, 3) offering of thanksgiving, 4) statement of gratitude, 5) closing – “may you be sanctified”
 - i. How does this structure show up in our worship service?
 - ii. How might all your interchanges with people be different if you started them with a greeting of peace and a blessing?
 - iii. What relationship in your life might need this “new way” of being or beginning?
 - iv. How might this offer of greeting and blessing to the other shift your stance toward the conversation?
 - v. If not these specific words, what words might you say to open the space for real listening to bring God into the conversation?
- f. Paul's focus was not to worry about the details of the 2nd coming, but rather Paul instructs people to “live a simple and unobtrusive life” –
 - i. What might that look like for you?
 - ii. What would you need to shed?
 - iii. How is our time in quarantine moving you in this direction?
 - iv. What spiritual practices might you need to help you stay steady in this direction?
- g. Paul encourages the people to be sanctified by their behavior – in other words, set apart, by how they live and who they follow – this is a slightly different twist – in that we often ask the Holy Spirit to sanctify and bless us (in our worship) with the understanding that the Holy Spirit then has strengthened us to live a life “worthy of God” – but Paul imagines it is our behavior that sanctifies us
 - i. Do you see any differences there (sort of chicken or the egg dilemma)?
 - ii. How do you feel set apart to do the work God has given us to do?
- h. Paul also speaks about “living church and going to the world”. So often, we live in the world and go to church. What is your experience with this? Where are you on this continuum?
- i. One extra question – what in your life is calling forth your imagination, adaptive change, a sense of looking beyond the current reality to the reality within and beyond the situation?

5. Closing Comments/Prayers