

Much Power

We all want to see the Church grow. It saddens us to see evidence of decline.

Tragically it is not just a loss of numbers that causes concern. The problem goes far deeper. There is little respect for the Bible. And many struggle to accept there is a way of life that all people should adopt. Instead personal choice reigns.

Therefore it does not surprise us the church no longer enjoys the influence it once did. But there is something more concerning. The church of today lacks some of the features of the church of the apostolic era.

Let us take, for example, the church in Thessalonica. The apostle Paul begins his first letter to its members with a comment about power. He reminds them of what God did. Paul told them about God, his plans and promises. When he did that there were startling consequences. He

summarises them. A single clause is used. The word of God, the apostle Paul says, came to them 'in power and the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (*1 Thessalonians 1.5*).

This is at the same time both a revealing and challenging statement. It is revealing in that it highlights what we can and should expect. And it is challenging in that it prompts us to ask questions both about ourselves and church life today.

To appreciate the force of what Paul says it will help if we mention two other facts about church life in his day.

Prayer

First, prayer was a central feature. At the end of his letter Paul instructs the church to pray without ceasing (*1 Thessalonians 5.17*). What he asks to be done he himself does. After introducing himself he tells them he thanks God for them (*verse 2*) and prays they will experience more of God's grace and peace (*verse 1*).

Prayer is vital. Without God we can do nothing of spiritual worth. Our privilege and responsibility is to express our complete dependence upon him through prayer. By means of prayer our lives are brought into line with his will. Through prayer we make known to God requests that

please him. And in prayer we articulate our thanksgiving, praise and adoration.

Paul and his colleagues prayed for the growth of the church. Their passionate desire was to see it grow in both number and spiritual life. They saw their prayers answered in Thessalonica. The word of God came to those who heard it in power and with full conviction. But how did they come to hear the word of God? At this point we should mention a second feature of church life.

Preaching

There is an ever lurking danger within churches. It is to rely upon activities, meetings and programmes. We see the need to reach out. We recognize the gap (or is it gulf) between those inside and those outside the church. And then we try to work out how to bridge it.

Thus down the years we have seen all kinds of evangelistic strategies and campaigns. We have seen different emphases as well. At one point there was a focus upon signs and wonders. Now the rage seems to be 'user-friendly'.

We do not doubt that we are called to use our minds and think through the problems and challenges that exist. But we need to do so in a biblical

manner. It seems clear that Paul and his colleagues pursued some kind of strategy, but they were not slaves to it. They travelled from place to place, usually stopping over in urban areas. There they would seek out Jews and Jewish meeting places. But their prime aim was to preach God's word.

Their message was distinctive. It began with God. They stressed his character and power as Creator; his promises and purposes; his will and c o m m a n d m e n t s ; a n d o u r accountability to him. And they made known what God has provided in Jesus Christ. Their goal was to be faithful. It was to point away from themselves and see God receive all the praise and glory.

The apostles saw that all this was to be done through preaching. By preaching we mean the proclamation of the good news of God. There are two elements to it: the content - the word of God; and the means - the making known of that word.

This is not to say that preaching is limited to a pulpit in a church or synagogue. The people of God, wherever they are placed, are to make known who God is, what God has done, and how he and his word are to affect the lives of all people. The responsibility lies upon the shoulders of all who believe. It is not

an optional extra. We are now in a better position to see what happened in Thessalonica.

Power

In Acts 17 we learn that Paul and Silas went to the synagogue, the place where Jews gathered. There, 'as was his custom' (*verse 2*), Paul 'reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead' (*verse 3*). They were met with two reactions. Some were 'persuaded and joined Paul and Silas' (*verse 4*); others were jealous, formed a mob and stirred up trouble within the city (*verse 5*). Our concern is to focus upon those who were persuaded.

How did they come to be persuaded? Was it Paul's preaching? Was it his skill and mastery of the facts and language? Does the explanation lie with the man or people, or does it lie elsewhere. 1 Thessalonians 1 points us to the answer. It points to a third feature of church life. That feature is the power of God. There are a number of elements we may note.

First, Paul indicates that the power of God was upon him. He writes, 'our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power..' (*verse 5*). In other words he was used and he

used words. But he did so in the power of God. That is something of which the apostle was aware.

Paul is not alone. We can dip into the writings or diaries of many preachers. It is possible to find testimonies that as they preached they became aware of God empowering them as they sought to explain and apply the scriptures.

Secondly, Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonica of what God did in their lives. They were persuaded the gospel of God is true. Such a conviction, Paul says, came from God. Their wills were moved as well as their minds being informed. It was evident to Paul and Silas that God opened their hearts to believe as he opened the heart of Lydia in Phillippi (*Acts 16.14*).

Thirdly, Paul states that it was the Holy Spirit of God who did this work. He is specific. He does not refer to some general, ill-defined force. Rather he speaks about the Spirit of God, the one Jesus promised. Shortly before his trials and crucifixion, Jesus encouraged his disciples by promising another Comforter, the Holy Spirit. He also declared that the work of the Spirit would be to 'convince the world concerning sin, and righteousness and judgment' (*John 16.8*). That Paul saw God do in Thessalonica.

Fourthly, Paul speaks of the gospel coming to those who became believers in Thessalonica in 'full conviction'. The terms could be translated 'in much full assurance' or even 'in much certainty'. Clearly we can compare this term with Luke's use of the term 'persuaded' in Acts. The point is this was no passing whim. God did a radical work within those who came to faith. The transformation was both profound and lasting. The converts were seen to be people who could speak personally and persuasively of the truth of the gospel. They knew it to be 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes' (*Romans 1.16*).

Powerful

The events in Thessalonica are instructive. They help us see not just what happened but also what we are to expect today.

Tragically the church of today shows too many signs of being in retreat. It is also deficient. The three key marks of a vibrant church we see in the New Testament are often fragile or wanting. Prayer, preaching and power were key features of the people of God in Paul's day. They waited upon and earnestly called upon God in private and together. They made known how great and wonderful God is and what great things he has done in Jesus Christ.

And they knew the power of God the Holy Spirit at work within them.

These features of church life were not restricted to apostolic times. They are what we can and should expect in every generation until the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Happily we can add that the Lord Jesus teaches us to both expect and pray for them. His promise is, to those who know how to give good gifts to their children, 'how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (*Luke 11.13*). Perhaps the weakness and ineffectiveness of Christians today is directly related to their failure to expect and ask (*see James 4.2f and also James 1.5-8*).