

## Enthusiastic Congregations

- Acts 2:44 – 47 ...having favor with all the people
- Acts 4:32 – 35 ...and great grace was upon them all
- 1 Thessalonians 1:3 – 8 ...for from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3 – 4 ...your faith grows exceedingly and the love of every one of you abounds
- Philemon 4 – 7 ...that the sharing of your faith may become effective
- Hebrews 3:13 ...exhort one another daily
- 1 Peter 2:2 – 3 ...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.
- Revelation 2:19 I know your works, love, service, faith and your patience, and as for your works, the last are more than the first. (Those reprimanded for declining are in 2:4, 3:16)

### How Much Faith is Enough?

Whatever the standard for eternal life, people want to know where the line is. That is understandable. We want to have confidence. Uncertainty is unnerving and discouraging. However, lack of an objective standard leads some to self-deception and others to agnosticism.

Almost every theological variation puts faith in the forefront. But, the route to the level acceptable to God has been mapped along a wide variety of paths. Some teach that God decided long ago who would make it and who would not, and that there is not a thing we can do about it. The key word there is “do,” from the old faith-works debate. The problem with that position is that the individual has no hint as to who is going to make it. Others point to certain actions, morality, or rituals that, in their thinking, are manifestations of faith. The problem is that the batting average required to make the All-Star team is poorly defined.

Minimum requirements lead to focusing on the line rather than on God’s objective for the universe. Think of the universe as a field, God’s field. God is in the middle, although the middle of an infinite field is a little hard to define. People wander the field. In this illustration, those close to God are acceptable. Those far from God are not. The close people found it necessary to build a fence between themselves and the outsiders to define the line between acceptable and unacceptable. So, their efforts became mostly focused on the fence: building, maintaining, tightening, sharpening the barbs. Those on the inside got no closer to God. In fact, sometimes they crossed the fence due to bad balance during repairs, or to test whether it was really strong enough. Oddly, those outside the fence did not care that it was there. They did not want to go in that direction anyway. But, they were entertained by the intensity of effort that went into such a pointless project.

If those on the inside were to refocus on God rather than the fence, they would be advancing toward God rather than hovering around the fence. If, perchance, any were, through inattention or confusion, to back away, eventually they would back into the fence. In fact, with this new orientation, the barbs would poke the behind, causing the drifter to jump forward, toward God. Perhaps a fence exists, perhaps not; God has not said. Paul seems to have made lists of bad behaviors to burst the self-deception bubbles of some early Christians, but the idea of a fence, a minimum requirement, was never used as a standard for entry. Unfortunately, some have made just such fences in modern Christianity, demanding that outsiders overcome themselves by their own power before being allowed inside. The idea of the gospel presented in

the New Testament is a do-over, a mulligan, a bailout, followed immediately with miraculous tools to overcome ourselves. We are not required to fix ourselves before approaching God, or God would get very lonely. Rather, we approach God and get fixed. That's the meaning of mercy: an intense desire to fix what ails you.

If we build the fence, we will mess it up. We will invent our own standards for acceptance. We will be worried that undeserving people will get in, as though God could get caught on a technicality and be forced to let in that person who would certainly trash heaven. We will build barriers to entry rather than safety nets for family. No matter how well-intentioned we are, this will soon become like the federal tax code, incredibly complex, requiring specialists to interpret, with loopholes for the rich and famous. What we need is for God to tell us rather than for us to tell God.

Looking through all the passages about faith, I have found five that make the connection that faith is acceptable while growing (many more imply the same). Don't let your thoughts run to the mustard seed analogy. The accounts in Matthew 17:14 – 20 and Luke 17:5 – 10 both record Jesus rebuking His disciples for their lack of faith, saying that if they had "faith as a mustard seed" they would be able to do fantastic, miraculous things. Jesus was not giving even a hint about the quantity of faith required for adoption. Further, we would be back in the same self-justifying boat, trying to decide how much faith that is. But, from the following passages, we can determine that, as long as faith grows, it is acceptable. After describing the contexts of those passages, I will return to the question of how God will let us know that our growing faith is acceptable.

(2 Peter 1:2 – 11) "An entrance will be supplied abundantly into the everlasting Kingdom" if we diligently add these character traits to our faith. As will be described in subsequent passages, the "exceedingly great and precious promises" by which we partake "of the divine nature" are for faithful people who are still breathing, just as they are described in the past tense as "having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."

(2 Thessalonians 1:3 – 8) The growing faith of the Christians of Thessalonica was "manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God."

(1 Peter 2:1 – 3) "Desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow thereby, up to salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

(2 Corinthians 10:15) The church in Corinth did about everything wrong, but Paul anticipated growth in their faith.

(Romans 14:1) Paul described those who were weak in faith, and those who were strong. In verse 19, the transition was through edification.

So, we can deduce that faith must be growing to be acceptable, which belies the existence of an absolute line. If our faith must be growing, then our understanding must be increasing, meaning that tomorrow we will realize that yesterday we were wrong about something. And, we will never reach the top, since growth is a necessary attribute. This concept is very disturbing to those who sincerely believe that one must understand and espouse all the right doctrines to be acceptable. Unfortunately, such a belief also condemns everyone born before that particular denomination last updated its Statement of Faith.

If we are not able to set a benchmark so that we can feel acceptable, the only other alternative is that God must let us know. But that actually makes a lot of sense. We are not going to attempt to tell God His business; we are going to let Him tell us.

How is God to go about that? The proverbial “still small voice in the night” too often leads to self-deception. The “salvation experience” is wide open for delusion as evidenced by both individual and group disasters that began by following our feelings. “Speaking in tongues” must be taught and offers no hard evidence (just circular claims to speaking and interpretation), so is an obvious exercise in self-fulfilling prophecy. No, God must tell us in a way that is in keeping with the methods He has used to this point: blatant and unmistakable physical evidence. Here are a few examples.

(2 Corinthians 4:7) “We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the power may be of God and not of us.” The context of chapters 4 and 5 is evangelism. Those who observe this power are outsiders. When outsiders recognize that what you just did was obviously beyond your ability, you know that God thinks your faith is acceptable.

(Romans 12:1 – 8) “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” Following that are examples of different gifts. Unfortunately, many churches have sunk to the “gift inventory” method made popular by another author. The failure of that method is that people are instructed to pick what they like to do and call it their gift. God promises gifts to the faithful, not the unfaithful. If you were an accountant before becoming a Christian, and you volunteered to be church treasurer after becoming a Christian, that is not a gift. You were an accounting whiz before God gave you anything. Of course, using your accounting skill for the good of the kingdom is a nice thing to do, but it is not a gift from God. Rather, when you suddenly are able to do a good thing that you could not do before espousing faith, that’s a gift and your evidence. So, your gift cannot be singing unless you were essentially tone-deaf before faith, but a virtuoso after, and not after several years of voice lessons.

(1 Peter 4:7 – 11) Peter admonished Jewish Christians in Turkey to do these things “with the ability which God supplies.” Believers and unbelievers are quite capable of doing nice things. When someone does a nice thing for you, you should say, “Thank-you.” The gifts suggested by Peter caused unbelievers to comment on the character of God (glorify God), not on the character of the do-gooder. Jesus made the same analogy in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>1</sup>

(John 17:20 – 23) I do not think it is a big leap to say that the things for which Jesus prayed in the Garden came to pass. In this short paragraph, Jesus asked that the unity of future believers be an evidence that He was for real. Further, He prayed that they be “perfect”<sup>2</sup> in that unity. Jesus further prays that they have His “glory,” which is a parade of positive character traits. Unity, consistency, and a boatload of positive character traits are not normal in this world. Jesus wanted to use those characteristics in the church as His physical evidence. (By the way, how do you think we are doing on that one?)

(Romans 8:13) Humanity has a poor track record of “putting to death the deeds of the body.” If you overcome a bad habit by superior self-control (and maybe a self-help book from Barnes and Noble), that is a good thing. If you have failed so many time you have lost count and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:16

<sup>2</sup> “Perfect” in the New Testament is a poor translation of the Greek word *telios* (τελειος). In modern translations, “mature” and “complete” are also used, but arbitrarily and without linguistic foundation. “Consistent” is a much better definition which may be substituted into all of the passages where *telios* appears. See the **Error! Reference source not found.** about **Error! Reference source not found.**

have given up ever overcoming that weakness, and then, after becoming a Christian, you rid yourself of that addiction essentially overnight, that's evidence. I have not been part of a prison ministry or a rehabilitation ministry (both of which are wonderful methods of outreach), so the percentage of my acquaintances who are addicts is small. Yet, I know personally three addicts who overcame overnight after many years of helplessness and failure. My understanding of addiction is that, to qualify as addiction and not just a bad habit, the substance being abused makes a permanent change in the connectivity of the brain. The addict is no longer in control. Some addicts are "fortunate" in that they have enough undamaged connections that they can, through a Twelve-Step program (another wonderful thing), keep their addiction at bay for many years. But they always have the desire. God can fix it permanently. Twelve Steps cannot. Of course, the observer does not know if you were a real addict or just badly behaved, but you do and that's your evidence.

(2 Corinthians 3:16 – 18) We are being transformed. Some think that the transformation of our characters will take place only at resurrection. Paul told the misfit Corinthian Christians that they were a work in progress while still breathing. Think of this as a parallel to addiction. While a lack of, for example, patience probably is not connected to substance abuse, that character flaw can be just as debilitating, although probably not resulting in incarceration. If you have spent decades unsuccessfully trying to be more patient, and then in response to submitting a claim to God concerning that promise, you are remarkably patient, you have your evidence. Some people I know have overcome anger-management issues (which landed them in jail a few times); their unbelieving friends were all asking how that happened. So, that change was an evidence to outsiders as well.

(1 John 2:27) Learning something without a qualified human teacher is rare. Abraham Lincoln was said to have been self-taught. An imposing list may be found by googling "autodidacts." Nevertheless, such people are a low probability. Yet, John informed the faithful that they had no need that anyone teach them. The key word there is "need." Teachers are not essential. But, as any reader of 1 John illustrates, gathering the ideas of others is a good thing. I liken the confirmation of this promise to those times when, completely out of your depth in a discussion of spiritual things, you say just the right thing or find just the right reference. Of course, some people can do this as a result of long experience and extensive study (both of which are good things). But when the untaught shock themselves, they have evidence that God considers their growing faith acceptable at that moment in time. Of course, it must keep growing, but they know that they are on the right track, even if only on the first lap.

The notion that God is responsible for letting us know if our faith is acceptable can be unnerving, especially if we have been told all our Christian lives that we were "saved" or that we have been baptized, and that is all we need to know. But what is the alternative? If we tell God that our faith is adequate (because we said a prayer or had a feeling or performed a ritual), we have no assurance at all, just our claim with no evidence other than benchmarks made up by people. Certainly, people claim that their benchmarks are in the Bible, but if growth is necessary (as shown above), benchmarks must keep moving.

Few church-goers have ever done anything that was clearly beyond the scope of what people can do. The examples I gave above (addicts, anger-mismanagement, debilitating impatience) are on the fringes of most people's experience. But the answer is simple. If I am one of those boring people who never spent a night in jail, all I need to do to find a miracle in my life is to read the New Testament and look for promises. When I find one I would like to claim

but never knew about before, I should focus on it. Pray. Be open to weirdness. Don't think of practical, possible, pedestrian ways to accomplish it. Be open to God doing it in a way I never imagined. Remember, Paul wanted to go to Rome. He got an all-expense-paid cruise from the government – albeit as a prisoner and there was that shipwreck, but he got what he wanted. If we box God in with how we think something should get done (Jesus called it “tempting God”), either nothing will happen or we will accomplish it by our own ability on a minor league scale. But even if we can get past ourselves and let something happen, we are not off the hook. Now we know how that one works; it is not faith to do it twice. We must move on to another promise, which is called growth.