

The last Census revealed, for the first time, that Australia was no longer a Christian nation. 44% reported they were Christians, down from 52% six years earlier. 39% reported they had no religion, up from 30%. I am not concerned, because I never believed we were a Christian country anyway.

More worrying, was the perception in the media, that Christianity was no longer relevant in our modern world. Rightly or wrongly, people think Christianity is doomed in our country.

It does make you wonder how Christianity – and our church here - will survive? When Paul went to Thessalonica, he taught in the Synagogue for three sabbaths (Acts 17). We're told what his message was: Paul "reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead" Acts 17:2,3

I imagine it wouldn't have been a popular message. Yet – a small number of Jews were converted, plus a larger number of God-fearing Greeks i.e. gentiles with some interest in Q. And quite a few prominent women, who would have had little authority in that male dominated society.

But then some of the old crowd from the synagogue became jealous "**How dare Paul steal people from our synagogue!**" I suspect his message about Jesus being Messiah, who was murdered by the boys in head office in Jerusalem, wouldn't have gone down too well either!

So they incite a mob from the marketplace and ran Paul out of town. Paul escaped to Beroea, – where he began another ministry until the Thessalonian Jews forced him to flee to Athens. At Athens, Paul became so concerned about the young church he had left at Thessalonica that he sent Timothy to see how they were going. This infant congregation of new Christians - should have had no chance.

Paul was at Corinth when news reaches him. I Thessalonians is Paul's response. Overall, he was delighted in their progress – they had not only survived but were thriving. There are a few minor problems he will address:

- Some were critical of the way he had left them so quickly;
- Others questioned his motives;
- He will answer a few questions about the Second coming.

But the letter is overwhelmingly positive. Which makes it a great letter to study, because Paul squeezes a range of fundamental lessons into a few short pages.

Remember this church was only a couple of weeks old when Paul was forced out. They had no established leaders – no Steve or Cameron with 3 or 4-years of theological training. No long or even short-term plans – not a mission or vision statement in sight! To top this off – they faced fierce persecution – much worse than the apathy we contend with today.

I initially intended to call this series "Church under the spotlight". But the letter says more about the Christian life, than it does about church. So I settled on a name that takes us from being mere observers, of a church in another time and context, to being participants – as God puts each one of us under his spotlight!

√ 2 **We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers**

Paul's opening prayer doesn't only put our prayer life to shame, (or at least mine!) but provides valuable insight into the Christian life.

v 3 **We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ**

He could have praised their work, labour and endurance. That would have been a good thing. Alternatively, he might have praised their faith, love and hope. Those also are admirable qualities. But rather than separating their actions from their beliefs he gives us this beautiful explanation of how our actions are driven by our beliefs

Work produced by faith refers to those things only faith can accomplish. There are many good, moral people out there. Who knows what motivates them? Your guess is as good as mine. But if they don't believe in God – we can be certain, God won't get much of a look in.

The work of faith means trusting God to change us, to complete the good work he began when we first became Christians. God will do that. I often recall an explanation I heard many years ago – **God accepts you exactly as you are. But he loves you too much to leave you that way.** Faith is not some sort of intellectual exercise. The work of faith has more to do with who we are, a child of God, than what we do. Christian growth comes as we develop our new character. A radical change occurs, as we transition from living for ourselves to seeking to please and honour God. God will do that.

But work also implies effort on our part. The better we know him, the more effort we put into understanding his will for our lives, the more God can change us. Faith does not operate like a light switch – its either off or on - you either have it or you don't. It's more like starting a fire to warm your house. It starts off weak and uncertain, but as you give it the time and the nurture it requires, the resulting warmth becomes increasingly obvious.

Later in the letter Paul highlights what this looks like as he commends the Thessalonians for allowing their faith to transform their values – seen in their rejection of idol worship and moral promiscuity.

Labour prompted by love is a little easier to explain, as it refers to our good works. The word used for love is agape - that selfless, other person focused love shown when Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross. Or think of 1 Cor 13 - agape love is patient, kind, doesn't boast, is not self seeking – I'll leave you to look up the rest.

So what does being prompted by love look like? In some situations, that's easy. I love my family, so I'm happy to help them. It's also not hard to help people outside my immediate family – provided I love them – or at least like them! But what about people I don't like? The awkward ones, or those who seem to just use us? Or what if my good works aren't directed to people – but to tasks – such as everything that makes this church run smoothly? Where does love fit in there?

There is a question in the Bible studies - do you ever resent helping others? If we are honest, I suspect most of us feel that way, at times. The remedy comes by considering our motives.

I help others because it makes me feel ... – *this is where I stop for 10 seconds to let you reflect on some possible answers.* I help others, because it makes me feel...

The selfless agape love Paul commends is not possible if we rely on our own resources. But as we discover how much God loves and cares for us, what others see as good works is actually God's love flowing through us. So, if you grow weary or resent helping others, the solution is to check on your motivation. Then ask God to correct your attitude by reminding you of His love for you.

And then we come to the final part of Paul's prayer - endurance inspired by hope in Jesus. We all know people who once believed but later turned their back on Jesus. Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians might be overwhelmed by their trials and persecution. So he prayed for their endurance.

Hope in Jesus means looking forward to the reality of heaven. That is what Paul is talking about. He will say a great deal more in chapters 4 and 5, in answer to the questions Timothy passed on to him. Until Jesus finally returns, hope is what motivates us to remain faithful and optimistic – even when tempted to give up. Hope assures us God is in control; there is a purpose in the joy and heartaches we experience. Hope inspires us to trust God no matter what, because we know how the story ends.

As important as hope is for us now, there will come a time when hope is no longer necessary. We won't need hope in heaven. When we are in the physical presence of God, no one will doubt his authority or question his methods. Can you imagine what being close and personal with God will be like? I have no evidence for this, but I suspect those who look forward to it more than others, will find that ultimate revelation more fulfilling.

Work produced by faith, labour prompted by love and endurance inspired by hope. That's a lot of doctrine in one little introduction!

Let me tell you about a colleague of mine, whose story illustrates what the combination of these three truths might look like in practice.

Abdul was the 2nd nephew to the King in a middle eastern country. He was second in line to the throne and would have probably been King before he died. But then he became a Christian, which is not a clever career path in a Moslem country. His family immediately disowned him. When his brothers tried to kill him, he fled to Australia as a refugee. He now works as a missionary to Muslim people. Even now he has to change his address every couple of months because of ongoing death threats. But as you talk to him, he never questions his decision to accept Jesus. He is so grateful for what God has done for him that he genuinely enjoys witnessing to other Muslims – as he faithfully tries to convince them of Jesus' love for them.

Contrary to all expectations, the Thess church not only survived but was thriving. How did they do it? What was their secret? We will look at some answers in the next couple of weeks, but there are some very profound reasons in V.4,5

V 4 for we know bros... that God has **chosen you,**

I realise this raises some difficult issues. If God chooses some, what happens to those who aren't chosen? How can God punish someone simply because they were not chosen? I have a couple of suggestions which I hope are helpful.

Firstly, all wrong-doing deserves to be punished. That's bad news for us all because, deep down, we all realise we are sinners. The good news is God's offer of forgiveness through Jesus is open to everyone. So, it's not a matter of punishing innocent people, but allowing those who reject God's solution to reap the consequences. In any event, if people reject God all their life, how would they feel if God forced them to spend eternity with him?

Secondly from our perspective, we are free to accept or reject God's forgiveness. If we accept Jesus, God welcomes us into his family, with the consequences that follow. If we reject Jesus, we remain under God's judgment, with the consequences that follow. Whatever being chosen by God means, if someone is not a Christian, it's because they have rejected Jesus, either deliberately or through indifference.

I've said this before, but I don't understand conversion. Why does someone suddenly change to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour? The good news is; it happens! So rather than fret over how or why - rejoice along with Paul - that it happened to the Thessalonians - and to us!

v.5 because our gospel came to you **not simply with words**, but also with **power**, with the **Holy Spirit** and with deep conviction.

As Paul spoke, people were convicted. In one sense Paul used mere words – as he logically explained the gospel. But the Holy Spirit then used those words to bring them to faith. People became Christians because God used Paul's words to convict them. I doubt Paul said anything most of us don't already know. While our brilliant explanation, or dynamic personality has a role, conversion is God's responsibility. That is why Paul was so excited about this church – because he saw God working in and through them.

That's the challenge I want to leave with you today. It doesn't matter what the Census says about Christianity. God...has promised to build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But he has chosen to work through weak and inconsistent people...like you and me. Because faith, love and hope – supply the motivation we need to turn our beliefs into actions.

We have a great responsibility as Christians in Kiama/Minnamurra. But the success or failure, growth or decline of our church – is all in God's hands. Do you realise Paul's...whole ministry in Thessalonica...lasted only a couple of weeks?