



Living Thessalonians

FOUR SESSIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

RESOURCES REQUIRED:

A safe, welcoming space to meet

Refreshments to keep the spirits up

*Someone prepared to lead each session
(you could take it in turns)*

*At least one Bible but preferably a number
of different translations*

A willingness to share openly and honestly

Setting up a small group for the first time?

The Methodist Church believes that meeting in small groups is a great way to support each other on our individual journeys of faith. We believe no-one should have to travel alone. However, we are aware that forming a small group for the first time can be a bit daunting. To help we have produced three short films under the title *Journeying Together* to help you think through the 'How and Why of Small Groups.' You can either send for a free DVD by emailing editor@methodistchurchinscotland.org.uk or download from the Methodist website www.methodist.org.uk or watch on YouTube.

We believe that, with support, anyone can form and lead a small group in an engaging and fruitful way. And we are convinced that what comes out of your discussions will be life changing.

We hope you find the sessions helpful – let us know how they go by contacting us on the email address below

Sally Robertson, on behalf of the Learning and Development Forum
editor@methodistchurchinscotland.org.uk. Feedback is always welcome.





Andrew Letby is the author of these discussion sessions. Here we ask him to introduce himself and why he believes there is so much we can learn from the early church.

Hi, I'm Andrew. I live and work as a Methodist minister based in Edinburgh, seeking to help people explore the journey of Christian discipleship. I'm fascinated by how the earliest Christians gathered and learned together with the minimum of leadership or written materials. I believe that, like those early followers of Jesus, we are once again on the edges of society and that, as contemporary Christians, we have much to learn from those who have gone before us.

As a Methodist, I am also committed to rediscovering the charisms which lie at the heart of our heritage and to the possibilities of growth through sharing in small groups.

May God bless you and your times together,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Andrew'.

The Revd Andrew Letby



Introduction:

Why study the church in Thessalonica? (Read this before your first study session)

Word was spreading around the Mediterranean; stories of an apparently un-newsworthy event that had taken place 30 years earlier in an outpost of the Roman Empire had suddenly gone viral.

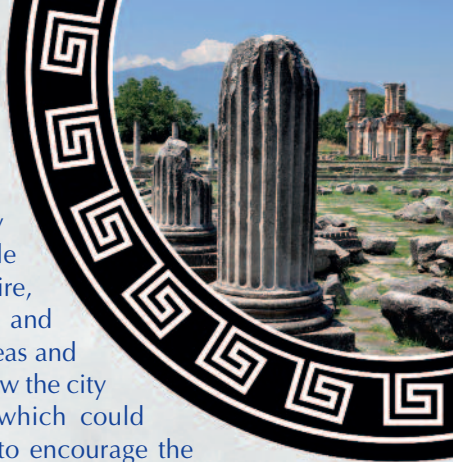
The person spreading the word was a Jewish lawyer – who used to be called Saul, but now styled himself as Paul. For years he had dedicated himself to gagging those who spoke of Jesus of Nazareth, the Rabbi who was crucified in Jerusalem, now said to have been raised to life. ‘I have met him – he was alongside me as I travelled’, said Paul. The story struck a chord; something of massive importance had happened.

Paul would naturally have gravitated toward the Jewish community, but we know from Paul’s writings that the Church soon attracted others, leaving communities with many questions and diverse opinions.

The writing we know as Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica tells of the impact of this story in one small city. As one of the earliest examples of Christian writing, perhaps sent only 30 or 40 years after those events in Jerusalem, we gain a fascinating insight into the lives of the first Christian believers.



Thessalonica (modern day Thessaloniki) was, and still is, a thriving port in northern Greece, on an important trade route which linked Rome with Byzantium, the Via Egnatia. So it occupied a very strategic location which brought together people and cultures. It was a free city in the Roman Empire, governed locally. In that mix of people coming and going there would always be a ferment of new ideas and people intent on causing trouble. Paul no doubt saw the city as an ideal place for a Christian community which could facilitate the spread of the Gospel. He wanted to encourage the people there to live their faith in a way that would attract and inspire others.



We must be careful not to think of the city too much as we would a contemporary city. When we think of Thessalonica we can be tempted to consider it in terms of the size of a modern city – the current population is 300,000 with over one million in the wider metropolitan area. That is similar to my home city of Edinburgh – a place where it is very easy to be anonymous (and lonely). But first century Thessalonica was very different – and looking at the few images available I see a densely populated but quite small area built on a hillside. So the Thessalonica of the time may only have had 600 or so buildings – residential and commercial; perhaps, then, a population of more like 3000. In that sort of environment it was harder to hide.

At this time there were maybe only 2-3,000 Christians in the world, and they were all dispersed in small communities around the Mediterranean. These young Christian communities met in small groups, perhaps groups of 20 at the most, as the only spaces available to them were the workshops and homes of the city, which could not accommodate any more than this. There may have been three or four such groups in Thessalonica.

When Paul writes to them the community is perhaps only a few months old. They have already experienced persecution and the city authorities are very suspicious. Read Acts 17:1-9, the one piece of background we have to life in Thessalonica and Paul's association with the city.

How to use the study outlines:

1. Take some time to read out loud the suggested passage from the Bible. Read out different translations if you have more than one version of the Bible available. Pause for a few minutes in between each reading. (If you are undertaking these studies on your own, still take time to do this and make sure you read out loud so you 'hear' the story.)
2. Now read the passage again to yourself and note down anything that strikes you as significant, and highlight any words or phrases that intrigue or inspire you.
3. Spend five minutes imagining yourself sitting in a small room in first century Thessalonica with a group of people you are only just getting to know. Try to sense the flavour and excitement of this new community and how it would have been to live in this small but cosmopolitan city and transient population.
4. Now read the comments in the study material and share your immediate reactions with each other. If you have read any other commentary on the passage share anything you have learned.
5. Discuss your responses to the questions asked in each study.
6. Read the passage again and reflect quietly on what you will take away.
7. Share with each other what you are going to do as a result of studying this passage and pray for one another.

The four studies in this booklet are based on extracts from 1 Thessalonians. Make sure you read and reflect on the passages which come in between too. Look out some of the commentaries which are available. A particularly helpful one is by Tom Wright. ¹

¹ Tom Wright *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians (New Testament for Everyone)* (pub. SPCK, London 2002)

Study 1: Living community

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

We live in a culture where appraisal and inspection are a routine part of life. From school reports and work appraisals to Care Home inspections and Trip Advisor restaurant reviews, we are constantly learning about how standards are being met, raised or missed. Such a culture is less obvious in our churches; we don't take kindly to assessing our worship or even less our personal discipleship. If we did, what criteria would we use for such assessments?

Paul, in writing to the group in Thessalonica, draws on his own time in the city and the reports that have reached him from visitors, including that of his close friend Timothy, to give his assessment of how they are doing. Paul is clearly distressed that he cannot provide 'hands on' support, but overall he is pleased and gives the community a pretty good report and encourages them to continue as they began.

Imagine the impact of receiving a letter like this in your church community. Then think what it must have been like for these new Christians who were working out what it meant to be a community of people following 'The Way'. Paul is clearly pleased by what he is hearing about this small but important group of people. In particular he commends them for their faith, hope and love (a familiar theme in Paul). These are not passive characteristics.

Faith is not passive but requires us to think through the gospel and bring our minds and will into line with it.

Love is also a very practical thing, requiring hard work that demonstrates practical care for one another. Paul returns to this several times in the letter and it is clear that he sees in the lives of the Thessalonian Christians a special care and concern for one another in the community.

Likewise, hope requires patience and readiness to respond. This was an age in which the new followers were convinced that the 'end times' were close – it is an apocalyptic time. But Paul resists telling them when that time is and, instead, encourages them to live faithfully for as long as is required.

The strength to do these things comes through the gift of the Spirit – the power which transforms lives. The gift of the Spirit lies at the heart of all Paul has to say.

Questions:

1. Is 'faith' something we really work at?
2. In the early Church, where being a Christian could easily lead to physical hardship, acts of care and service were natural. In a world where personal danger is less of an issue how can we, as individual disciples and small communities, demonstrate the same love for one another?
3. In a world of instant gratification is hope in the future a thing of the past?
4. Imagine Paul was writing to your church or small group. What would he complement you on? What might he criticize? (Be honest!)
5. Jesus commands us to love God and our neighbour. As Methodists we wish to emphasize that the word 'love' is an active verb. What are you taking away from today's discussion that will help you love? How will you know if you have been successful?



Study 2: Living attractively

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 and 2:13

We speak of 'first impressions' as being 'lasting'. The first few minutes of meeting a new person or visiting a new place are extremely formative. Supermarkets are carefully designed to create a good first impression and draw us in, yet churches sometimes feel as though they are designed to repel all who try to enter.

But the physical environment is only part of it. How we relate to one another is important. When we enter a room full of people or meet someone for the first time, what helps us quickly feel welcome and cared for? How does it affect us when we experience a cold, frosty reception, an atmosphere of tension?

What does it mean to be an 'attractive' Christian community? As I look back over my faith journey, I see that many of the places that I have called 'home' have been far from attractive in any conventional sense. I realise, too, that many of the people I have encountered along the way have been broken and difficult. Yet in so many of these places and people I have found a welcome, I have been encouraged to express myself and have been accepted unconditionally for who I am. These are the true signs of an attractive person or community.

Paul has already spoken of the way in which the new community in Thessalonica had taken to heart the message he shared with them and been blessed by the transformative power of the Spirit. He goes on to say that this is not just an internal transformation but it is seen in the demeanour of each person. *The Message* rendering of verse 8 makes this point in a particularly powerful way.

'Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore—you're the message!'

These are people who live what they believe; they are attractive - not necessarily in a physical sense but as people that others want to be with and whose lives they want to emulate.

In Chapter 2, Paul talks about why this is the case. Paul was a living example. His message was more than words and so his listeners and readers trusted him. Travelling preachers were not an unusual experience but most of them brought a message that failed to deliver. Paul's message proved transformational because he was not speaking for himself, but demonstrating new life in the power of the Spirit.

Questions:

1. When have you met a person or a group that has demonstrated this attractiveness? What was it about them that made you respond in this way?
2. How do people respond to us (personally and as a community)?
3. What can we do to make our lives and churches more attractive? What does it mean to be 'the message'?
4. Jesus commands us to love God and our neighbour. As Methodists we wish to emphasize that the word 'love' is an active verb. What are you taking away from today's discussion that will help you love? How will you know if you have been successful?



Study 3: Living with fragility

Read: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

We often hear people say that they have lost their 'faith'. What, of course, they mean is that they have lost their 'certainty'. In good times it is easy to believe that God cares for us, but questions creep in when things begin to go wrong. It is at these times, when we feel most fragile, that we really demonstrate our 'faith', faith in God who will be with us in working things out.

The reality of life for most of us is that we experience both good times and difficult periods. When we face the tough times we cling to hope and to the experience that we have always previously made it through. It is at such times that friends and family, or the other communities of which we are a part, come into their own. Together we find the strength to move on.

In this passage Paul talks about the suffering he has endured (some of it in Thessalonica itself) ² and recognises that his friends have not had an easy time. Just because Paul has endured his own suffering doesn't mean that he is not concerned to support his friends. He is a bit like the worried parent of a teenager just beginning to make their way in the world and who is discovering life is not always easy. Paul is learning to let go, but at the same time wants to be supportive.

The early Christians in Thessalonica needed a safe space in a city which did not understand them. They met in the places they had – homes and workshops: small, simply furnished rooms where perhaps no more than twenty people could meet. But their community life was more than a little fragile – from the story recorded in Acts 17, we know that Jason's house was not a safe place. The city authorities were watching them.

Paul encourages the Thessalonians to remain faithful, a word which implies loyalty to some basic principles and being steadfast. His worry is that they will be led astray, especially in the face of persecution. Paul is very aware of the inner voice of doubt which can creep in. It would just be easier to say 'I don't believe'. In fact, the new Christians appeared to be declaring their allegiance to a new king – a rival to Caesar perhaps? Within their message was some political dynamite. The idea that Jesus was a new King was rightly or wrongly perceived as a challenge to the Empire – and as such questioned the legitimacy of the local government.

This was a challenge to the surrounding community and the authorities. It would have been much easier to fade into the background, but (for all its newness and fragility) this community realised that it had to stand out from the crowd, no matter how dangerous it was.

² Acts 17:1-9

Questions:

1. What do you think are the key things Paul is encouraging his friends to hold on to?
2. What has helped your through the tough times?
3. In what ways do our beliefs challenge the world around us today?
4. How do our beliefs affect our day to day living?
5. Jesus commands us to love God and our neighbour. As Methodists we wish to emphasize that the word 'love' is an active verb. What are you taking away from today's discussion that will help you love? How will you know if you have been successful?



Study 4: Living well

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10

A community is made up of the individuals within it and so the attitudes and actions of each member are important. A healthy community recognises the strength which comes from common concern: all communities need some basic principles to guide their communal life.

Within the life of the Church today the idea of New Monasticism is providing a challenge and directing us in a striking new way.³ It encourages us to take the best from the past⁴ and apply it for today. Most often, 'new monasticism' is not about residential communities but about groups of people who live in a dispersed way, across a city or even round the world. At the heart of any such community there is, however, a simple 'rule' or set of guiding principles which encourage order, commitment and a common understanding, and in living by this rule members find a link and a strength.

Having encouraged the Thessalonians to believe, Paul goes on to outline how this looks in practice. His rules are foundational. They are not meant to constrain but provide a framework for living well. Paul describes this way of life as 'holiness'. This is not an 'other worldly' characteristic but part of the gritty reality of life. John Wesley also used the idea of holiness: scriptural and social holiness were key to his teaching. For both Paul and Wesley, holiness is about living by a positive set of values which spill out into action.

Both teachers encourage us to live well by respecting the gifts God has given us. They counsel us that, taken to extremes, these gifts – be they good food, laughter or sexuality etc. – will turn into burdens and hinder us from living well.

³ Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy (eds) *New Monasticism as Fresh Expressions of Church (Ancient Faith, Future Mission)* (pub. Canterbury Press, London 2010); Ian Adams *Cave Refectory Road: Monastic Rhythms for contemporary living* (pub. Canterbury Press, London 2010)

⁴ As an example, read the Rule of St Benedict and note his advice for people who seek to live together in community. <http://www.osb.org/rb/text/toc.html> (accessed November 2012)

Questions:

1. What are the basic rules of the various communities that you belong to? What happens when they are laid aside?
2. Paul teaches that the Gospel brings freedom. But, with freedom comes responsibility. How do we help one another to enjoy God's abundance in a responsible and life enhancing way?
3. What can we learn from the experience of others, eg. monastic communities that will inform us for life in our local Christian community today?
4. Jesus commands us to love God and our neighbour. As Methodists we wish to emphasize that the word 'love' is an active verb. What are you taking away from today's discussion that will help you love? How will you know if you have been successful?



Final Thoughts

Review the whole of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica and choose three words or phrases which sum up the life of that community. Discuss with one another how these apply to you personally, to your small group and your church.

What Next?

Why not join us for A Day out in Thessalonica? Around Scotland the Methodist Church is involved in organizing interactive days where we spend time thinking about what we can learn from the early Church. To find out about A Day Out in Thessalonica near to you, or if you are interested in hosting a Day Out... event, contact **editor@methodistchurchinscotland** or visit the website **www.methodistchurchinscotland.org.uk**.

Think about what is next for you. Do you want to continue with your small group or take a break? Do you want to start another group with other people? Sometimes it's good to try something new! God will be with you whatever you decide. Travel well.



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To download or for more information **www.methodistchurchinscotland.org.uk**



