

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

The Real Deal

Christ Church Liverpool

Theme: The Thessalonian Christians will be confident in the gospel of God as they remember the way Christ's messengers lived in accordance with their powerful words.

Aim: Find Christian confidence in the message and testimony of the apostles and the parental care of the church elders.

How do you know what to believe?

- When your girlfriend says she loves you what makes you think that's true?
- When politicians ask you to vote for them how do you decide which will do what they say they will?
- When you listen to prominent atheists debate Christian leaders what is it that makes you stick with what you believe now – or what would it take to make you 'change sides'?
- When you have a period of suffering or hardship in your life what makes you keep on believing in God, or for some, what makes you keep not believing in God?
- How do you know what to believe?

It's not just an abstract philosophical kind of question – it's an out on the streets, real life, vital every day kind of question.

Most of the things we believe are not things we have just worked out for ourselves. The information we use to build our understanding of the world, comes from other people. Which means that the only way we can know what to believe is if we know who to trust. The only way we can know what to believe is if we know who to trust. And there is no doubt that the 21st century west has a crisis of trust.

If you want an example of that crisis of trust, today is the perfect day for it. On the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on America there is no better illustration of the crisis of trust in our society than the conspiracy theories about 9/11. There are tens of thousands of people who simply do not believe the official accounts of what happened that morning.

The conspiracy theorists say the twin towers did not collapse because of the structural damage caused by tens of thousands of gallons of burning jet fuel but because rogue elements in the US government and military conspired to blow the buildings up from the bottom. They say plane that crashed into the Pentagon wasn't a commercial airliner but a missile and a US army cargo plane later dropped pieces of debris to make it look like a jetliner had been destroyed. They say United flight 93 didn't crash over Pennsylvania, but was blown up by US military jets. They say a movie released the year before

with a plot eerily similar to the events of 9/11, where an evil group within the American government try to crash an airliner into the twin towers to justify starting a war in the Middle East, weren't a freaky coincidence but a deliberate 'softening up' of the public.

The conspiracy theories themselves are, to be honest, ridiculous. We are right to laugh at them. But they are also understandable. The people who invent these ideas have grown used to political leaders lying to them about weapons, about oil, about war, about expenses and about their own sex scandals. So it's understandable that some people just don't believe **anything** their leaders say anymore.

We laugh at conspiracy theorists but they are just have an extreme version of the cynicism about politicians that affects almost all of us. So if we don't trust our political and military leaders who do we really trust?

- The police? Not if the recent riots are anything to go by.
- Journalists? Phone hacking murder victim's voicemail anyone?
- The church? Well people did, I think, till they found out that in many churches that trust was abused to cover up for priests who raped children.
- Doctors? Perhaps; though ever since we discovered Dr Harold Shipman killed around 250 of his patients over 30 years without getting caught quite a lot of us aren't that certain about them either.
- Our wives or business partners? The ever growing market in private detective agencies shows that people don't trust even those closest to them.

Add in family breakdown, which destroys many people's trust in their parents and our ever more mobile society, which means we are constantly uprooted from our friendships and you can see why we find it hard to know who to really trust.

So how can Christians expect people in our families and our workplaces to believe a story about a man who, allegedly, lived and died 2,000 years ago?

How can I, as a Christian pastor, expect you to withstand the pressure of all the influences around you, which will encourage you not to put your faith in the Christian gospel. Most of that pressure won't be pressure to give up being a Christian entirely. I'll be more subtle than that.

Many people you meet who will be quite happy for you to be a Christian. But they will think they are doing you a favour by encouraging you not to take it too seriously. Your parents might think it's fine to be a Christian until you big amounts of your money to fund the work here at

Christ Church. Or until you start to talk about being a Ministry Trainee for a year when you graduate. Your workmates may be pleased that you are a believer until your commitment to LifeGroup leading and being here on Sundays makes you pass up a promotion. Your uni friends might think it's great you follow Jesus until you turn down a really hot girl just because she's not Christian. In our cynical culture people who care about you will encourage you not to be too sure. Not to totally trust either the message about Jesus or the people in your church. Not to take it too seriously.

The problem with that is that the only way to be a Christian is to take it seriously. Jesus was quite clear about that. Jesus said you have to put your hand to the plough and never look back. Jesus said that everyone else in your life must be massively less important than he is. Jesus said that Christians have to live every hour prepared to die for following him.

So those voices around us which encourage us to follow Jesus, but not too seriously, are really telling you not to follow Jesus at all. If you're going to be a Christian you've got to be sure. And if you're going to be sure you've got to work out who to trust.

The apostle Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy spent just three three weeks explaining the good news of Jesus and founding a fragile Christian church in Thessalonica before they were forced to leave. So after the initial excitement of hearing about Jesus, the loving king who forgives our sin and brings eternal life, it's understandable that many of them began to wonder if following Jesus was really what they wanted to do. Could the message about Jesus be trusted? What reasons did they have for committing their lives to this message, especially when they were being persecuted for believing it?

In their culture most people had not one God but dozens, or even hundreds. The Thessalonians must have faced pressures very like the ones we experience not to take being a Christian too seriously. So how could they be certain what to believe? How could they know who to trust?

In the verses we're looking at this morning Paul gives us two reasons why we can choose with confidence to believe the message about Jesus. Two reasons not just to sign up to say "yes that's true," but to actually give our life to Jesus. To rest our weight on the gospel of Christ.

Reason 1: You can rest yourself on the gospel of Jesus Christ, because Paul and his friends lived as messengers approved by God.

The reason Paul offers the Thessalonian Christians why they should keep on going, trusting the message about Jesus that he brought them isn't a detailed logical argument. The reason Paul gives here why we should believe in Jesus isn't the evidence for Jesus' miracles. It's not the brilliance of Jesus' teaching of the or the lack of

plausible alternative explanations for his resurrection. The reason we should believe, Paul says, is the total conviction and integrity with which Paul and his friends lived and spoke about Jesus. We should believe the message because we can trust the messenger.

The ancient world was full of travelling philosophers and religious teachers who made their living promoting new ideas and doctrines. Many of them were charlatans, using their skills of flattery and praise to worm their way into the lives, and wallets, of men and women desperate to know how best to live.

Paul was not like that. When Paul came to Thessalonica he wasn't seeking a city where he could make a few quid – he was fleeing persecution. But instead of lying low for a bit started preaching again the same things that had got him persecuted before. Despite the hardships he had suffered, which included a thorough beating, he dared, v2, to speak God's message again. At times, the things he said to say about corrupt human nature, about God's anger at sin and about the coming final judgment seemed harsh. But that wasn't because Paul was mistaken or malicious. Indeed the challenging nature of Paul's message showed clearly, v4, that he did not change his message to suit what he thought the Thessalonians, or anyone else, wanted to hear. Paul was concerned to please only one person with his message; the God who entrusted him with that message in the first place.

In the first Lord of the Rings movie the hobbit, Bilbo, is reluctant to give up the beautiful golden ring he possesses. It seems to him too beautiful. But the wizard Gandalf, suspecting the ring to be evil, uses harsh words to persuade Bilbo to let the ring go. That is a sign of his love and integrity. As Gandalf puts it: "I am not trying to trick you, I am trying to help you."

That's how it was with Paul. If the Thessalonians were going to escape the terrible wrath of God they had to make radical changes in their lives. They had to give stuff up, to turn, as the passage we looked at week time says, from idols to serve the living and true God. It was a painful process for them.

But Paul's willingness to press on them such a hard message was proof, he says, that he was not teaching them to get money or praise or popularity for himself. It was a sign that they could trust what he said.

Paul was so concerned to ensure that the Thessalonians could have confidence in the integrity of his message that he didn't even seek the kind of respect, honour and financial support that he was entitled to. Rather than charge the Thessalonians a fee to come and hear his lectures, as was normal for public speakers both then and, Paul, v9, worked a second job, probably the hard physical labour of leather working, to provide his own food and lodging money while he was in Thessalonica.

Paul didn't deal with the Thessalonians as if he were a celebrity in town for a show. In those days it was

common for visiting philosophers to enter a city with great dignity, pomp and ceremony. They would have singers and trumpeters and chariots. But Paul's visit to them, v1, literally his "entrance" was not like that. It was not in vain and fruitless, but neither was it vain and puffed up. Instead he came in the midst of conflict and opposition. For all that he had a message from God, Paul was no superstar in the Thessalonian's lives. He was more like a mother than a model, more like a father than a footballer.

If Paul had been offering a different kind of message that wouldn't have mattered. If he had been teaching that what life is all about is getting influence and prestige a rock star approach would have been the right one. If, like so many preachers in our city, Paul had been saying that those with true faith won't be poor and don't get sick a ministry that sucked money out of the pockets of converts would have been just fine. But Paul preached about a God who sacrifices himself for us. His message was about a God who stooped to become a man, and to die as a man, so that we could live.

It was a wonderful message. And the Thessalonians could believe that it was true because nothing about the way Paul behaved while he was in Thessalonica contradicted that message. Paul claimed to be a messenger approved by God to talk about the wonderful gift of grace through the death of Jesus. And Paul lived in a way that fitted such a gospel like a hand in a glove.

What does that mean for us? Well there are far more people today who attack Christianity on the basis of the character of its founders than who attack Christianity on the basis of its facts. You will meet people who say you shouldn't believe the Bible because the resurrection of Jesus never happened. But you will meet more people who say you shouldn't believe the Bible because Paul and his friends were oppressive women haters who supported slavery and brought a harsh and repressive morality to the world.

Those people are wrong about Paul. But they are right about the importance of integrity. Paul is determined that his readers know he is no cold-hearted, money grabbing, rent-a-preacher. He was a man of integrity.

This week, every time you read something in your Bible and wonder if you can be sure about it. Every time a colleague or friend hints to you that it's not wise to be too fanatical about this Christian thing. Every time you are tempted to be cynical about whether we can really rely on what Paul says about Jesus remember that the men who wrote this book were eyewitnesses. Remember that they didn't profit in this world from their beliefs. Remember that they didn't get royalty cheques for the gospels and they didn't take credit card donations for their ministries. Remember that they got put in prison and they treated their converts like their children.

The words in this book are not the words of hucksters, con-men or profit seekers. They are the words of men of

integrity. You can rest yourself on the gospel of Jesus Christ, because Paul and his friends lived as messengers approved by God.

Which is great news for us, just as it was great news for the Thessalonian Christians. But there's an important difference between us and the Thessalonians: they met Paul and we haven't. So for us to have confidence **today** in the truthfulness of the message about Jesus it's not enough that the apostles lived out their message with integrity. For us there must be a second reason to put our full trust in the message about Jesus:

2 You can rest yourself on the gospel of Jesus Christ, because your church elders look after you with parental care.

Paul didn't just bring a message and then move on. He didn't lock himself away in a hotel room between ministry meetings. He came right into the Thessalonians' homes and hearts.

He was like a mother to them. Literally, v7, says he was like a wet nurse taking care of her own children. Other preachers might be good wet nurses; nourishing people with the milk of their teaching. But Paul goes way beyond that. He doesn't act like a hired nanny. He's like a mother with her own baby.

Other preachers might cajole, warn and instruct. But Paul didn't just speak to the crowds. Like a dad with his kids he took them aside individually, v12, and showed each one of them what living as a Christian meant for them.

This morning we can read Paul's letters and hear the truth about Jesus he teaches in them. Maybe we can even get a sense of the warmth of his character through these letters. But Paul can't be a spiritual mum or dad to us. As much as you might come to appreciate his ministry he can't take you aside over coffee on a Sunday and comfort you when you are struggling. Paul, Silas and Timothy were great men, no doubt, but they can't share their lives with us.

So how can we have the confidence the Thessalonians had in the reliability of the good news about Jesus? The answer is that you can't have that confidence. Not unless the people who teach you about Jesus live like Paul lived.

Those people might include the person who led you to Christ in the first place. Or your LifeGroup leader or the CU president. But the people today whose responsibility is closest to that of Paul, Silas and Timothy are the elders, the leaders of a local church.

To my fellow elders, and especially to those young men amongst us who hope, one day, to be church leaders I want to say this morning that this is a serious business.

We can get it wrong in two ways. One way church leaders get things wrong is when they are very

interested in the details of people's lives and want to control and direct them in all sorts of things that are nothing to do with what the Bible teaches. The correction for that is to remember the job of the elder; we are to parent the church with the message of the Bible, not with whatever we think is a good idea. But I don't think that's the big danger at Christ Church. I think we are much more likely just to ignore the individual needs of people in our church. My fellow elders let me warn you: unless we take on the caring, comforting, encouraging and urging role of a parent in the lives of our church family, they will not have the confidence they need that the message about Jesus is reliable.

Elders who treat the job like it's an excuse to have a role in church that is all about reading big books and getting to stand up at the front are robbing people of Christian assurance. If elders only declare the words of the apostles to the church and do not share the love of the apostles with the church like spiritual parents then we have failed.

Well that's for my fellow elders. For the members of the church, and Paul was writing to church members this has several implications.

a) Watch the glory

Some of you will be moving on to other churches in the next months and years because of study, work or family. When you do that you need to look for a church where the members speak of the leaders in parental terms.

For there are many churches where the role of the members is not much more than giving the leaders glory. Paul, v6, didn't seek glory from his converts, but many pastors do. There are plenty of denominations where the number of baptisms a church leader does in a year matters more than the quality of their relationships in the church. There are plenty of churches where the number and amount of Direct Debits is the thing that excites the leadership team.

Look for a church where the elders are like mums and dads. And if you're staying at Christ Church and you feel that the elders are failing to exhort and encourage you come and tell us. Don't tell anyone else – that's ungodly gossip. Come and tell us.

b) Don't be a teenager

Some of you we don't parent very well. In was chatting to someone just this week who had been told by another church member that nobody here loves or cares for them.

Can I say that very often when we don't parent people well, it's because you don't let us in. In family terms some people here today, not many, but a few, are like sulky, uncommunicative teenagers who never speak. As an elder it's hard to encourage someone if you have no idea what is going on in their life. As an elder it's hard to

comfort someone whose home you have never been invited to visit.

Please, this morning, if you have made it difficult for us to parent you, repent of that sin and engage. Because if you don't allow those of us who have responsibility for teaching you about Jesus to demonstrate to you the tenderness and challenge of Jesus you will be missing out on assurance.

c) Be encouraged – even when we rebuke you!

That's for a few. But the vast majority of you here this morning should feel encouraged. I've sat in elders' meetings where the guys have prayed for you all with real insight and care.

I've seen elders with demanding jobs turn up at a meeting after working 14 or 16 hours straight so they can discuss how best to help you guys grow as believers. That dedication blows me away.

I'm privileged to serve on a staff team where I have never one heard anybody complain about how much the church pays them, even though they could all make a lot more money elsewhere.

For the faults and failings of your leaders, and we have many, I feel confident, with Paul, to say that we are ready to share with you not only the gospel but our lives as well. That's not because there's anything amazing or special about us. It's because this message about Jesus has powerfully changed us, just as it is powerfully changing you.

If you've been here any length of time I hope you have experienced that the elders of the church want to exhort each one of you. I hope that even when what we've had to tell you isn't what you wanted to hear you recognise that your leaders pleasing God not men isn't a bad thing; it's the very reason why you should believe the Christian message.

How do you know what to believe?

Well you can wholeheartedly believe the message about Jesus. His good news transformed Paul and his friends so that they lived out with integrity the good news they brought. And his good news has transformed your church leaders, beginning the slow and painful process of moving us away from being the sinful self-absorbed men we were, towards being those whose great desire is to help everyone in our church grow in confidence in Christ.

This week may you find joy and confidence in Christ because of the integrity of the apostles and the parental care of your church leaders.

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