

Pastoral Care on Alpha

The Alpha Course starts here at CJ's in 3 weeks time and today I'd like to talk to you about Pastoral Care on Alpha but first of all I will read **1 Thessalonians 2:7-12**

"We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory".

This was the Apostle Paul's attitude and this is what we are aiming to achieve on Alpha and beyond in our fellowships and the Church.

If, I were to sum up in one word what the Alpha course is all about, other than the word 'Jesus', that would be the word 'love'.

You could sum up the philosophy of Alpha in three very simple propositions.

God loves you. **Romans 5:8**, says, "God demonstrated his love towards us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us". That's how we know that God loves us and that message of the cross runs right through the course.

We love God Jesus summed up the 10 Commandments by saying, (**Mark 12:29-31**) 'The first commandment is love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and with all your strength', so we want people to come into that relationship and grow in it. That's why the whole course is based around relationships.

Every talk is based around a relationship with God and then the third proposition is:

We love others. We go out into the world.

The Christian faith, as you know, is not just about our vertical relationship with God, important though that is, it's also about our horizontal relationship with others - as Jesus said, 'the second command is love your neighbour as yourself.' Pastoral care is part of our love for others

The psalmist says that David shepherded them with two things: (**Psalm 78:72**) 'integrity of heart'. The important thing about helping on Alpha is doing it for the right motives. We don't do this to build up our own ministry but in order to serve, to love people. And having the right heart is more important than anything else. 'skilful hands he led them'. There are skills to be learnt and that's what we are looking at, some of the basic skills of pastoral care which we can learn and acquire and put into practice on Alpha.

Let us start by looking at **the aim of pastoral care**, and the words of **Colossians 1:28-9** "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present **everyone** perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me".

So that we may present everyone perfect meaning, 'mature' in Christ. It's everyone. The aim is that every single person who comes on the course is looked after.

The small group system means that it doesn't really matter whether the course is a small or big one, everyone is looked after.

[Bill Hybels Senior Pastor of Willow Creek a Mega Church in Chicago, USA says that: 'Truth applied across the table' has been the key to his own personal growth.]

And I think that's what happens in the small groups and with one-to-one pastoral care, the small groups are the most important part of the evening.

As with everything in our lives prayer is key so we encourage you to pray daily for the people in your small group.

It is very important, we know for people to have the opportunity to make up their own minds. But in this process, we allow people to move at their own pace. We don't try and force the pace.

It's a golfing expression: 'Let the club do the work!' And I think the same is true in this whole area of pastoral care, 'Let the club do the work'.

Let the teaching - the talks that they hear, do the work; the praying that people are doing for them; the living out the example of the Christian life in front of them; the work of the Holy Spirit, as they experience the Holy Spirit.

So let's remember what the aim is: 'So that we may present everyone perfect in Christ'. That they would grow in maturity as their relationship with Christ grows.

We know what the aim is but how about **the method**; we find it at the beginning of the verse: 'we proclaim him [that is Jesus Christ] admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom'.

So first of all, we want to introduce them to Christ and as you will know we have opportunities during the course.

It's so simple. I would encourage you simply to sit down with the person, to explain 'sorry, thank you, please'. To pray for them, and to get them to pray the prayer.

And then encouraging them to grow in their relationship with Christ which happens primarily as God speaks to them through the Bible, so if they haven't got a Bible, I would encourage them to buy a Bible, or maybe even if they can't afford it, buy one for them yourself. And encourage them to read it.

And encourage them also to grow in their relationship within the body of Christ. People generally start to come to Church the Sunday after the weekend. So encourage them to grow in their relationship with Christ and within the body of Christ.

What should our attitude, my attitude be as far as pastoral care is concerned?

First of all be an encourager. As Paul says:

'Therefore encourage one another, and build each other up just as in fact you are doing' (**1 Thessalonians 5:11**).

It's so important that people come into an atmosphere that is encouraging. There is nothing worse than an atmosphere of cynicism and scepticism and that sort of atmosphere should never come anywhere near the church.

It's wonderful when people come into an affirming atmosphere. It's like a plant that has water and sunlight, it just flourishes and grows and I think we are right to be affirming and encouraging to the people who come because of the great doctrines in the Bible.

Doctrine 1.

Creation: Every person, who comes through that door, to Alpha, is someone who is created in the image of God. That means they are very important.

What does this mean to us; it means we should treat them as someone of great importance, whoever they are, because they are made in the image of God?

Doctrine 2.

The Fall: The Doctrine of the FALL runs through the Bible. Every person who comes through that door is a sinner, but so are we, all of us are sinners, that means we can't patronise them, we can't look down on them and say, 'What a dreadful lot of sinners you are!' because we are all in the same boat.

It's only through the grace of Christ that we can be forgiven. This is not the power of positive thinking; it's the real thing.

Doctrine 3.

Redemption: Redemption runs through the Bible right from Genesis 3 to the results of the work of Christ on the Cross- a transformed regenerate people.

Every person who comes through that door is someone for whom Jesus died.

God loves them that much, that he sent his one and only son to die for them, that is a very positive doctrine and that means that we should love them, because God loves them.

Doctrine 4.

The Return of Christ: One day Jesus will return and every person who has put their faith in him will be like him, with a transformed and glorified body. And they will be with him forever.

Secondly be a listener (not always a teacher)

James writes: 'Be quick to listen, slow to speak'. And that applies to every part of the course.

But it applies also during the meal, when we are talking to them. This aspect of listening to people - genuine interest in what they are interested in - is right at the heart of the philosophy behind what we do on Alpha.

We have found that very structure of Alpha empowers people who often in their own lives have very little in the way of power or freedom.

Alpha is now working in well over 80 per cent of the prisons in the UK and one person wrote exactly this on their questionnaire: What did you enjoy most about Alpha? Their answer was this: 'It was the first time in my life that anybody had asked me, what do you think?'

Thirdly, be a peacemaker. I think, on the whole, the leaders and helpers are not tempted to have an argument with the people in the group.

People are never argued into the Kingdom; people only become more and more antagonistic to the Christian faith because of any argumentative attitude.

And I have never yet met anybody whose testimony is this: 'I was an atheist, but then I met this Christian and we had a flaming argument and as a result of the argument I said to him, "Goodness me, you are right! I am wrong! I had better become a Christian!"' It doesn't work like that.

Rather than confronting them, listen to them. And be a peacemaker.

Now, the skill of the leader is to try and reconcile these two irreconcilable positions, bring peace and try and avoid that kind of conflict in the group.

This aspect of being a peacemaker applies also to the whole attitude that we have to other Christians. (Matt.5:9)

Finally, I'd like to talk to you about **commitment** a word that so often makes people uncomfortable.

Paul writes: 'To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy which so powerfully works in me'. We see there an amazing combination of our responsibility and God's grace. Our responsibility is to struggle, to toil and to strive, to labour.

That means a commitment to pray. In your personal prayer and indeed during our prayer sessions before Alpha, it's a hard commitment but it needs to be done.

It means being committed to the group and sometimes it's hard and disappointing because people drop out. But nonetheless, we aim to do everything with 100 per cent efficiency. We'll never get there, but we are aiming for it.

The reason we are aiming for it, is because we want everything to be as good as it possibly can be. (1Cor.10:31)

We want the food to be the best food in London. We would love people to come on the Alpha course, just because of the food! We want the talks to be as good as possible; we want the tea and the coffee to be the best coffee we can produce.

We want the small groups to be as good as they possibly can be, because we don't want people when they walk in here the following week to say, 'Oh, oh well, it is Christians, I suppose you don't expect very much more than this!'

We want them to say, 'Wow! This is amazing! These people must believe! I don't believe, but they must believe, because they have put so much into this!' And that requires energy.

But it's not just hard work and struggling, it's with all God's grace, with all his energy. We can't do it with our energy. It's the Spirit of God who fills us and I would encourage you to receive as much as you can during the evening; to receive during the time of praying beforehand; to receive during the worship; to receive as much as you can during the talks.

I know some of you who have helped or led on Alpha before, you have heard the talks over and over and over again and it's hard, but one of the things that we have noticed is that some of the people who are the most mature Christians are the ones who say at the end of the talk, 'I got something new out of that!' So, receive as much as you can and give glory to God as you serve and administer his care and grace to others.

May we pray?