

## Turning Things Around

Sadly, in every local community, you will find people who call themselves 'former' church members and some indeed who say they are 'former' Christians. "I used to go to church, but not now." "I used to believe in God, but no longer." Maybe you know someone, even in your own family, who says they have given it away. It is always sad to hear, no, very sad to hear. They may tell you the reason but often not. Perhaps it was something simple. Like moving house and never managing to find a fit into another church. Maybe not finding another church like the one they have just left, or finding it hard to start again as newcomers. Maybe it is something more serious. Feeling 'burnt out' because of over involvement and they want a break. Then too, some have experienced poor treatment at the hands of the local church or denomination. Whatever their reason it is sobering and hard to hear. Others giving up is always painful.

Surprisingly, there are many people in this category. Recent church research has shown that 4 in 10 Australians are in the category of being 'former' church members. This may be news to us, but in fact 'giving up' has always been an issue ever since the early days of the church. Sometimes they are called rather judgementally, 'backsliders'. It can happen to any one of us.

Our Epistle reading today is from the book of Hebrews. This letter was written to a first century church that was thinking of giving up the Christian Faith. Many of the congregation had been converted to Christianity from the Jewish faith. They accepted Jesus as their Messiah. But a number of them were now thinking of going back to what they were before. Maybe they were being persecuted for becoming Christians. Indeed the first 12 chapters of Hebrews spell out the details of what that action would mean.

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The author shows that the Christian faith is better in every way than the Jewish faith. Christ is from God and is better than the angels, Moses and Joshua, any priest, and he is the only complete sacrifice. Jesus made the final sacrifice for sin and after his death, none of the Old Testament sacrifices were needed. And chapter 11, the famous chapter of men and women of faith in Old Testament times will have given these wavering Christians great hope and helped them to have faith and trust in God.

However the final chapter, chapter 13, that our reading comes from today, contains practical advice on what Christian living should look like. If they hold to this, then things will turn around. The power of Christian living will make an impact on others and will please God. So today we are going to look at part of this practical advice. And we will notice just how practical it is.

Here is instruction on love in the congregation, hospitality in the home, about prison visiting and the importance of marital faithfulness, about man's greed for earthly possessions and his fear of an uncertain future. In the teaching of these verses Christians are expected to be loving, pure, contented, loyal and full of worship!

Firstly, the instruction is 'Be loving'. (verses 1 – 3 READ).

Love matters more than all else. Here are three aspects of 'brotherly love' to consider. Brotherly love must continue. We are to be loving towards one another because we belong to the same family and the Father's love must be expressed in our lives. And this love must continue. Christian love is not an emotion. It is continual, practical concern. Love can so easily evaporate.

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Secondly, brotherly love must be generous. It is not just words. You see this love in practical action. They must open their homes to visitors and be generous with their possessions. In the first century, inns and hotels were notoriously immoral, unhygienic and expensive. So Christian travellers knew they could count on a warm welcome at the home of a fellow believer. How do we use our homes today? Do we hold a Bible study for fellow believers or an outreach group for non-believers? The home is an excellent place for such hospitality.

Then thirdly, here we have love being very practical. Visiting those in prison, especially when some of them were in prison for their Christian faith. Today Christians do not often end up behind bars in this country. However they certainly do in many other countries. Here, through effective prison ministries like Kairos and Prison Fellowship, Christians are reaching out to those who have lost their freedom. And the term 'the mistreated' embraces all those who struggle in life, it not always being their own fault. The drought has impacted all our lives. Keep love practical.

Secondly, there is the instruction to 'Be pure'. (Verse 4. READ).

How relevant is this for our society today? Both our own marriages and the institution of marriage have come under pressure from those who think differently and want to change our society. As Christians we need to show true love within marriage and not let the standards of this world as seen on our screens, become the norm. With this sexual revolution going on around us we must hold on to God's instructions for marriage. Sexual expression is for the marriage relationship alone. For the rest we should abstain. How hard this is for our young people to hear but they need to

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be encouraged by our teaching and example. It is immorality and adultery, not marriage, which will come under God's judgement.

Our third instruction is 'Be content'. (verse 5 – 6. READ.).

Here is another hard one for us today. Our society is so materialistic and the secularism so godless, this exhortation is so important. Our lives are to be free from the love of money and we are to be content with the possessions we already have. After all God will provide us with what we need and with what is good for us. We are not to set our hearts on riches and those things that perish, but work for satisfying spiritual possessions. That will bring contentment. The two Old Testament quotes underline God's wonderful promises. He will never fail us and He is our helper. Have you come across someone who is truly content? They do not wish for anything more or to be somewhere else. They have a real peace about them because they know God will always do what is best for them. Self ambition and greed are so destructive. Contentment says there is more to life than success.

Our fourth and final instruction is 'Be Loyal'. (Verses 7-8. READ).

Just as Christians are unafraid because the Lord is our helper, so the heroism and faith of former leaders is an inspiration. They were remembered for their faithful preaching, they spoke the word of God to them, and for the example of their lives. The church members were urged to examine or in modern parlance, to 'scan closely' the lives of such people. Those who have died, maybe as martyrs, leave a lasting legacy and abiding influence.

Then, since these leaders have gone we see that the eternal, living and changeless Christ is still with them and alongside them. He is always

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present with each generation of Christians including our own. He is the same yesterday and today and forever. Yesterday refers to His death for us on the Cross of Calvary when He died for our sins. Today He is the One who has gone on before us to heaven and is even now praying for us. The future is known fully to Him. And He lives forever, and as the Lord of history He will certainly return for those who are eagerly waiting for Him. Here is the letter's most famous verse. It brings us back to keeping our eyes on Jesus Christ. In the previous chapter the church was encouraged to fix their 'eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart'. (Hebrews 12: 2, 3).

Here is the clue to turning things around. Whether for ourselves, our church or our nation. Amen.