

Christian Discipleship ... and Vampires!

Dear friend

I know it's a little later than usual, but here is my annual letter to the congregation.

In 1 Chronicles 12:32 we read of the men of Issachar, '*...who understood the times and knew what Israel should do ...*'. In his generation Aiden Wilson Tozer, the American Christian preacher, pastor, author, magazine editor and mentor, was such a man. He fulfilled the role of a prophet in his day and generation in that he was a *forth-teller* and a *fore-teller*: he powerfully spoke forth the Word of God but he was also a fore-teller in that he was able to read the times, see unhelpful trajectories that evangelical Christianity was on, and accurately predict the dangers those trajectories would lead to. Just over forty years ago, in 1974, Tozer expressed his '*...feeling that a notable heresy has come into being throughout evangelical Christian circles – the widely accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to him as Lord as long as we want!*' That heresy has not gone away and in 2015 it is still very much alive and kicking. It has produced many people in our day and generation in our land who profess the Lord Jesus Christ to be their Saviour but who do not live as if He is their Lord. This greatly concerns me. Why? Such a professing Christian is basically saying that Jesus, and what He teaches, makes no real substantive difference to his or her life. The Lord has no say or influence in decisions and choices that are made and this results in the life and practice of such professing Christians basically being no different from the life and practice of those who are not professing Christians. What is the problem with this? Why is this such an issue? Because it is crystal clear from the Bible that salvation in Jesus apart from obedience to Jesus is unknown. The word *disciple(s)* occurs around 280 times in the New Testament while the word *Christian(s)* appears only 3 times. Should we not take note of the significance of this? Today we have more of a tendency to speak about *Christians* than *disciples of Jesus*. It was no different in past generations. But the word *disciple* is more clearly pregnant with what a follower of Jesus is and does than the word *Christian*. A disciple of Jesus is a person who places himself or herself under the discipline of Jesus' teaching. In other words the term *disciple* carries connotations of obedience, and, Jesus' instruction '*...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Matthew 28:20) in a way that the term *Christian* does not. As a fellowship in Antrim town, in our day and generation, we must be fulfilling Jesus' command to follow Him and to work to get others to follow Him. In other words, our call is to be disciples of Jesus and to make disciples of Jesus. In light of these opening remarks can I urge you, therefore, in the early part of this new year, to pray for all in our fellowship who have a responsibility to teach God's Word, whether to boys or girls or young people or adults. Pray that our teachers will be model disciples of Jesus themselves and that the Lord will use them to make disciples of those they teach. Let us also pray for each other: that all who are disciples of Jesus, regardless of whether we have an official teaching role or not, will be obedient to Jesus instruction to be His disciples and to make disciples for Him.

It continues to be a privilege to prepare to preach each Lord's Day, and to preach each Lord's Day, in First Antrim pulpit. I am thankful to God that I was able to complete an exposition of *Zechariah* in the past Church year and I trust that digging deeper into this Old Testament Minor Prophet on Sunday evenings was a blessing to those who heard it 'live' and to those who have listened to it, or will listen to it, through the CD ministry. Towards the end of the year I began an *ad hoc* series on *Revivals in the Bible* and believe these to be timely messages for the encouragement of God's people in what in many ways are discouraging days as our society becomes more and more Godless and many of our brothers and sisters in Jesus throughout the world are facing intense persecution, even unto martyrdom. Lord's Day morning services were taken up with the continuing exposition of the Gospel of Luke and as we moved into our new Church year in September this continued. As you will recall, however, I did break into the series in Luke to preach a short series on qualifications for, and characteristics of, Elders in the Church. The Presbytery of Templepatrick gave First Antrim permission to hold an election for additional Ruling Elders this Church year and the series was designed to help the congregation with regards to electing new Ruling Elders. We have now had our election and I urge you to pray for those the congregation has elected as they proceed towards ordination. As in all of my letters at this point, I remind you that I sincerely covet your prayers as I seek to plan my preaching and to fulfill God's calling to teach and preach in First Antrim. I also want to assure all again that **I am always available, after either of the Lord's Day services or by arrangement at another time, to chat about pastoral issues or concerns you might have, as well as to answer any questions you have.**

We have continued to benefit from the ministry of our assistant Minister, Mr Philip McClelland. Philip has been Licentiate Assistant with us for the past 18 months and as well as, by God's grace, having had an effective pulpit and pastoral ministry, took on the role of Youth Club Camp padre last July and was also given the

responsibility by the Kirk Session to oversee the regeneration of our small group ministry. GROW (Enjoy God, Love People, Promote Christ) was launched in Autumn 2013. On 6 occasions before Christmas 2013 we studied Jesus' prayer in John 17 while after Christmas we spent 6 sessions working through Michael Reeves' work on the Trinity, *The Good God – Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit*. Having studied Romans 1-7 in the session before Christmas 2014, we have now embarked on the study of Romans 8-16. We are thankful to Philip for the time and effort he has put into this ministry and are also thankful to all those who either hosted or are hosting, taught or are teaching the various GROW groups.

In January 2014 we welcomed Heather Fry into our fellowship when she was appointed as Youth Worker in First Antrim. Heather has now moved on to other service outside of First Antrim and we wish her God's blessing. We are thankful for her work, particularly among the young people of First Antrim, and pray that there will be spiritual fruit from it in the future. In addition to all her other responsibilities in First Antrim, our Deaconess, Rosemary Spiers, took over the leadership of the Care Ministry committee when Angus Cuthbert stepped down from its leadership. We are thankful to Angus and Sara for their service in the Care Ministry over many years. Pray for Rosemary and the Committee as they continue with this vital work in our fellowship. The ministry team of Philip, Rosemary, and I generally meet weekly to report, plan and pray. Will you pray for us? Also pray for our Church Administrator, Mrs Heather McKelvie, as she continues to carry a heavy administrative burden, particularly as she works with our Treasurer Harry McFadden regarding Church finances. The work of both these key people is deeply appreciated.

The application to redevelop the Meeting House behind the historical front façade of the Church building has culminated in planning permission now being granted. Over the past year we had meetings with the Minister of the Environment, Mark Durkin MLA, and with Terry A'Hearn, the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) as we sought to move forward on this issue. We are thankful for all the hard work the Church Development Team has done in this matter and for the support given to the planning application by Rev Dr William McCrea, MP, and Councillor Trevor Clarke. Pray that the Lord will continue to make His will clear to us as we seek to move to the next stage of this building project.

In June 2014 I completed my year as Chaplain to the Mayor of Antrim, Councilor Roderick Swann. My last official engagement was to attend the Antrim Community Excellence Awards Dinner at the Templeton Hotel on 11th June 2014. One of the highlights of the evening was the Antrim Christians Against Poverty (CAP) Centre being given the award for Community Group Contribution. We are grateful for official recognition of the significant work the Antrim CAP Centre does in the community. Pray for Centre manager Robert Jones and Debt Coach Angus Cuthbert as they head up this work in Antrim. Michelle McCabe has resigned as Debt Coach and we are thankful to God for her faithful service in this role. May the Lord continue to bless this vital ministry in Antrim town and beyond. In March 2015 I complete my second year as Moderator of Templepatrick Presbytery. It has been a privilege to serve in this capacity for this time and I am thankful to all who prayed for me as I shouldered this additional responsibility.

Continue to pray for the Kirk Session of First Antrim. As a Session we have been spending time, and will continue to spend time, seeking the Lord's will as we endeavor to lead the flock of First. Many Session members, and some members of the congregation, attended Dr Harry Reeder's *Embers to a Flame* conference on church revitalization in February 2015, and all members of Session have been encouraged to read the book on which the conference is based. We trust that these endeavors will aid us as we seek to discharge our God-given responsibility to shepherd the fellowship of First Antrim.

Have you been wondering about the title I gave to this letter? A new multi-million dollar Dracula movie from Universal Studios, *Dracula Untold*, was released in October 2014 – but it has nothing to do with that! It is actually to do with the issue with which I began the letter – the whole matter of discipleship. Dallas Willard, in his excellent book, *The Great Omission*, speaks about *vampire Christians*. What are *vampire Christians*? They are Christians, argues Willard, who are produced as a result of the heresy Tozer made reference to in 1974. He describes them as professing Christians who say to Jesus, *'I'd like a little of your blood, please. But I don't care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won't you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I'll see you in heaven.'* We are not to be *vampire Christians*, or to put it another way, we are not to be *undisciplined disciples*. Or to put it yet another way, we are not to be disobedient to Scripture. Let us resolve to be followers of Jesus who place themselves unreservedly under the discipline of His teaching. Let us resolve to be disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus. Then others will see the reality and power of the living God in us. And this will be to God's glory!

Your friend and Minister

Rev Dr Bill Parker