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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS:

Happy New Year! We hope 2018 has been a blessed year for you and pray for 2019 to be even more so. It is our hope to GROW in 2019: GROW in our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, GROW in the knowledge of God's word; GROW in our love for the cause of Christ; GROW in our love for our brethren; GROW in our devotion to worship God – you get the picture. We want to GROW and trust you are focused on the same for this new year.

We are thankful for the writers who have shared their time and ability with us to make GROW magazine available each quarter. We are thankful for you, our subscribers. A magazine, whether print or digital, won't accomplish much without readers. It is our hope that each issue encourages you and challenges you to GROW in the faith.

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Now, come GROW with us!

Cordially,
Sean P. Cavender
William J. Stewart

Living Stones

SHANE CARRINGTON | SULFER SPRINGS, TEXAS

“We are New Testament Christians, so we do not need to study the Old Testament.”

Perhaps we have heard someone make this claim. Then we actually read our New Testaments and discover the many Old Testament references – examples, quotations, prophecies, wisdom statements, allusions, etc. – revealing our need to study the Old to receive full enlightenment regarding the New.

Peter’s first letter is an excellent example of this. Note the following sampling of allusions to the Old Testament:

- “inheritance” (1 Peter 1:4) – Old Testament Jews had Canaan; we have heaven
- “the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you...” (1 Peter 1:10-12) – they heralded the coming of Christ Jesus
- “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16) – eternal principle straight out of several passages in Leviticus, including 11:44, 45
- “as of a lamb unblemished and spotless” (1 Peter 1:19) – Christ, the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system
- “...you also, as living stones, are being build up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices ... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession...” (1 Peter 2:5-9) – many references to Old Testament Israel and New Testament Christians as the ultimate fulfillment of these.

This is only a taste, but a proper understanding of the Old Testament is essential to fully understanding the New Testament. May we dedicate ourselves to that task.



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“LIVING STONES”

The original “house of God” was a portable structure befitting a nomadic people: a tent (Exodus 23:19; many times in 1 Chronicles). It was elaborate and beautiful, but it was still a tent. In the course of time, David wanted to honor God with a permanent structure. Since David had blood on his hands, God did not allow him to build it, but with the materials both he and Solomon gathered, Solomon headed up the construction of the permanent house for God (1 Chronicles 28-29). Yet even it turned out to have a temporary nature, for the Babylonians destroyed it and it had to be rebuilt. Whether tabernacle or temple, these only foreshadowed God’s true temple: His people, the church. The tabernacle gave way to the temple and the temple gave way to the church (1 Peter 2:4, 5). This shows what a blessing it is to be a part of God’s great blessings and work!

Whether tabernacle or temple, they had several features:

- They were centrally located in the nation, showing that God’s will and presence were central to that nation’s life.
- They were places where the people

approached God in worship.

- They were places from which God made His word/will known to the people.
- They were places where God made His glory known.
- They were constructed of valuable materials, showing the preciousness of their relationship with God.
- They stood as a testimony to God's presence among them, etc..

The temple was constructed of stones: things dead, lifeless. But as God's New Testament temple, we are "living stones" – alive, active, praising, serving. We are God's house/dwelling/family, fulfilling in Christ that old structure foreshadowed.

Yet in its rudimentary nature, the temple was still glorious and it was the place where God manifested His glory in powerful ways (see the inauguration of the original tabernacle, Exodus 40:34-38, and of Solomon's temple, 1 Kings 8:1-11). Today, as Christians, we are God's new, holy temple, and we manifest God's glory to the world.

When Peter wrote these words the world demeaned and persecuted those early disciples. This might have diminished their view of themselves as God's sees them, but suffering should enhance that glory by bringing to full realization the understanding that we are not of this world (1 Peter 2:9-17). Indeed, "if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name" (1 Peter 4:16). "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Peter 4:18). The old temple was glorious, but may we never lose sight of the fact that through Christ – regardless how the world treats us – we are more glorious.

Through prejudices some people attack and ostracize others due to differences in race, culture, gender, economic status, physical disability, religion, etc.. Christians sometimes experience these attacks (1 Peter 4:16).

Society may shame and reject us for following Jesus, but we are in good company for they also treated the Lord this way:

"And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 2:4).

God is the one who determines true value and honor, declaring Jesus as "choice and precious." Since we are built upon Him, regardless how the world views us, God declares us "living stones" composing His holy temple/house (1 Peter 2:5)! Truly, as God exclaims, "Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed" (1 Peter 2:6).

CONCLUSION

The rich layers describing God's work – even from days of old – in bringing His Son to save us pervade the Old Testament canon. A solid understanding of the New Testament requires familiarity with the Old.

The story of God's ancient people, Israel, actually includes us in at least two ways. Their story of slavery, redemption, God's gracious provision, and struggle toward the promised land of old foreshadows our deliverance from bondage in sin, redemption through Jesus, provisions of tools to help us in our sojourn through this world, and our struggle toward our home in heaven. Secondly, their story/history was to bring Jesus to this world to bless all families of earth with hope, and in Christ we are recipients of what God was working toward throughout that ancient time (Galatians 3:26-29).

In a world where the profane surrounds us, may we in Christ stand as "living stones" founded upon the "precious corner stone" (1 Peter 2:5, 6) – "the stone which the builders rejected ... the very corner stone" (1 Peter 2:7). In Him we find salvation, purpose, stability, mission, and hope. May we radiate these to the world by offering "up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Effective Members in the Body of Christ

JOSH WELCH | COLUMBUS, OHIO

It was about eleven years ago when I stood up after a quick lunch with my wife and youngest infant daughter and felt a sharp pain in my side. It was like nothing I had ever felt before. I reached to pick up my daughter out of her seat to carry her to the car. It hurt to pick her up. I said to my wife, "Something doesn't feel right." I went to the doctor and they ran some tests. Later that night I was being carted into surgery to have my appendix removed. I have not really missed that appendix. I assume it had a purpose. Yet, not enough to be missed. However, it certainly made its presence felt when something went wrong with it. How many church members might be described as an appendix? They are there and we suppose they are doing something. You might even hear them stir up a fuss. Yet, truth be told, if they disappeared from the assembly their absence may hardly even be noticed.

Now, some church members may be like the appendix. Others are a lot like the heart. You cannot live without a heart. It pumps blood and gives life to the whole body; it is a vital organ. If it were gone, well, then you would be too. We need it. We value it. We can see the good it does throughout the body. Yet, the heart is only valuable working in conjunction with all the other body parts too. As you consider yourself in the local body of Christ, what kind of member are you? Are you more like the appendix or are you more like the heart? Are you a member without a clear purpose or are you a member who is vital to the work of the local church?

The apostle Paul often used the vivid illustration of the church as a body and Christians as its body parts. To the Romans he wrote, "*we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another*" (Romans 12:5). To the Corinthians he wrote, "*Now you are the body of Christ, and*



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members individually" (1 Corinthians 12:27). To Ephesus he wrote, "*And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*" (Ephesians 1:22-23). Consider a few lessons we might learn if we will be effective members within the body of Christ.

Members must work. When any body part is not working, it affects the whole body. A leg is somewhat useless for walking if a person is paralyzed from the waist down and it does not work. A person whose arteries are clogged will soon need a quick fix or a fatality may be on the horizon. When our memories begin to fail and deteriorate it can be ruinous to everyday tasks. Yet, when all of these body parts are working at full capacity, we find ourselves in the prime of our life. It is the same in the body of Christ. When every member is working, we will be better for it. When members quit functioning, the local church starts dying instead of thriving. It does not matter how experienced, talented and gifted a church might be if it does not put those abilities to work. We need to understand this basic fact. No sowing results in no reaping (2 Corinthians 9:6).

The church is not a body part. We are a whole body. No one is so gifted and talented so that they can do everything the church needs by themselves. Even Moses needed to appoint helpers (Exodus 18). Even Jesus needed to put His disciples to work (Luke 10). If they depended upon others to accomplish their purpose, we must not think of ourselves as so high and mighty we can just do it alone. On the other hand, we are not so insignificant

that we are unimportant. Every person is significant in the church. We need each other for maximum effectiveness. Paul wrote, “...to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). Underscore the phrase “each one” in your Bible because it refers to you and your unique work in the body of Christ!

Appreciate the diversity of roles within the body. Paul wrote, “...we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function” (Romans 12:4). As Paul mentions in the Corinthian letter, “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you;’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Paul writes this to a church who was sharply divided over spiritual gifts. Some felt their gift or their office was greater than that of others. He squashed that idea. He asks a series of rhetorical questions in 12:29-30 to indicate not all people have the same role, yet that does not mean they are unimportant. He says, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Corinthians 12:29-30). The obvious answer to each question is “no.” Yet, each member is important in its work. Paul writes to Ephesus, “He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ ... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:11-12, 16). Note not every member has the same function but “every joint” and “every part” needs to be working in a mature body! May we never be tempted to look down upon an individual because they are not able to serve in the same capacity we do or because they have not achieved the same level of maturity we have. The diversity of roles within the church is a sign of its strength, not its weakness. So, celebrate those who have a different function

than you do. Appreciate and value the diversity of abilities each individual member brings to the table in the collective church. Admire the handiwork of the body of Christ!

Serve the Lord in the areas where you will be most productive. Paul goes on to write to the Romans, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:6-8). Not everybody is fit for every role. In fact, plugging people into the wrong roles can be extremely unproductive. A widower may not be able to serve in the area of hospitality the way an empty-nester couple can. A young, married couple with school bills and infants in the home may not have the same means to “give, with liberality” as an older, retired couple with a nice pension and paid-off house. A novice Christian may get overwhelmed when thrown into a role of leadership because his inexperience finds him unprepared to handle the challenges therein. The song service may be very unedifying if led by a person who is tone-deaf. Not everybody fits into every role. Yet, like our own bodies, this is what makes the church beautiful. All of the body parts put into their appropriate spots create a powerful and unified whole. We would not ask a finger to do what the nose does. We would not ask the lungs to do what the brain does. Each body part must do what it does best! One of the biggest mistakes we might make in the local church is forcing someone to fit into a role where they are not gifted, well-suited or passionate. God expects us to do the best with the “talents” He gives us as we serve (cf. Matthew 25:14-30). We have all been blessed with different abilities to different degrees and we must serve in the ways where God can maximize our abilities in His kingdom! So, find out where you are best-suited to serve and fill that role and, as Solomon wrote, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might...” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

When Singing Is At Its Best

COLTON MCDANIEL | SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

“I love to sing.” This phrase was a warmup in my high school choir, but it is also the way I really feel about singing.

My earliest memories are of singing Doo-wop songs. Yet as much as I loved performing with choirs growing up and no matter how fulfilling it was to earn good ratings at state competitions, no music is as pleasing as singing praises with the people of God. This is how God designed it. He created music to be naturally enjoyable to the human ear. But on top of that, He prescribed a combination of that naturally enjoyable activity with words of edification and praise to create psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Unfortunately, I have heard some brethren who say they really do not enjoy song worship. There are perhaps two reasons for this kind of thinking. First, they may not like the sound of their own voice. Second, sometimes the church has developed a somewhat stoic approach to worship – we come, sit, listen, and leave. In so doing, they have forgotten that God wants us to enjoy worship, not just to go through the motions. Both are common concerns, but it is the latter we will address in this article.

THE BEAUTY OF SONG WORSHIP

When is singing at its best? When is song worship beautiful? True worshippers will ask such questions if they wish to worship God in a way that pleases Him.

When it comes from the heart. When we sing to God and to one another, our hearts sing. The heart we present before Him must be filled with faith (Psalm 31:1). When such a heart is cultivated within us, it is nearly impossible to stop it from speaking (Psalm 9:1-2). A heart that breaks forth in song must also be a heart enraptured by the glory and majesty of God. When we consider the wonders of His creation



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and work, our singing will praise him in honor (Psalm 8, 47).

In considering the work and glory of God, our hearts will also bubble over with gratitude. Singing out of thankfulness is personal; instead of simply “Look what God has accomplished in us,” this kind of singing says, “Praise the Lord for what He had done for even me!” (Psalm 13:6; 30:4; see Colossians 3:16). And, of course, our hearts are most prepared for singing when we sing to God out of an abundance of love (Psalm 116:1; 31:23). From early on, love has driven people to song, whether because of romance, patriotism, or some other affection, but how much more should our love for the God of our deliverance and strength inspire singing (Psalm 18:1-2).

When it teaches and edifies. Each song we sing should be rooted in the teachings of the Bible. Consider Psalm 49:1-4. Here, the sons of Korah are not just referring to general know-how or secular proverbs but to the understanding that comes from meditating on God’s will. Likewise, Christians are commanded by God to take His word, consider it deeply, and then teach it to one another in song (Colossians 3:16).

Each song should relate a message that can

be easily understood because God is deserving and is honored when our minds are engaged (Psalm 47:7; 1 Corinthians 14:15). If we truly love the Lord with all of our mind, then that must include applying our minds in song. Songs are useless if they are confusing or so archaic that we cannot understand the language; again, God is King and thus is worthy.

When it is done to the best of our ability.

God deserves our best. If we are unwilling to give that to Him, we might as well nix the singing portion of our worship. One way we give our best is by focusing on what is taking place. Our hearts and our minds cannot be truly devoted when we sing if we are distracted (Psalm 104:33-34). Singing is a method by which we meditate on God's word. We are commanded to "let the word of Christ dwell in us richly" (Colossians 3:16). Thus, we must focus in order to glean the most from the song worship.

While giving the best from our hearts and minds is vital to our growth as song worshippers, we cannot minimize the importance and even necessity of improving our voices. Psalm 33:1-3 is powerful here. Though we do not use harps or stringed instruments in our song worship today, we must remember the Israelites were specifically commanded to use them, which means they had to take time to learn and practice. It was not enough to them that they could somewhat play; the praise of God was so important that they perfected their music until it could be said they "skillfully played." We too must prepare our voices and practice blending them together in harmony. It is not enough to say, "Well, God knows my heart." God deserves our best, both in heart and voice.

THE JOY OF SONG WORSHIP

What happens when we give our best to God in song? Many answers could be given, but the primary outcome which comes to my mind is indescribable joy. Certainly, we can see throughout the book of Psalms, as well as in the rest of the Scriptures, that singing is a sign of joy for those participating in it (Psalm 98:1-4;

James 5:13). The time we spend together in song is a time of rejoicing.

Individual Joy. When we bring to God our songs of praise and thanksgiving, it stirs something within us and we are moved. In James 5:13, singing hymns can certainly be a reaction to joy, but when we sing it continues to generate gladness within us. Remember when Paul and Silas found themselves in prison, their reaction to persecution was to pray and to sing hymns to God (Acts 16:25). Hymns bring us joy even in the midst of troubles and trials. Consequently, singing to God ought to be a regular practice in our day. In James 5, the language implies not "If anyone is cheerful, go ahead and let him sing psalms" but bears more the emphatic idea of "he *must* sing psalms."

Though we certainly can find joy when we conduct personal song worship, we also experience great joy when we sing with one another. When we come together, we are there for the purpose of stirring up one another; "one another" meaning there is benefit for the individual and the group. When we sing together, we must understand that not every song will have the same impact on everyone. One who sings "*It Is Well with My Soul*" may be seeking peace in the midst of trials, while another across the room sings, praising God because he is already experiencing peace.

Collective Joy. When we sing together, we grow together. As we join voices, we become bonded in a way that cannot be expressed. This growth is, of course, a primary function of meeting together in general, as well as when joining in song (Hebrews 10:24-25).

God has made it clear that He desires His people to sing together. Collective singing is God's will because of what it stirs within us (Ephesians 5:17, 19). Notice the phrase "making melody in your heart." We often get distracted by discussions of what this does not mean to the neglect of interpreting what it really says. As said above, when we sing together, our hearts sing. This mode of worship unites because we are pouring our hearts to one another. It is not just our voices, but also our souls that are speaking.

External Joy. When we glorify God within the assembly, others who join us and see the joy we share will (hopefully) desire to know more about it. I have recently heard it said that we must not allow visitors to dictate what we preach on or what we do in worship. Now assuming that we are not changing the will of God to please those outsiders, I must disagree with this kind of thinking. Certainly, edifying one another is why we assemble, but I also think of Christ's earliest teachings in the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light so shine *before men*, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16; emphasis added).

When we are together praising God in song and someone walks in, we should want to show them what true, spiritual music is all about. As we teach one another, we are teaching them as well. Our growth results in the growth of others. This is a scenario God anticipated in 1 Corinthians 14:23-26. Understanding this is in a context of spiritual gifts, a similar situation ought to be what we desire today. When people come into our assemblies and hear us speaking to one another in psalms, I have often heard them say, "The singing is beautiful." Quite often, those visitors return. Our singing is not just about bringing joy to ourselves but also to edify those who hear.

Divine Joy. But what we sometimes forget to acknowledge is the joy experienced by our

God in all of this. Our song worship is first and foremost about praising Him. We receive joy from it – and praise God for that! – but our songs are all about His glory ("to the Lord," Ephesians 5:19). If we are honoring God in our songs, why should He not take pleasure in it? This is what sacrifice is all about – praising God and Him being pleased with our offering. Though not speaking about singing specifically, Hebrews 13:15 says that when we give "the fruit of our lips," it is a "sacrifice of praise." In it, He is well pleased.

Song worship greatly pleases our Lord and God. In Hebrews 2:10-12, even Jesus loves to sing praises to God. The implication of these verses is that when we sing, Jesus sings with us. God is therefore an active participant in worship. In fact, worship would be nothing if Jesus were not here joining with us. Singing brings God praise and joy! Though Psalm 147:1 is certainly the sentiment of the psalmist himself, he by inspiration is also proclaiming the feelings of God: "Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; *for it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful*" (emphasis added).

To worship God in song is a blessing to all. How beautiful is the sound! How glorifying the praise! Singing is at its best when we give our hearts, minds, and voices entirely to Him; and when singing is at its best, true joy is found. "I love to sing."

Living Stones & Spiritual Sacrifices

WILLIAM STEWART | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

Construction analogies are common in the New Testament. From an early age, many of us sang about the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man who built his house on the sand (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus stressed the need for us to count the cost of following Him by speaking of a man who began to build a tower but was unable to finish (Luke 14:28-30). In 1 Corinthians 3, the apostle Paul called the church “*God’s building*,” himself a “*wise master builder*” and urged us to build wisely upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2 elaborates, calling it the “*...foundation of the apostles and prophets...*,” and uses words like “*building*,” “*a holy temple*,” and “*a dwelling place of God in the Spirit*” to speak of the church. These building illustrations abound.

We find similar language used in 1 Peter 2. Jesus is “*a living stone*” (v 4), “*a chief cornerstone*” (v 6), “*a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense*” (v 8). If we are in Christ, we too are “*living stones ... being built up a spiritual house*” (v 5). We are living stones because of Him – apart from Christ, we are dead in sin and have no part in “*God’s building*,” the church.

It is vital we grasp the importance of being “*built up*” or as Paul worded it in Ephesians 2, being “*joined together*” (v 21) or “*built together*” (v 22). We are part of a structure; one piece of a whole. When the bricklayer builds a wall, he sets one brick upon another, gelling them together with mortar. As the blocks are added, the wall takes form and becomes a strong cohesive unit. For a brick to be part of the wall, it must be used in the wall. The brick left lying to the side by itself, though it is a brick, has not been “*joined together*,” “*built together*” or “*built up*” with the others. The brick fulfills its true purpose, not by laying idly on the ground somewhere, but by being included in the wall.



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Living stones (Christians) cannot fulfill their God-given role by themselves. When we come to Christ through obedience to the gospel, we are added to the universal body of believers, but throughout the New Testament we see emphasis placed on believers gathering together, not haphazardly, but as local churches following the divine blueprint. Living stones cannot be “*built up a spiritual house*” apart from membership in and fellowship with a local congregation. The bricks need to be in the wall to be part of the wall.

By implication, attendance and participation are requirements. The apostle Paul used the physical body as an analogy for the church when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth. He stated, “*...God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased*” and “*...those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary...*” (1 Corinthians 12:18, 22). Local churches need their members to be present and active; every member, not just those who fill leadership roles. The pinkie on your left hand has a comparatively minor role to play in the function of your body from day to day, but are you not glad that it’s there? And if one day it were not there, I guarantee you would notice and miss it. Every member is important in the body, no matter how big or

how small.

If we randomly remove several bricks from a wall, even if they are “weaker” bricks, the structural integrity of the wall is compromised. The absence of some bricks affects the strength of the wall and puts more strain on the bricks that remain. Every brick adds to the strength of the wall and is needed. The same is true of the local church. Every Christian is a living stone and intended by the Lord to be part of the building project – the spiritual house wherein God is praised and glorified. When Christians are willfully absent from the assembly, it weakens the church. Friend, if we are going to be the living stones God wants us to be, if we are to be “*built up a spiritual house,*” then we need to be present and active in a local church.

Not only does Peter say we are “*being built up a spiritual house,*” but he also refers to us as “*a holy priesthood.*” Two distinct but related Old Testament images are brought together as a single image in the New Testament. The Jews had a temple, a physical structure, which was built as a place of worship and service. And they had a tribe of priests, the Levites, who were commissioned to minister at the temple. Under the New Covenant, the temple and the priesthood are one. The church is “*a spiritual house*” and “*a holy priesthood.*” We are both the place and the people where “*spiritual sacrifices*” are offered up to God through Jesus Christ. What are these “*spiritual sacrifices*”?

Writing to the saints in Rome, Paul said, “*...present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service*” (Romans 12:1). According to the command of God, worshipers under the Old Testament offered animal sacrifices to the Lord. They were alive when they brought them, but the process of offering them resulted in dead sacrifices. Under the New Covenant, you and I started out dead. Through Jesus Christ, we have been brought before God and made alive (Ephesians 2:1-5). The Lord now expects us to be a living sacrifice– to devote our lives to serving Him. Romans 12:2 warns against conformity to the ways of the world, and commands us to be transformed, to be

changed in our thinking, to have a renewed mind in accordance with the word of God. When our minds are directed by God’s will and when we choose to live by faith (Galatians 2:20), we are offering a spiritual sacrifice to the Lord.

In Hebrews 13:15, we read, “*...by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.*” When we gather for worship, praising God in song, exalting Him and His way in our worship, prostrating before Him in prayer, reading and discussing His word – we are offering spiritual sacrifices. A result of our diligent study of God’s word should be good works, which are counted as sacrifices to God (Hebrews 13:16). The New Testament has a great focus on the need for Christians to do good, to minister to others, to meet needs. Jesus cautioned us not to do good deeds to be seen by men, but rather to be seen by God, who will reward us for our spiritual sacrifices offered to Him (Matthew 6:1-4).

In Philippians 4, Paul acknowledged the generous spirit of the brethren in Philippi, who “*...sent aid once and again...*” for his necessities (Philippians 4:16). They supported Paul in the work of preaching the gospel. He confirmed that he had “*...received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God*” (Philippians 4:18). In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul reasoned with the unreasonable saints at Corinth about the importance of financially supporting those who preach the gospel. I say unreasonable, for they were unwilling to support him while he worked among them (2 Corinthians 11:8). In the first letter, he used a variety of illustrations to establish the point that “*...those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel*” (1 Corinthians 9:14). No one goes to war at his own expense; those who plant a vineyard eat of its fruit; one who tends a flock drinks the milk of the flock; when an ox is treading, you don’t muzzle it; the Levitical priests who ministered ate of the things at the temple (v 7-13). The support of those who preach the gospel, whether local or distant, is “*an acceptable sacrifice,*” a spiritual sacrifice, well pleasing to

God.

Are you a Christian? If so, you are called to be a living stone. You are called to be *“built up a spiritual house”* with other living stones. You are called to serve as *“a holy priesthood.”* You are called to *“offer up spiritual sacrifices*

acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Does your service to the Lord match the description of what He has called you to? Are you a living stone exalting God and building up His people or a lifeless broken rock unprepared for judgment?

Preaching That Converts

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The work of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is one of the greatest and most important things someone could ever be involved in. Preaching is simply announcing and proclaiming the words for salvation (Acts 11:14). Preaching is something that is desperately needed if souls are to be saved. There is a time and a place to talk and chat about the Bible, but there is also the ever-present need to announce the gospel.

WHY PREACHING?

I remain firmly convinced that preaching is something the church needs. However, not any kind of preaching will do. Preaching that is not driven by the word of God is unhealthy and detrimental to churches and Christians. Far too often preaching is seen as a time to not open up the Bible for study of the Scriptures; instead, preaching turns into a motivational / persuasive speech. While everyone needs encouragement and motivation, preaching is a much more serious endeavor. Preaching the word of God is about converting people to be faithful to God. Preaching is about saving the preacher's soul and the people who hear him (1 Timothy 4:16).

IS PREACHING EFFECTIVE?

There are no magic pills for the work of evangelism. It is work. It's "personal" work – it requires us to get busy and it is something no one else can do for me. Our culture has definitely changed over the past few generations. However, preaching is timeless and can still be effective today. Sometimes we may encounter people who "don't want to be preached at." We certainly should not have a sense of arrogance or a "holier-than-thou" approach in our discussions with people, but what I fear is often the case when people say they don't want to be preached at is they don't want to encounter plain, distinctive



6 via Kenny Eliason / Pixabay.com

announcements of Jesus, the church and morality. Hearing a difficult and distinctive message would require them to respond to the words of Scripture and be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Preaching will not win every soul to Christ; Jesus was forsaken because of His hard words and teaching (John 6:60-66). Yet, it would be a mistake to think of preaching as ineffective in the work of converting souls.

PAUL'S EXAMPLE

While Paul traveled on his second missionary journey, he came to the city of Thessalonica. He followed his normal custom by attending the Jewish synagogue and using the scriptures to support his preaching of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:2,3). Due to his persuasive preaching, some believed and joined Paul's group of preachers, while others did not believe (Acts 17:4,5). The unbelieving Jews grew angry and desired to get rid of the apostle. Paul was forced to flee for the sake of his life. On account of his rushed exit, Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, reminding them of the circumstances by which they were introduced to the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:1-8). It is in this passage of Scripture that Paul describes the manner in which he came

to them, preaching the doctrine of Christ which led to the conversion of the Thessalonians.

Some things never change, especially in relation to the preaching of the gospel. Some will always have ulterior motives for preaching the gospel. Others will use flattering words to deceive their listeners. For these reasons, Paul affirms several characteristics about his preaching. The way and manner Paul preached was successful in penetrating the hearts of his hearers. He was unashamed of how he preached. If we want to have the kind of preaching that will lead lost souls to the saving gospel, then our preaching must be like Paul's!

BOLD PREACHING

The way in which Paul introduced the gospel to the brethren at Thessalonica was in a bold manner (1 Thessalonians 2:2). Strong's defines the word bold as "to be frank in utterance, or confident in spirit and demeanor." Bold preaching does not seek to disguise itself, but lays everything out in the open, being easily understood. Boldness is a quality that does not hide sin but exposes it. Bold preaching will not excuse the ignorance of false teachers, but openly shows their falsehood.

Many people are ashamed of bold preaching. Many are fearful bold preaching will run people away from the church. People will accuse the preacher of being mean and demeaning or unkind and unloving towards others in their preaching. The sad reality is that anyone ashamed of bold preaching is ashamed of powerful, effective preaching. They are ashamed of the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).

Consider the preaching of several ministers of the gospel: Isaiah was bold in his preaching (Romans 10:20-21); Stephen told the Jewish council they were uncircumcised in their hearts and ears – bold words (Acts 7:51); Paul is also described as a bold speaker, who was incredibly brave in the face of serious consequences (Acts 14:2-7).

Do we pray for boldness in our preaching? The apostles considered the need to beseech the Lord in prayer for boldness in their preaching (Acts 4:29-31). A spirit of boldness is not about being self-reliant and belligerent, but about relying upon God.

We should never become ashamed of the truth contained in God's word. We must be bold and distinctive in our preaching. Those distinctions will be easily seen as we preach the truth of the one church (Ephesians 4:4), the necessity of water baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), and the error of instrumental music (Ephesians 5:19). Bold preaching will expose sin, command repentance, hold the standard of holy and righteous living, and warn of God's judgment against sin. Bold preaching will be void of any area of compromise with denominations/sectarians, postmodern philosophies, and political persuasions. Bold preaching will not make excuses for moral failures, nor will it seek to rationalize blatant sexual immorality (homosexuality, transgender, adultery, fornication, etc.). Any type of preaching that is not characterized by boldness is not biblical preaching! Preaching that is full of cowardice will certainly not convert anyone to the obedience of faith in the God of heaven.

HONEST PREACHING

Perhaps the most difficult thing for Christians to realize is that some do not preach the gospel out of sincerity. Some preachers have evil motives for preaching, thus it leads to a kind of preaching that is contrary to the gospel itself. Their preaching is full of lies – deceptive preaching. Paul affirms that his preaching was full of honesty and integrity (1 Thessalonians 2:3-6).

His preaching was not of "uncleanness" or "guile." He did not try to "please men" nor did he use "flattering words." Paul's preaching was never intended to deceive his audience. Honest preaching will never seek to deceive or manipulate the hearers of God's word. If there is anything that would distract listeners from receiving the honest truth of the gospel, then it must be removed.

A preacher must live an honest life. Hypocrisy in the life and words of a teacher will cause people to believe they are being deceived and they will not trust the teachings they hear. James warned about hypocrisy in teaching (James 3:1). How can a man teach one thing and practice another? It makes him a hypocrite and he will be judged for the life which he lives (James 3:1, 10-12).

Motives for preaching will become evident soon enough. If our intent in preaching is about gaining respect, admiration, and appreciation from our listeners, then we must be careful (cf. Luke 6:26). Honest preaching will have high regard for those who are being taught so they may be saved.

One reason many teachers fill their preaching with empty promises, shallow explanations, and deceptions is because some people do not want the honesty contained in God's word. They would rather believe a lie (2 Timothy 4:2-4). Since they love unrighteousness, God allows them to believe a lie to their own destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12).

No matter how unpopular honest preaching may become, we must be ready to present the word of God in a manner that is faithful to the message. God is a witness in our preaching (1 Thessalonians 2:5). He will judge all who teach and preach in accordance to how we handled His word. The word of God is what will give unbelievers faith (cf. Romans 10:17), not the lies conceived in the minds of men.

AFFECTIONATE PREACHING

Paul described his preaching as a mother who gave everything of herself in order to nurse her children (1 Thessalonians 2:7,8). His preaching was characterized by affection, concern, love and adoration for those to whom he spoke. Affection needs to be directed towards the soul of mankind and we must treat them with the same sort of concern that Paul had for them.

We must learn to join love and truth together (Ephesians 4:15). Preaching without love will only cause harm and destruction to a church. An abrasive attitude can turn people away from the Lord. Some do not look within themselves as they preach and teach. They do not reflect on their personal attitude or else they would see a mean-spirited attitude in their preaching the truth. They feel entirely justified in their attitudes. Do we believe that if we make a stand for the truth with no regard for love, perhaps causing some to run away from the church, that the Lord is pleased with us? We are sadly mistaken.

Affection should not be mistaken for tolerance though. Love demands discipline, just as a father who loves his child must correct him when he does wrong. Love will not excuse sin, nor does it ignore rebellion (cf. Hebrews 12:6,7).

Affection and love must be attributes of effective preachers.

CONCLUSION

Too many preachers are concerned with only preaching in a way to gain favor with their listeners. They turn to means and methods that are contrary to the gospel of Christ. Some advance a social gospel while others are praised for their encouraging words of the "health and wealth" gospel. This only leads to developing weak-minded people that have no genuine interest in spiritual matters. Sin is never condemned, nor is repentance expected. This is weak and insipid preaching that breeds weak believers and weak churches.

Let us all work to have an effective kind of preaching; preaching that is effective in presentation of God's word, edifying the body of Christ, and in converting lost souls. This is the kind of preaching characterized by the apostle Paul. We can easily demonstrate this kind of preaching in our sermons too.

Confidence Without Being Overconfident

CHUCK BARTLETT | NEWBURGH, INDIANA

I remember reading a comment made by a person who left the Lord's church years ago stating, "The problem with members of the church is they don't have confidence they are going to heaven." This person may well have encountered Christians who felt that way, but it does not have to be that way. Let us take a closer look.

The apparent problem that faithful Christians have with stating, "They are going to heaven" has to do with not wanting to be presumptuous and take over the Lord's role as being judge (2 Corinthians 5:10). Saints should also heed Christ's warning about those who thought they were going to heaven but were mistaken (Matthew 7:21-23). So, should the child of God think they are not going to go to heaven and that they are always in danger of being excluded from eternal life?

It's important that we see the distinction between trusting in the Lord and trusting on ourselves. All who are saved are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Therefore, we know God's grace is reliable and we are to walk by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). Even though people think grace means God overlooks sin, or that one can walk by faith without scriptural authority – creating a false hope – Christians know better. Just because so many people in their foolish thinking have convinced themselves they are ready for the Judgment day, it should not remove the confidence the faithful should have. Having said that, let us look at the dangers that the Lord's people face in being overly confident.

LETTING DOWN YOUR GUARD

The apostle Paul told the church at Corinth that they need to *"take heed lest you fall"* (1 Corinthians 10:12). There was a negative (warning) but balanced with a positive. It would be impossible to take heed if it were not



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possible to know what is right. The fact is, one can know they are doing wrong because they know what it means to be doing right and they are capable of doing it.

In line with all of this, the same church was told to regularly examine themselves to make sure they are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). By knowing the standard of truth, if we depart from the faith then we can always get back on track (1 John 1:8-10). Our God is faithful and just to forgive us. Salvation is not earned but we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

TRUSTING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ARROGANCE

For the most part, answering out loud that we are okay spiritually might cause others to think we are bragging or being arrogant. Even with the cautions put in place about being overconfident, it doesn't mean Christians should not be confident. After all, our confidence is in the word of God and His grace. The last thing children of God need to be doing is questioning the inspired word and having doubt. We are clearly told we can know the truth (John 8:32).

Consider this: a man is asked, "Does your wife love you?" If you answer yes, does it mean you're puffed up as if you are the best husband in the world? It could, but not necessarily.

Could it not simply be that you're confident in your wife's words and actions that she truly loves you? With such, is it wrong to have confidence and feel good inside? Obviously not. How much more so with our heavenly Father. He knows us and we know Him; we can have faith and we can be pleasing to Him (Romans 10:17; Hebrews 11:6).

We ought to speak like Paul and say, *"nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to him until that Day"* (2 Timothy 1:12).

HAVING HOPE WITH AN ELEMENT OF DOUBT

Christians are warned about doubting when they pray (James 1:5-8). If we are to have confidence in prayer, why would we think it wrong to trust in God's promise of heaven? Jesus, prior to leaving this earth, comforted His followers by telling them, *"Let not your heart be troubled"* (John 14:1). The Lord went on to say He would return and they could come and be with Him (John 14:3). Christians might feel that keeping an element of doubt is a sign of humility, but it is a lack of faith. It betrays a lack of confidence in the Lord. So when they face hardships, some forget about God entirely. Others may not forget about Him, but still have a lack of trust in the Lord, and are seemingly satisfied with it, as though such is OK with God. We cannot allow doubt to be stronger than faith.

When you read Paul's parting words to Timothy, believing his death was imminent, you don't find words of confidence coupled with doubt. He stated, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of*

righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Paul did not say "maybe" there will be a crown laid up for me that the righteous Judge "might" give on that Day. The whole point in having faith is to walk by it. No, this isn't confidence in self; rather it is confidence in the Lord who is true to His words.

KNOWING ERROR BUT NOT TRUTH?

Brethren are admonished to expose false teachers (1 John 4:1). If we are following those who teach error then we are just as wrong (Matthew 15:14). The point is, we cannot know what is wrong without knowing what is right. If one can know with all certainty what is false, then does it not make sense that you can have just as much confidence in the truth? This brings us right back to our opening comments – Jesus said, "You can know the truth."

Truth does not just expose error, it brings us comfort, encouragement, guidance, hope, and assurance. No apologies are expected from the one who trusts in the Lord and in the power of His might (Ephesians 6:10). I know Christians can leave the Lord (1 Timothy 4:1), but the faithful are to have the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7). Let us learn from our brethren in the first century who endured tribulations such they knew that if they endured heaven would be theirs (Revelation 2:10).

Yes, take heed lest you fall, but also, when you walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:3-7). May we truly value the blessed hope we have and walk with confidence, but not over-confidence.

APRIL 2019 PREVIEW

EXPOSITORY ARTICLE	The prophet Elijah makes for an exceptional character study. <u>William Stewart</u> will lead us on the journey of this prophet's life, victories and struggles.
CHURCH ARTICLE	There is a huge focus in the New Testament on tending to the needs of others. <u>Brian Sullivan</u> will help us to focus on biblical benevolence.
WORSHIP ARTICLE	"Do this in remembrance of Me." The Lord commanded us to keep His supper. <u>Sean Cavender</u> will encourage us to do so in such a way that God is glorified, and we and others are built up in the faith.
APPLICATION ARTICLE	The best known event in Elijah's life is the showdown at Mount Carmel. <u>John Maddocks</u> will draw lessons from the text to help us in our stand for the Lord today.
EVANGELISM ARTICLE	1 Peter 3:1 speaks of a wife winning her husband to the Lord without a word. <u>Keith Sharp</u> will urge us to understand the power of a godly example when reaching souls for Christ.
BEYOND THE BASICS	Reading is good. Studying is better. Meditation is best. <u>Scott Long</u> will look at the time we spend in God's word and focus on how we can best use our time to grow in faith.



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