

CHIEF EDITOR:
Sean P. Cavender

EDITOR / DESIGNER:
William J. Stewart



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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS:

Happy new year! We are excited for the year ahead and the prospect of GROWing in our knowledge, understanding, and application of God's word. Thank you for being a GROW magazine subscriber. If you believe this e-publication is worthwhile, we'd be delighted for you to share it with others. Forward the notification email, share a link on social media, or print a copy to hand to someone.

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Cordially,
Sean P. Cavender
William J. Stewart

Jesus In The Book Of Matthew

KYLE BOYD | WICHITA, KANSAS

None of the Gospel writers make a cause for Christ quite like Matthew. His attention to detail and methodical writing style results in a book filled with all the evidence one needs to be sure that Jesus IS the long-awaited Messiah as prophesied centuries before. Written to a Jewish audience, Matthew carefully lays out his case leaving the reader with no doubt that Jesus IS the Christ and that He IS Lord and King. Let's briefly examine three points Matthew uses to show beyond doubt that God's Anointed One has come.

Genealogy

Matthew begins his case with Jesus' lineage. As soon as **verse 1** of the first chapter, Matthew ties Jesus to David and Abraham. **Matthew 1:1**, *"The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."* In this chapter, some of the most significant promises about the coming Messiah were given to these two men. In **Genesis 12:3**, God told Abraham, *"And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."* In **2 Samuel 7**, God promises David that one of his descendants will sit on the throne, ruling eternally. The genealogy in Matthew 1 legally links Jesus back to Abraham through Joseph, His earthly stepfather. The genealogy included patriarchs, kings, and private citizens and would have carried a lot of weight with Matthew's audience. No longer did they need to hold on to the promises of old because Jesus is the promise. Matthew then calls Jesus the Messiah three times in the first 17 verses because He is the Messiah, and the genealogy supports it.

Prophecy

Matthew continues his case by offering powerful evidence through fulfilled prophecies. Throughout the entire gospel, Matthew reminds the reader of the many prophecies spoken long before. Then, Matthew shows how Jesus is the



1 via Aaron Burden | Unsplash.com

fulfillment of those prophecies. A few to consider: **Matthew 2:4**, *"And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For from you will come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"* This was spoken by Micah the prophet 700 years before its fulfillment. **Matthew 4:13-16**, *"and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This happened so that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet would be fulfilled: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, on the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light, And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, Upon them a Light dawned.'"* Isaiah prophesied centuries before this happened. Lastly, in speaking of His disciples' response to His betrayal, **Matthew 26:31-32**, *"Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be*

scattered.” Zechariah spoke this prophecy approximately 500 years before Christ. Carefully comb through the pages of Matthew and find many more fulfilled prophecies. Matthew doesn’t just tell you what happened; he tells you what happened had been foretold, and by seeing the connection, you may believe.

Miracles

Miracles are found throughout Scripture. From **Genesis 1:1** through the book of Revelation, God has used miracles to prove His existence and power. In Matthew’s writing, Jesus’ miracles play an integral part in proving His deity. Miracles also show His compassion, His power over the physical body, the natural world, and the spiritual world. However, most importantly, they prove that He can perform the ultimate miracle: forgive sins. In **Matthew 8**, Matthew begins his section on miracles, moving them into the centerpiece of his argument. Jesus touches a leper and heals him in **verses 1-3**. He then heals a centurion slave in **verses 5-13**, then curing Peter’s mother-in-law in **verses 14 and 15**. Matthew then moves on from showing Jesus’ power over the natural body. Then Matthew shows Jesus’ power over the spiritual world by casting out demons in the *“many who were demon-possessed”* in **verse 16**. And then Matthew shows His power over the physical world by calming the storm in **verses 23-27**. These miracles are significant to Mathew’s argument. So Matthew continues to inform readers of Jesus’ incredible power in **chapter 9**. He heals a paralytic; He raises a girl from the dead. He heals two blind men, and in **verse 35**, *“healing every disease and every sickness.”* These would have greatly affected Matthew’s audience since many of Matthew’s audience were still alive when it was written! All of these miracles are a fantastic case for Christ. However, of all the miracles mentioned in these chapters, the most significant is found in the beginning of **chapter 9. Matthew 9:2** Jesus forgives a man’s sins. There is nothing more important in all of human life. And these miracles mentioned illustrate that Jesus can forgive you of your sin! Out of all of the benefits people received in Jesus’ miracles, they pale compared to the benefit the world would

receive through the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection. I’m confident the words of Matthew’s contemporary, the apostle John, ring just as true for Matthew’s gospel as they do for his own. **John 20:30-31**, *“So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.”*

These three points are not an exhaustive list of Matthew’s case for Christ, and much more could be said. Read through the gospel and let Matthew walk you through all the evidence you need to believe that Jesus is the Christ. But what’s great about Matthew’s gospel is that he does not just limit his gospel to giving evidence. He also wanted his readers to know what Jesus cared about, what He focused on, and what His priorities were while on earth. All three can be summarized with one word: Kingdom. Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist in **Matthew 3:2** devoted his life to preaching this message, *“Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* After defeating the devil in the wilderness, Jesus begins His preaching by saying, *“Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand”* in **Matthew 4:17**. The kingdom of Heaven was atop of Jesus’ list. He taught more about it and emphasized it more than anything else. He wanted the world to know what this kingdom was, what it would take to enter into it, and what it would look like for one to be one of its citizens. The entirety of Matthew’s gospel is filled with the answers to these questions. Certainly, the word kingdom has multiple uses in Scripture. It can refer to nations, the church, or Heaven itself. Careful study of the Bible and the book of Matthew is necessary to determine which “kingdom” is under consideration. But first and foremost, the kingdom of Heaven is God’s reign and rule. It is His government, His authority, that He was coming to establish. The kingdom required Jesus’ divine sacrifice and the power of His resurrection to make it possible! It involves the church, but it’s more than the church. It’s the kingdom from Heaven brought down and established on earth through Christ that will one day be handed over to God in Heaven (**1 Corinthians 15:24.**) It’s the

kingdom that Jesus is ruling over on His throne in Heaven. Being a citizen of this kingdom is a choice. It's your choice, and you don't have to enter it. But God wants you to, and He's made it possible for you to be able to do just that. Enter His kingdom by joining His people and decide to submit to the King. Believe in Jesus, turn from your sins, confess Him as Lord and make contact with Jesus' blood through water baptism for the forgiveness of your sins. And then follow the teachings of Jesus about kingdom citizenship behavior, beginning with the great sermon on the mount.

If you want to know Jesus and need proof for His life, or if you want to know what His mission was, then start where the New Testament starts. Read Matthew. Let Matthew walk you through from start to finish of Jesus' life. Let the inspired writer's words have their intended effect. God's words convict, they touch hearts, and they change lives. The Bible may not have been written directly to us, but it was certainly written for us. The Bible was written FOR you so that you can be saved. So believe in the King and join His kingdom today!

Pondering Philippians: Congregational Profile

SCOTT LONG | MARIETTA, PENNSYLVANIA

THE CIRCUMSTANCES



2 via Gerd Altmann | Pixabay.com

Robbed of his freedom for teaching the gospel, Paul sits in chains. It is not the first time (and it might not be the last*). Yet, as a true bondservant of God, rather than bemoan his circumstances, Paul rejoices in the twin blessings of access to teaching the “*Praetorium guard*” and increased preaching by the brethren, though some “*preach Christ even from envy and strife.*” Even in his chains, Paul has cause to remember his beloved Macedonian brethren and pray for them.

On the second journey, Paul and Silas set out to visit the cities Paul and Barnabas had visited on their first journey (Acts 15:41). They had just met and taken on Paul’s beloved Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). After going through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 16:6ff), the Holy Spirit stopped them from going further into Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to Bithynia. When they came to Troas, Paul had a vision: a man of Macedonia (northern Greece) pleading, “*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*” They concluded the Lord had called them to preach the gospel there and crossed the sea to Neapolis and Philippi.

Philippi was not without note in the annals of history. In about 42 B.C., Augustus/Octavian and Mark Antony defeated the murderers of Julius Caesar, Brutus, and Cassius, signaling the beginning of the end of the Roman republic. Philippi became a Roman colony after this battle.

This being Paul’s first foray into Macedonia, it must have been strange walking into such a Roman-dominated city without even a synagogue (Acts 16:13). Yet Paul soon found the hearts of the citizens of Rome in Philippi to be open and caring. For example, down by the river where women prayed, they met the well-to-do Lydia, a seller of purple from Thyatira

who worshipped God. There the Lord opened her heart to the gospel (Acts 16:13-15).

As a result of Paul’s casting out a spirit of divination from a servant girl, which resulted in a loss for her masters, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison (Acts 16:16-24). As they sang praise to God at midnight, an earthquake shook the prison, opened the doors, and loosed everyone’s chains (Acts 16:25-34). The Philippian jailor, thinking his prisoners had escaped, reasoned that this was the end for him and decided to kill himself with his sword. But Paul yelled out, “*Do yourself no harm!*” The jailor, who must have had some knowledge of Paul’s teaching, asked them that all-important question, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” That very night he heard the gospel, believed the teaching, and obeyed the gospel in baptism. After Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship, they were let go and departed Philippi.

One of the beautiful qualities of the Philippian brethren is seen in their giving spirit. Paul speaks of the Macedonian congregations in 2 Corinthians 8:5, “*they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.*” Further, he calls them “*partakers with me of grace*” (Philippians 1:7). Indeed, Epaphroditus had come from Philippi to aid Paul in his imprisonment, “*a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God*” (Philippians 4:18). Paul is moved by the gift that Epaphroditus brought, who also became deathly ill while visiting Paul. Paul says that God spared his life and great sorrow for Paul. It is interesting to ponder that, although Paul had the miraculous power to heal, he was unsure of

Epaphroditus' recovery. Epaphroditus, too, had become distressed when he heard that the Philippians knew he was sick; and so, Paul sends him back to his home with this very letter.

THE MIND OF PAUL

The letter to the Philippians is fascinating for its glimpse into how Paul views himself and his life. We have already noticed his love of the Philippian brethren. He calls them "*partakers with me of grace*" (Philippians 1:7), "*my beloved*" (Philippians 2:12), and "*my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown*" (Philippians 4:1). He writes, "*I have you in my heart*" (Philippians 1:7) and "*I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:8). Without question, this letter comes from a heart of love for the brethren.

In this letter, Paul looks at the dichotomies of life. For instance, we see what life and death mean to Paul. He is confident that his deliverance from chains will come because of the prayers of the Philippians and the aid of the Holy Spirit according to God's will. Here, the Greek word for deliverance, or salvation, can mean "*deliverance, preservation, safety, or salvation.*" While many assume Paul is speaking of physical deliverance, it is clear it ultimately matters not to him. He will be delivered into eternity if he is not physically delivered from chains. Paul defines life and death in terms of what it means in his service to Christ. In Philippians 1:20, he desires that "*Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.*" So he says in Philippians 1:21, "*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" He sees both life and death as viable alternatives. If he continues to live, it is to serve the Philippians. If he dies, it means the blessing of realizing his hope to be with Christ. He tells them that such a choice is not easy. As we all do, he wants to be with Christ, but he realizes he can help the brethren. Selflessly, he chooses instead to remain alive and help the brethren. It is "*more needful for you,*" he says.

Consequently, Paul expresses in Philippians 2:16 his hope that his labors in Christ should

not be in vain. In Philippians 2:17, "*Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.*" Though drink offerings are made in the Scriptures well before the giving of the law, it is there we see them codified as sacrifices. ISBE defines the drink offering as "*A liquid offering of wine, rarely water, sometimes of oil, and usually accompanying the burnt-offering, but often with the peace offerings.*" This offering was poured out upon the altar. Here, it is Paul who becomes the drink offering, poured out upon the altar of the Philippians' "*sacrifice and service*" (Philippians 2:17) of their faith. He rejoices that he shares in their salvation and service, urging them to rejoice with him in this.

So what does the flesh mean to Paul? The Old Covenant, with its laws, had been nailed to the cross by Jesus. Yet, many Israelites insisted that the flesh was still necessary and that circumcision was still the sign of God's favor, whether for Jew, proselyte, or the newly-welcomed Gentiles. And so Paul warns the Philippians in 3:2 to "*Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!*" That is, beware of those who would compel you to honor the flesh and be circumcised. In Philippians 3:3, he says, "*For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have NO confidence in the flesh.*"

Yet if anyone were to put their confidence in the flesh, it would be Paul. He lists what he had been in Philippians 3:5-6. Yet all of that stature, those fleshly boasts, Paul saw as loss and rubbish or dung. Paul sees his fleshly attainments as no more than bodily waste. Could Paul make a stronger statement about his view of fleshly things and achievements?

Why does he feel so strongly? Because the alternative is as great as the flesh is vulgar. His attainments are loss because of "*the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.*" How could the things of earth possibly compare? Paul says his concern is to "*know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings,*" (Philippians 3:10). Also, he states so that "*I*

may attain to the resurrection from the dead,” (Philippians 3:11). There you have it. What could be better than the resurrection unto eternal life?

It is amazing to think that Paul, of all people, sees himself as not having attained to that resurrection, as not having been completed. He sees that he can do so much more to help the lost of the world. He is not yet spent as he will say later to his beloved Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:6: *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.”* As a result, he first forgets about the things that are behind (those things of the flesh, including the law) and reaches toward those things that are ahead. This mindset is crucial to understanding Paul. He had a past. Yes, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews and a Pharisee; he also persecuted the church and considered himself the chiefest of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). These things were always in his mind, but he had to leave them behind to *“press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus,”* (Philippians 3:14).

It is easy to understand Paul’s view of the dichotomy of abounding and abasement with such a mindset. In chains, Paul was glad to receive the aid that Epaphroditus had brought to him from the Philippian brethren. His joy, however, resides not in the fulfillment of his own need. Instead, he says he seeks *“the fruit that abounds to your account”* (Philippians 4:17). The Philippian aid given to Paul is good work on their part, fellowship in the gospel, and God sees it as fruit.

Paul’s view on being abased (*“Reduced to a low state, humbled, degraded,”* 1828 Webster’s) or abounding (*“To have or possess in great quantity,”* 1828 Webster’s) is not that abounding is not better than being abased. However, there were times in Paul’s life as there are in everyone’s when he was in want. Such is why the Philippians shared with him, as in Philippians 4:15-16, more than once and as the only church in Macedonia to do so.

Paul says, though, that he had learned something. He knew how to live in both

conditions, abounding or suffering need. We may think it strange that he would say he had to learn how to live in plenty, but the temptation to become comfortable, to expect that plenty to continue, to take it for granted, to be unthankful is always there. Paul had to learn how to live in want, with its physical and emotional discomforts, its temptations to be bitter and to steal. As Agur says in Proverbs 30:8-9, *“Give me neither poverty nor riches—Feed me with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full and deny You, And say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God.”*

Ultimately, Paul learned contentment. The 1828 Webster’s says to be content is to be *“quiet; not disturbed; having a mind at peace; easy; satisfied, so as not to...object, or oppose.”* Paul had learned how to be at peace even when he was in need and to be satisfied and not complain. When he was abounding, he learned to be thankful. How is this possible? Paul’s trust is in the Lord, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,”* (Philippians 4:13). As a result of his reception of their aid, Paul is full, abounding even in abasement, thankful, and trusting fully in God (Philippians 4:18).

EXHORTATION

In Paul’s instruction and exhortation, he says in Philippians 1:6 that he is confident *“that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”* In Philippians 2:13, he specifies that *“it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”* Yet, Paul says to them in Philippians 2:12, *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”* While this seems like a contradiction, Paul tells the Philippians to cooperate with the plan and will of God for them.

It may not seem that Paul is writing a treatise on Jesus, but Jesus permeates this letter, and the passage that deals specifically with Jesus, 2:5-11, provides the lynchpin for everything Paul is saying, from his attitude to the attitude and actions he urges on the Philippian brethren.

In Philippians 2:5, Paul says, *“let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”* The mind of Philippians 2:3-4, which Jesus perfectly illustrated in His actions. We know that Jesus was in the beginning and was with God and was God (John 1:1). Here He is said to have been in the form of God, the appearance. Although He dwelt in heaven with the Father, He willingly left that abode to come to earth. He took on flesh and the appearance of a man to become of no reputation and live as a servant. The Creator becomes the creature. Jesus did not consider His being with God and a thing to be grasped and retained. Instead, He humbled Himself and was obedient *“to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”* Hebrews 12:2 tells us that He *“for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame”* in order *“to save sinners”* (1 Timothy 1:15). It is not hard to see why Jesus did not have to retain His position in heaven and was willing to come to earth as a man.

Though His excursion to earth resulted in a terrible death, it did not end there. God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to His right hand, and has *“given Him the name which is above every name,”* that all people should bow to Him and confess that He is Lord *“to the glory of God the Father,”* (Philippians 2:9-10).

This example, or rather the mind behind the example, that Paul tells the Philippians to have within themselves.

Let’s look at Paul’s instructions to these brethren. We might group them into three overlapping themes of his letter, which we also see in the example of Christ. We see service, unity, and joy.

Paul’s prayer for the brethren in Philippians 1:9-11 serves as a general outline of the instructions he has for them:

1. Let your love for God and the brethren abound more and more as you grow in understanding and wisdom.
2. As you grow according to the will of God, you will show forth why this will is so good

for man.

3. Be filled with the fruits of righteousness that are in Christ.

Against the backdrop of this prayer, Paul weaves through his instruction to the Philippians’ exhortations to greater service, stronger unity, and fuller joy.

Urging them to greater service, Paul tells the Philippians, *“let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ,”* (Philippians 1:27), *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,”* (Philippians 2:12), hold fast the word of life, (Philippians 2:16), have the mind to *“press toward the goal,”* (Philippians 3:14-15), and *“be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God,”* (Philippians 4:6).

Toward stronger unity, Paul exhorts them to *“stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel,”* (Philippians 1:27), be *“like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind,”* (Philippians 2:2), *“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others,”* (Philippians 2:3-4), *“Do all things without complaining and disputing,”* (Philippians 2:14), and *“let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind,”* (Philippians 3:16). And there is reason to stress the unity of brethren, for among them, Euodia and Syntyche were not of the same mind in the Lord (Philippians 4:2). Paul implores these women who have labored with him in the gospel to be of the same mind and urges help for them.

With their devoted service to God and love for and unity with one another comes great joy for Paul and them. Paul says they need not be terrified by adversaries *“which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God,”* (Philippians 1:28). They *“may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and*

perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,” (Philippians 2:15). He encourages them to press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14). There is an excellent reason for joy among these brethren. Paul nears the end of his letter in Philippians 4:4-8 by saying, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!”* The coming you are longing for is near, *“The Lord is at hand.”* Rejoice! Pray to God, and *“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”* And *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there*

is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

What a beautiful letter this is! Oh, how much we can learn from it. How encouraged we may be by its examples and exhortations. Let us, indeed, meditate on them deeply and be filled with the fruits of righteousness.

*Paul’s imprisonment was likely either in Caesarea or Rome. It is not within the scope of this article to deal with which it was. Others far more knowledgeable than I have waded into these waters.

Psalm 95 – Worshipping The Great God Of Heaven With Heart-Felt Reverence

JOHN HAINS | SMITHVILLE, ONTARIO



Verse 1 – “Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation.”

From our Psalm 95 text, this 1st verse invites and encourages us to come together to worship the Lord in song! Our worship to the magnificent God of heaven is something He deserves – with all of our hearts – and to the highest degree! Our hearts ought to be filled with songs of praise – and adoration – because **He is great and greatly to be praised!** (Psalm 96:4). The Lord is so generous and expressive to us in love, mercy, grace, and kindness that we can’t keep quiet – as our hearts overflow with songs of praise!

Without question, prayer is a major Bible doctrine and subject referenced throughout the Scriptures. It is one of the greatest spiritual blessings the child of God is afforded to enjoy in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:3). How wonderful and incredible that our loving and caring heavenly Father has provided to His children this means of communication with Him!

how to pray. And even if we already feel confident that we know how to pray, no doubt all of us can grow more in this area of our walk with God.

I am very thankful that during the earthly ministry of Jesus, some of His disciples requested of Him on one occasion, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Jesus’ disciples were Jewish men who undoubtedly were taught by their parents to pray when they were children, and now as grown men, often prayed. But they still recognized a deficiency in their knowledge of prayer and perhaps their ability to do so effectively. So who better to teach them or us, regarding the subject of prayer, than the Son of God Himself?

So, how does the Lord, and the inspired men who wrote His commandments (1 Corinthians 14:37), teach us to pray? First, let us briefly consider some important ways the Lord teaches us to pray.

- **Reverently.** The very first aspect of prayer that the Lord teaches us is who we are addressing when we pray and how we address Him. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name” (Luke 11:2; Matthew 6:11). The meaning of “hallowed” carries with it the idea of venerated, sacred, someone to be revered. Certainly, the Creator of all things, the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present God, is to be addressed reverently whenever we pray to Him. So, let us be careful not to become nonchalant and casual about how we address the One who holds our very breath in His hand (Acts 17:25). Since He is the One to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13) and the One to whom we are to serve, we must approach Him “acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28).
- **Humbly.** In His parable, Jesus taught about two men (Pharisee and tax collector) that

went up to the temple to pray; one thing is made abundantly clear: God favorably hears and receives the prayers of the humble, not the haughty (Luke 18:9-14). “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). As the LORD said of old through His faithful prophet Isaiah, “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). King David understood, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). So, “humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

- **For our Physical Needs.** When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, one of the key things that He emphasized to them was to make the request: “Give us day by day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3; cf. Matthew 6:11). Expressing our need for food in this way, “day by day,” reminds us of our dependence upon God and His goodness to provide us with what we need. Jesus would go on to teach in the text of Matthew 6 that the focus and priority of His followers was to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (v. 33), and not worry about food, drink, and clothing. Our heavenly Father knows that we need these things and will graciously provide them (Matthew 6:25-34; cf. Acts 14:17). But it is important to be reminded often that though we may work extremely hard to provide for our own household, it is God still who “gives to all life, breath, and *all things*” (Acts 17:25, emphasis mine, jf).
- **For our Spiritual Needs.** Of course, as always, our Lord is primarily concerned with our spiritual needs. So He instructed His disciples to pray: “And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Luke 11:4). Our sins against God (Romans 3:23; 1 John 3:4) are accurately described as “debts” (Matthew 6:12). They are a debt owed that we cannot possibly ever pay or “make up for,” thus, we are fully relying on

God’s mercy and grace to take our debts away. For the child of God, this is to be done by confession, repentance, and prayer (1 John 1:9; Acts 8:22). Jesus also makes it abundantly clear that God’s willingness to forgive us is dependent upon our willingness to forgive those who sin against us (Matthew 6:12, 14-15). Prayer to God is also vital in resisting and overcoming the temptations of the evil one. Paul exhorts saints to put on the whole armor of God, as well as “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18). And Jesus instructed His disciples in the Garden to: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41).

- **For the Spread of the Gospel.** In what is often referred to as the “Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus taught His disciples to pray “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2; Matthew 6:10). At the time, the “kingdom” (i.e., the Church) was “at hand” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17), but still future. But now the kingdom, the Lord’s church, has been established (Matthew 16:18; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). Members of the household of God should continue to pray for the Lord’s church – for the gospel to be preached near, far, and wide – for the borders of the spiritual kingdom to expand – and for precious souls to continue to be added to it by the Lord (Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul wrote to churches, exhorting them to pray for more opportunities to spread the gospel. He said, “meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak” (Colossians 4:3-4). “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you” (2 Thessalonians 3:1). The harvest of lost souls is plentiful, but the laborers are few, so let us “pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:38).

- **Filled with Praise.** Jesus ends His instructive prayer with these words of praise, “For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen” (Matthew 6:13). Our prayers ought to be filled with praise to God (Hebrews 13:15). Paul penned to the saints in Philippi, “Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Philippians 4:20). As he wrote to Timothy, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17). As Peter declared to the saints: “that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11). Jude ends his short epistle with these words: “To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen” (v. 25). “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!” (Psalm 150:6).
- **Through Jesus Christ.** Jesus taught His disciples “that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” (John 15:16; cf. 14:13-14; 16:23-24, 26). The apostle Paul declared: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). How fortunate we are that we have “a merciful and faithful High Priest” (Hebrews 2:17) who can “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15); therefore, we can “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). And what a blessed and reassuring truth that our Savior “lives to make intercession” for the saints (Hebrews 7:25)!
- **According to God’s Will.** Jesus also teaches us to pray to God, saying, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Luke 11:2; Matthew 6:10). Seeking the will of His Father in heaven was always at the heart of what Jesus did (John 5:30; 6:38; Matthew 26:39, 42), and so must it be with us in our lives and expressed in our prayers. Our prayers are not to be centered around our will, wants, and desires, but rather God’s perfect will. When we remember to focus our prayer requests around the will of God, the Bible tells us that we can have great confidence in God hearing and answering our prayers. “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 John 5:14-15).
- **With Faith.** No matter how well-expressed, eloquent, and lengthy our prayers may be, they are voiced in vanity if they are void of faith. In the New Testament book of James, we read: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. **But let him ask in faith, with no doubting**, (emphasis mine, jf) for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (1:5-8). Did you catch what James stated here? If we ask things of God (such as wisdom) with doubts within us (i.e., lacking in faith), we will not receive anything from Him! As Jesus taught His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, **believing**, you will receive” (Matthew 21:21-22, emphasis mine, jf). So let us pray with confidence, trust, and faith!
- **Steadfastly.** Those who first obeyed the gospel on the day of Pentecost are described as “continuing steadfastly...in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Paul instructed the saints living in Rome: “continuing steadfastly in prayer” (Romans 12:12). The Greek word for steadfastly literally means: “to be earnest towards, that is, (to a thing) to persevere, be constantly diligent...to adhere closely to” (Strong’s Hebrew & Greek Dictionaries). This is exactly what Paul was exhorting the brethren in

Thessalonica to do when he wrote to them to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Even when the odds seem to be against us, we must continue to pray to God and not lose heart (Luke 18:1), remembering that we are praying to the One “who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20).

- **In Righteousness.** James declared: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16). Notice that James did not state that the prayer of just anyone can accomplish much, but the effective prayer of an upright man or woman certainly can! After all, as Peter penned: “For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:12). For example, remember that Peter warned husbands that their prayers to God could be hindered if they were not treating their wives in a godly manner (1 Peter 3:7). We cannot expect a holy God to hear and answer the prayers of people living unholy lives (cf. Isaiah 59:1-2). Dear Christian, if you want your prayer to be received by Almighty God, then strive to consistently walk in the light as He is in the light (1 John 1:5-6).
- **For Those in Authority.** Paul exhorts Christians to pray for those who are in positions of authority in civil government. God Himself has ordained the governing authorities (Romans 13:1). He calls upon saints to pray for their leaders regardless of their politics and policies. “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Notice the reason the apostle gives for why Christians are to pray for all who are in authority. He states, “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.” It is for our benefit that we

would remember them in our prayers.

- **When Filled with Anxiety.** Whether one is reading in the Old Testament or the New Testament, the message of Scripture is clear, God does not want His children to be filled with anxiety. At times in our lives, anxious thoughts will multiply within us (Psalm 94:19), weighing our hearts down (Proverbs 12:25). The inspired apostle Paul tells the Christian that praying to our heavenly Father is a wonderful solution in taking away our anxieties and replacing it with the peace of God. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). The God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3) wants us to cast all our anxieties upon Him because He cares for us so deeply (1 Peter 5:7).
- **When we are Suffering.** James asked, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray” (5:13). He said if any brethren were sick, they should summon the elders of the church to pray over the one who was sick (5:14-16). Paul prayed to the Lord when he was suffering with a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). He pleaded with the Lord three times to remove it. The answer that he received was: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul humbly accepted such an answer and said: “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” David rightly declared: “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all” (Psalm 34:17-19).
- **With Thanksgiving.** I am afraid a key element often left out of our prayers is remembering to give God thanks. But when

you stop and look at the prayer Scriptures in the New Testament, you will notice how often “thanks” and thanksgiving” are included. Of course, the book of Psalms is saturated with prayers and songs of thanksgiving to the Lord. Let us recall that Paul wrote: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, **with thanksgiving**, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6, emphasis mine, jf). “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it **with thanksgiving**” (Colossians 4:2, emphasis mine, jf). How important is it for the Christian to remember to give God thanks? Paul tells us in

Ephesians 5:20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:18. “giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” As the psalmist declared, “Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!” (107:8).

“Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). He will, and He does if we are willing to learn from Him and then put His teachings about prayer into practice in our day-to-day lives.

The Dangers of Not Growing

REAGAN MCCLENNY | LUFKIN, TEXAS

2 Peter 1:5-7 describes “adding” important qualities to our Christian character. Some people describe this list as a ladder with each quality as a rung, but that can leave the wrong impression. These are not qualities that we work on one at a time and leave one “complete” to move on the next. Instead, a better image is of a single instrument playing, and another and another are added in perfect harmony until a full orchestra is playing. So, when all the instruments are added, is the process complete? I would suggest that the process is only beginning in earnest! A high school orchestra has (basically) all the same instruments as a professional one. The primary difference in the quality of their performance is a matter of growth.

As the father who cried out to Jesus, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24), there is still growth to be had with each quality even if we possess some measure of all of them. Peter makes this truth clear as he continues.

2 Peter 1:8 “For if these qualities are yours and are increasing...”

Peter is describing growth in these areas and emphasizing that growth is a prerequisite to everything he will speak of next. Of all the issues we might have in our Christian walk, we might not view lack of growth as a major concern compared to more explicitly “sinful” problems. Still, this text tells us that the dangers of not growing are real and serious!

Think of lack of growth as a spiritual heart attack. It is not a singular, isolated incident but is caused by and reveals several things in our spiritual health. First, there are the immediate symptoms that tell us something is wrong. Then there are the underlying causes that we must address. Finally, there is the future prognosis about any changes we may need to make.



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The Immediate Symptoms:

Lack of Growth Makes Us Ineffective and Unfruitful in the Knowledge of the Lord Jesus—“they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (v8b)

It stands to reason that if these things are NOT in us and growing, we WILL be barren and unfruitful (even in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ).

Peter has made it clear already at the beginning of this epistle how important the “knowledge of the Lord Jesus” is to our Christian life (v2-3). He will go on to warn about false teachers who subvert this knowledge and lead people astray with deceptive words, even those who have “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2:20).

This knowledge, as incredibly powerful and important as it is, is not enough on its own. Amazingly, even if we “know” all about Jesus, we will still be worthless and unfruitful if we stop growing. Vines defines “barren” as “idle, yielding no return, because of inactivity.” A suggested synonym is “unemployed.” We

aren't DOING anything in our service to God because we've stopped growing! God always wants us to be effective and productive in His service, and He provides the tools necessary for that continued growth (Matthew 13:20-23; Luke 13:6-9).

Isn't that what Peter is saying in 2 Peter 2:20-21? Instead of growing, progressing, and producing, these brethren regressed to what they were before they were Christians. They had the knowledge, so what was the problem? The main problem was that they didn't grow to the point that they could see the emptiness of the false teachers' allurements and resist them. As a result, there was no "adding to" and "increasing" in their faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love!

While lack of growth is dangerous in and of itself, it is also symptomatic of other, deeper problems. Thus, it becomes diagnostic of other dangers.

The Underlying Causes:

1. Spiritual Blindness and Nearsightedness —"For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind" (v9a)

Much has been made of Peter's unusual word order here, but I suggest it fits with the progression of Peter's thoughts regarding the inability to see.

When we are blind, we can't see our current condition. Spiritually, those who aren't growing have stopped seeing themselves the way they really are. They have a perception of their own righteousness based on the past ("I have become a Christian," "I've worked for the Lord before," etc.), but they don't see their present weakened condition. A lukewarm, lackadaisical approach to our spiritual life, where we rest on our laurels of perceived faithfulness, causes us to stop growing (Revelation 3:15-17).

When we are nearsighted, we can't see very far off. If we have nearsighted eyes, we can only see what is right in front of us. If we have nearsighted hearts, we can only see the physical things of this earth (that are right in

front of us) and not things of a spiritual nature. We can't see things that are afar, things that are coming, the things in the future.

Growth inherently looks to the future. We ask questions like, "How can I get better?" and "What can I do next in service to the Lord?" but Christians who stop growing stop looking to the future. If we stop looking to the future, we don't consider what we should be doing next, what is coming next, or even the judgment (which is spiritual in nature). After describing this coming judgment later in the epistle, Peter says, "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; (15) and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation..." (2 Peter 3:14-15).

But it's not just that we can't see the present or the future when we aren't growing; we don't see the past clearly either.

2. Spiritual Forgetfulness—"...having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins." (9b)

When we are forgetful, we are "blind" to the past. Specifically, we forget the cleansing of our sins that came as a result of God's grace! We forget what Jesus has done for us. Peter's letter was all about "reminding" these brethren of what they should have already known (2 Peter 1:2-4, 12-14). His final reminder is about growing in grace and knowledge instead of forgetting that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and the Christ!

2 Peter 3:18 "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen."

By this grace, we have escaped the corruption, depravity, and pollution of this world (1:4, 2:20). We have escaped from those who live in error through the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2:18). Not only does God's grace provide an escape, but we are also given "entrance" into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord (1:12).

Spiritual forgetfulness causes us to lack any gratitude for God's grace. Look at what God

has done for you! Remember it well. Such gratitude is one of our strongest motivators for growth.

Not growing isn't just dangerous and revealing; it is also predictive. It invariably leads to something else if left unchecked.

The Future Prognosis:

Continued Lack of Growth Precedes A Coming Fall from Our Calling and Election—"Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall." (v10)

Again, the opposite is true. If we DO NOT do

these things, we WILL stumble and fall! Literally, "suffer a reverse." I was a faithful Christian, but I reversed course and went back to sin (as in 2 Peter 2:18-20, above).

2 Peter 3:17 "You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked..."

Thank God Peter does not just express growth in terms of danger but also in victory! If we grow in the qualities Peter lists in 1:5-7, we will NEVER STUMBLE with a spiritual perspective and an appreciation of God's grace. Only growing Christians can achieve such lofty heights and obtain such precious promises!

A Tale Of Three Cities

SEAN CAVENDER | WICHITA, KANSAS

It is curious how one person can preach and teach the same thing in various places yet yield many different responses from their audience. This frequently happens in the New Testament, especially in the apostle Paul's preaching. In Acts 17, when Paul was on his second missionary journey, he departed Philippi. He came to three cities in rapid succession:

Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Although Paul was forced to leave those cities because of persecution, he made the best use of his time by preaching the gospel of King Jesus. Paul varied his approach based upon who his audience was. He would speak to Jews differently than to idolatrous Gentiles. Yet, the gospel was unchanged: salvation was through God's appointed Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

Acts 17 is easily be outlined and summarized in this way:

- Thessalonica: some Jews believed, several Gentiles and women believed, but many Jews were jealous
- Berea: many Jews and Gentiles believed
- Athens: many Gentiles were curious, but few were obedient

THESSALONICA

First, Paul went to the Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica. He was there for three Sabbaths, reasoning with them from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed God's Anointed One (Acts 17:1-3). One of the pieces of evidence Paul used was the crucifixion of Jesus. Passages in the Old



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Testament such as Isaiah 53 prophesied about the brutal death of God's Servant or Psalm 22, which spoke of the mocking and excruciating anguish that the Messiah must suffer. The crucifixion of Jesus certainly fulfilled these Old Testament prophecies — and some in the Jewish synagogues became convinced and believed. Acts 17:4 states that "some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas."

Along with these Jewish converts, several of the Gentiles were persuaded by Paul's preaching. Luke records that a "large number

of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women" came to faith, thanks partly to Paul's reasoning from the Scriptures. As a result of these open-minded believers, a church was established in Thessalonica. Paul wrote a couple of letters to the Thessalonian Christians that we can read in the New Testament.

In three short weeks, Paul formed a local church in the city. Nevertheless, several were angered because of Paul's preaching. The majority of the Jews did not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and became jealous. They created an atmosphere that was antagonistic to Paul's preaching. The unbelievers formed a mob and started an uproar in the city marketplace, leading to an attack on Jason's house (Acts 17:5). These unbelieving, angry Jews accused Paul of "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The angry mob wanted the city authorities to be on their side, so they accused Paul of subverting the Roman Empire and suggesting another was king, Jesus (Acts

17:7). This accusation was misleading. While it is true that Jesus is King over His kingdom, Paul was not encouraging a revolt from the Roman authority. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world; it is a spiritual kingdom (John 18:36). The unbelieving Jews were deceptive, trying to turn the local authorities against Paul and Silas.

The pressure tactic worked to some degree. Jason paid off the ransom that the attackers were demanding. The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away in the middle of the night (Acts 17:9-10).

BEREA

Upon their arrival in Berea, Paul and Silas went to the Jewish synagogue to preach that Jesus was indeed the Christ. Luke describes the Jewish synagogue in Berea as being "more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica" because they were eager to receive the word of God, and they examined the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11). The truth of the gospel fell upon the good and honest hearts of those Jews in Berea. The Bible says "many of them believed" (Acts 17:12). Also, a good number of Gentile women and men were converted. The Bereans are an excellent example that shows us the importance of being open-minded and fair in our hearing. They demonstrated a willingness to examine God's word every day and a desire to repent to be right with God. These Bereans had been following Judaism, but they came to believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Of course, the devil will always seek to uproot what God has planted. The wicked and unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica heard about Paul preaching the gospel of Christ in Berea, so they came to Berea to turn the crowds against Paul and Silas. These persecutors again forced Paul to leave Berea and to separate the preaching team (Acts 17:14).

ATHENS

The third and final city Paul visited in Acts 17 is the city of Athens. Paul arrived there and first went to the Jewish synagogue (Acts 17:17). He quickly began to engage with the Gentiles and

Greek philosophers (Acts 17:17-18). While we do not know everything Paul said, he was preaching the gospel — the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:18).

In the Greek city, it was not unusual for new teachings to be discussed openly and debated. Many people seemed to enjoy the discussions and dialogue about new ideas (Acts 17:20-21). Paul's sermon in Athens is an incredible example of how to begin a conversation with people's initial understanding and then introducing them to new ideas by teaching them the truth. Paul's approach was different in Athens than in Thessalonica, but the content was the same. These people needed to believe in God and Jesus, repent of their sins, and be ready for the final judgment (Acts 17:30-31). It is apparent that once they heard Paul speak about the concept of resurrection from the dead, they were completely turned away. Their many questions and curiosities had been satisfied. Some said they would hear him again, but whether or not that happened is left unstated (Acts 17:32-33).

The city known for debating new ideas and engaging with various philosophies proved to be a place with very little interest in hearing the gospel of Christ. There may have been many inquiring minds, but very few people were interested in letting that message change their hearts and mind. Yet, there were a few people who believed (Acts 17:34)! For example, one of the members of the Areopagus court, Dionysius, who heard Paul became convinced of his message. Dionysius proved to be an honest hearer of the gospel. Also, a woman named Damaris was among the converts in Athens.

We don't know what happened to these believers after Paul left the city of Athens. However, it is comforting and encouraging that even a few people in that city full of idolaters heard the gospel and committed to following Jesus Christ.

THREE CITIES. ONE MESSAGE. MIXED RESULTS.

In Acts 17, it is apparent that we can share the

same message of Jesus Christ yet have challenges, successes, and even failures. Our approach can shift to address what people need to hear, but they can still reject God's truth. On the other hand, we can be engaged with people who appear interested, answering their questions, and they still want nothing to do with the gospel and the Lord's church.

In the city of Thessalonica, some people believed, but many grew envious of Paul. In Athens, many people were interested, but very few were invested in making changes in what they think. In Berea, people were eager to learn and study God's word.

Evangelism would be a lot easier if we were guaranteed positive results every time we told someone about God's plan of salvation through Jesus.

A few weeks ago, I heard an interview with a college baseball player who said, "baseball is a game of failure, not a game of success." He pointed out that someone is considered a great baseball player even if they strike out 7 times out of 10 at-bats. He went on to comment that what determined success in baseball was how you responded to failure. He said baseball is about the process of growth and maturing. A good baseball player learns how to get a quality at-bat, especially when things are difficult. For example, when he has two strikes on him, he has to foul off some pitches or hit it in the gap to get on base. The batter's thinking and approach are what set him up for success in any at-bat he may have, no matter the circumstance.

I think this kind of attitude would help us in our approach to evangelism. We tend to define successful evangelism in terms of the results that we see. Three out of 10 hits might be good results in baseball — and evangelism — but perhaps our focus should not be on the results. Instead, we should look inwardly to develop the best quality times and opportunities to study the Bible with our non-Christian friends and family.

Evangelistic results are going to vary. Jesus understood that the gospel would draw people

to Him, or it would drive people away. He knew people would reject Him (Matthew 21:42-43; John 6:66). More importantly, Jesus prepared His disciples for facing the disappointing results of rejection when He gave the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-25).

Nevertheless, Jesus was never deterred by disappointing results. He associated with sinners because He came to seek and save the lost. He came to heal those sick in sin. Jesus found motivation not in the results but in actually doing the work God had sent Him to do. He told His disciples, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work...Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest" (John 4:34-35). There is always work to do. There is always someone who needs to hear the gospel of grace and forgiveness.

Shifting from a results-driven model of evangelism to a work-driven model must have been how Paul approached his evangelistic efforts. If he had focused on the results, it would have been tempting to quit preaching at the first sign of trouble. Paul stayed the course. He did not change the message. Even if he was discouraged because of people's attitudes and rejection of the gospel, he continued to preach.

Our mission is to share the gospel with others. We cannot determine nor control the results. But just as a good baseball player develops quality at-bats, we can create quality opportunities for sharing the gospel. Below are a few suggestions:

1. Talk to your friends/family/neighbors about a specific study and discussion at church in a sermon or a Bible class that helped encourage you.
2. Talk with others about mundane and everyday events by adding a question or comment about God. This can set up follow-up questions or opportunities to study. [This happened to me a few weeks ago. I was outside chatting with a brother in Christ who serves as a deacon at the local congregation where I preach. We were

talking about the sunset that evening, and he then said, "I wonder what Jesus thought about seeing the world and His own creation while He was down here on earth." We took a normal conversation and then talked about the profound, biblical concept of Jesus and the incarnation.]

3. Make a connection with people. Find out something about them and their beliefs. Ask them questions and create a dialogue. That's what Paul did in Athens. The person could be someone who takes your food order at a restaurant or coffee shop. In a world where people are more attached to their phones, tablets, or laptops, making a deep, personal connection will undoubtedly stand out.
4. Answer questions when people ask you something about the church or the Bible. Perhaps they will be open-minded and be willing to listen. Maybe they only want information without a commitment like the people in Athens. However, you never know when you will meet a Dionysius and

Damaris (Acts 17:34).

5. Use online tools at our disposal. A Bible study used to require meeting up in the same physical location. Now there are opportunities to share sermons and classes via YouTube, Vimeo, or other services. There are websites with articles to read. Video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom and Google Meet) makes global studies possible. Churches need to develop an online presence, and individual Christians must point people to those online tools.

We will face challenges in evangelistic efforts. We may grow discouraged because of people's negative response to the truth. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to learn from Jesus' teaching and Paul's example. We need to keep doing the work. Develop and cultivate as many quality opportunities to share the gospel with as many people as we can. Plant the seed and allow God to give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:7). All glory belongs to God!

Counterfeit Christianity

WILLIAM STEWART | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

Caveat emptor is an old maxim regarding the acquisition of goods. It is Latin for “let the buyer beware.” Charlatans and swindlers are always ready to take advantage of unsuspecting patrons. If we are not careful (and sometimes even when we thought we were careful) we can be cheated by forgeries and bogus items, whether it be artwork, sports memorabilia, clothing, electronics, nutritional supplements, or even food products. The prevalence of online shopping today has opened a massive opportunity for con artists to dupe buyers. Indeed, *caveat emptor*! Some may not use cash anymore, but there is always the possibility of coming across counterfeit currency for those who do. 2018 statistics from the Bank of Canada indicate over 33,000 counterfeit notes were detected in circulation, about double what was discovered in 2015. One encounter with a counterfeit bill is enough to make anyone appreciate the high cost of counterfeiting. The bank will take the fake note off your hands, removing it from the marketplace, but you receive nothing in return. They cannot and will not reimburse those who have had the misfortune of receiving a bogus bill. To do so would encourage criminal activity and undermine the value of authentic notes. A \$5 bill may not hurt much, but imagine losing \$20, \$50, or even \$100 to counterfeit. Ouch!

As troubling as buying a knock-off item or losing cash due to counterfeit currency, there is a more serious deception defrauding the world. Sadly, it is one to which most people pay little or no attention. It is not a scam that affects our pocketbooks – worse – it reaches to the very core of our being, to our eternal soul. Would you believe that counterfeiting is more of a problem in the religious world than it ever has been or will be with money and merchandise? A common perception among people, whether religious or not, is that it really does not matter – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism,



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Hinduism, etc. They are simply different ways to the same end, right? Not so! These various religions present different doctrines, different hopes, and different philosophies. A prophet of God wrote many years ago, “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3) The prophet speaks of the agreement needed between God and those who will serve Him. There are not as many ways to God as there are religions in the world. We must come to God according to His will, not our own. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Any religion which excludes Jesus as the source for which eternal life is blatantly counterfeit.

Even in the realm of what is commonly called “Christianity,” we must be cautious. Just because something calls itself “Christianity” does not make it so. We need to seek authentic Christianity. Counterfeit churches have become a powerful tool for Satan. We hear and read statements such as: “Attend the church of your choice,” or “One church is just as good as another,” or “It really doesn’t matter what you believe, so long as you believe.” These statements all proceed from the one whom Jesus identified as “the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Counterfeit Christianity has been a source of frustration for many, causing multitudes to give up on “organized religion.” Let me say bluntly – the denominational mess which surrounds us is contrary to God’s will. The apostle Paul specifically taught against sectarianism (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Jesus prayed for His followers, that “...they all may be one...” (John 17:20-21). Jesus came to establish ONE church (Matthew 16:18). The apostle Paul likewise spoke of just ONE church (Ephesians 4:4; cf. 1:22-23). If Jesus only built ONE church, and yet there are thousands of different churches with widely different doctrines, we have a problem. So, how do we know which church is the Lord’s church?

The importance of finding the Lord’s church and being added to it cannot be overstated. Acts 20:28 tells us Jesus purchased the church with His blood. Which church? His church. He did not purchase a host of pseudo-Christian groups. He did not die for an assortment of denominational organizations. Various denominations may use the Bible, have uplifting worship services, and the people may be wonderful. But “...unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...” (Psalm 127:1).

Some things are obviously erroneous and thus not a huge concern. For example, when you see a cheap pair of Abidas shoes, you know to leave them alone – the authentic brand is Adidas, not Abidas. However, some counterfeits (and this is true in religion) bear a striking resemblance to the real deal. So we need to be observant and discerning. If what is taught and practiced in the church we go to seems “good,” but we cannot legitimately support it from the Bible, we are in the wrong place. If the church we are a member of was started by someone other than Jesus, it is not His church. Just as there are identifying marks for authentic products, there are identifying marks for the Lord’s church. We’ll consider ten here.

1. **ORIGIN.** The church was built (Matthew 16:18) and bought (Acts 20:28) by Jesus. It began in Jerusalem in the first century (Acts 1-2). Any church which claims a different

place, time, or person of origin is not the Lord’s.

2. **NAME.** Juliet’s “What’s in a name” speech notwithstanding, names are important. Have you ever received a cheque where your name was misspelled or amiss in some fashion? Legally, you cannot cash the cheque. The church of the Bible gives glory to the Christ (Romans 16:16) and to God (1 Corinthians 1:2). A church wearing a name to exalt someone or something else is not His.
3. **STRUCTURE.** Jesus is the only head of His church (Ephesians 1:22-23). He does not share this position with anyone, nor has He appointed anyone on earth to function as the head of the church. Each congregation is to have or be working towards qualified bishops and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-16). Elevating men with titles is condemned (Matthew 23:6-10). Men are to take leadership in the public assembly (1 Timothy 2:11-12). A church that claims some earthly head or sets aside the role and qualifications of leaders, or which exalts men with flattering titles, or which has women exercising leadership in the assembly cannot be the Lord’s.
4. **MORALITY.** God redeemed His people to be holy (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Peter 1:15-16). A church that flaunts their acceptance of sin or is soft on moral issues cannot be the Lord’s church.
5. **SALVATION.** The church that Jesus built preaches the same gospel which He announced after His resurrection (Mark 16:15-16), which Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38), which Philip taught to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39), and which Paul declared to the Macedonians (Acts 16:13-15, 30-34), Romans (6:3-5), Galatians (3:26-27), and in every other place where he proclaimed Christ. Therefore, any church preaching a “faith only” gospel or any other gospel (Galatians 1:6-9) is not the Lord’s.

6. **AUTHORITY.** The church built by Jesus follows His word, seeking biblical authority for what is done (Colossians 3:17). A church that ignores the need for authority in practice and doctrine, which freely goes beyond or falls short of God's word, is not His.
7. **WORSHIP.** The church established by Jesus engages in biblical worship. Biblical worship includes observation of the Lord's Supper and the collection for the saints on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2), praising God without the use of instrumental accompaniment (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), and sharing together in prayers and the apostolic teachings as revealed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:42). If a church is not following the Bible pattern for worship, it is not the church for which Jesus built and died.
8. **DOCTRINE.** The Lord's church abides in the doctrine of Christ, the New Testament or New covenant, which was established in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is for our learning (Romans 15:4) but is not our law. Paul taught that we must "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), not slicing and dicing it to find support for various -isms and schisms that find their origin in the mind of man. If a church does not hold to sound doctrine but simply teaches what people want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3), it is not the Lord's.
9. **PURPOSE.** The church which Jesus established has God-ordained objectives.

Those objectives include a focus on worshiping and exalting the Lord (Acts 17:23-28), spreading the message of salvation to others (Luke 19:10; Matthew 28:18-20), encouraging and building one another's faith (1 Corinthians 14:5, 26; Ephesians 4:12), and ministering to needy saints (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34-35; 2 Corinthians 8). The church Jesus built is not a social club or a family life center; it was not established as an entertainment and social hub in the community.

10. **FELLOWSHIP.** Biblical fellowship is companionship and union with God and others, grounded in the things mentioned above. John says we can have fellowship with one another and with the Lord if we walk in the light (1 John 1:3, 7). However, we are not to give the hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9) to those who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11). A church that receives and stands for things that the Lord does not, that church cannot be His.

There are certainly more identifying marks of authentic Christianity, but these will suffice for this article. We need to be focused on the truth. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Again, in prayer to the Father, Jesus said, "Sanctify them by Your word. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The truth of God's word is authentic and authoritative. If we follow it, we can have the assurance we are legitimately walking in God's way. Don't fall for the devil's deceptions.

APRIL 2022 PREVIEW

EXPOSITORY ARTICLE

Tyler Sams will continue our series of articles looking at the Lord Jesus through the eyes of the gospel writers. He will discuss Mark's portrayal of Jesus.

CHURCH ARTICLE

John Hines continues our series of congregational profiles looking at the church which was at Corinth.

WORSHIP ARTICLE

Marshall McDaniel provides the next article in our Psalms of worship series, focusing on Psalm 136.

APPLICATION ARTICLE

Jim Mickells addresses the need for us to put on the armor of God as described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6.

EVANGELISM ARTICLES

Among the struggles we may face in the cause of Christ is the fear of rejection when we share God's word. Mike Stephens urges us to overcome this fear as we proclaim Christ.

BEYOND BASICS ARTICLE

Tom Rainwater addresses a seldom discussed but very needed topic in his second article focused on remarrying after losing a spouse.



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