

# Calling

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Previous books by the same author:

*Think as a Spirit*  
*Family Gathering*  
*Hegemones*

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## Introduction

The competition between outreach, edification, and connecting with God is like the competition between work, family, and church. If the three are viewed as three areas each demanding attention, we will forever be stressed because, no matter how we allocate our time, another ratio could have been better. Instead, we must find one thing to pursue which addresses all three aspects as sub-categories. That one thing for the faithful is summarized in our calling, that *by* which we were called and that *to* which we were called. No, it is not a feeling or voice that assigns you a specific task. Such an idea is not in the New Testament. Rather, we are called to certain relationships and characteristics; everyone to the same goal, although playing it out differently because we have liberty to be responsible for ourselves through the application of our natural talents and those provided by the Spirit.

In chapter 6 of a previous volume, *Think as a Spirit*, are the details of the work of the Spirit, how that work is manifested in the faithful. That indwelling Spirit has nothing to do with the call of the faithful, since the Spirit is given after faith exists<sup>1</sup> and is God's mark upon those who are His. Of course, Calvinistic doctrine proposes that the Spirit injects faith into those already chosen by God, which denies free will and the purpose of creation. Rather, that indwelling Spirit is responsible for the development of the faithful into the character of Jesus, to a degree and with a velocity dependent upon the faithful trusting and allowing that transformation to happen. Unfortunately, the notion of an indwelling Spirit who renovates the faithful is overlooked by many groups, so the faithful person is not able to be open to those advantages.

Another volume, *Hegemonies*, explores the concept of examining oneself (Chapter 2), how that is expressed in the New Testament. Essentially, every passage that uses that expression should be taken positively, as dictated by the context. The faithful examine themselves to detect their own growth, not to find how they have failed.

The principle of liberty as developed in the New Testament is in Chapter 1 of the same volume, revealing that, in the New Testament church, every faithful person has liberty; no one but God has authority over them. Of course, liberty is the death knell of authority, yet each denomination has its authority structure composed of humans. Certainly, the more mature in faith may offer advice, and the less mature would be wise to consider that advice carefully. But, bottom line, each one has liberty. Of course, using liberty as a cloak for vice is transparently ludicrous. Rather, liberty has, as its companion, responsibility. Each one may choose his or her own path, and will be held accountable for those choices.

This volume is about *by* what we are called and *to* what we are called. Those are the two contexts found in the New Testament for the concept of "called." In this volume, the mechanisms and destinations such as are in the New Testament will be grouped so that the various sources and destinations may be understood as a whole, avoiding the shortcomings introduced by building a doctrine on only part of the information, filling in the gaps with preconceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:9 – 17

## Chapter 1: Called

The first task in understanding any word in the New Testament is to assemble a list of all the contexts in which it appears. A Strong's concordance is a handy tool for finding all the places where a particular Greek word appears in the New Testament.

### Called as a Verb

The Greek root of all the "called" verbs is *kaleo* (καλεω, 2564 in the Strong's dictionary).

#### As in English, "called" may be used to identify something:

- Romans 4:17 Who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did
- Romans 9:25 – 26 I will call them My people who were not My people...They shall be called sons of the living God
- 1 Corinthians 15:9 Who am not worthy to be called an apostle
- Hebrews 2:11 He is not ashamed to call them brethren
- Hebrews 3:13 While it is called Today
- James 2:23 He was called the friend of God
- 1 Peter 3:6 Sarah...calling him Lord
- 1 John 3:1 That we should be called children of God
- Revelation 1:9 On the island called Patmos
- Revelation 11:8 The great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified
- Revelation 12:9 That serpent of old called the Devil and Satan
- Revelation 16:16 To the place called Har-Meggido
- Revelation 19:11 He who sat on the horse was called Faithful and True
- Revelation 19:13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood and His name is called the Word of God

#### As in English, "called" may describe the action of summoning another:

- Romans 8:30 Whom He predestined He also called; whom He called, these He also justified...
- Romans 9:7, Hebrews 11:18 In Isaac your seed shall be called
- Romans 9:11 Election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls
- Romans 9:24 Even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles
- 1 Corinthians 7:17 – 24 As the Lord has called each one, so let him walk
- Galatians 1:6 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you
- Galatians 5:8 This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you
- Ephesians 4:1 Walk worthy of the calling to which you were called
- 1 Thessalonians 5:24 He who calls you is faithful
- 2 Timothy 1:9 Who has saved us and *called* us with a holy calling...according to His own purpose...before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior

**In a few cases, special people were summoned to a particular task:**

- Galatians 1:15 – 16 Called me through His grace to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles
- 1 Timothy 6:12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called
- Hebrews 5:4 No man takes this honor to himself but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.
- Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out

**Two passages describe *by what* people are summoned to the gospel:**

- 2 Thessalonians 2:13 – 14 God from the beginning chose you for salvation by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord
- 2 Peter 1:3 Who called us by glory and virtue

**Finally, the following passages describe *to what* the faithful were summoned:**

- 1 Corinthians 1:9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son
- 1 Corinthians 7:15 For God has called us to peace
- Galatians 5:13 You, brethren, have been called to liberty
- Ephesians 4:4 You were *called* in one hope of your calling
- Colossians 3:15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body
- 1 Thessalonians 2:12 Walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory
- 1 Thessalonians 4:7 God did not call us to uncleanness but in holiness
- Hebrews 9:15 That those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance
- 1 Peter 1:15 He who called you is holy, you also be holy
- 1 Peter 2:9 Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light
- 1 Peter 2:21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example
- 1 Peter 3:9 Blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing
- 1 Peter 5:10 May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus...
- Revelation 19:9 Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb

As a verb, “called” is used either to apply a description to something, or to summon someone. Christians are called *by* the gospel, by Jesus, by His grace (His collection of positive character traits with emphasis on the way those traits are integrated and consistent), and by His mastery of earthly life. Christians are called *to* the fellowship of His Son, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and to the marriage supper of the lamb.

The only people mentioned as having received a specific call are Paul, as an apostle, and Jesus, as the eternal High Priest. Note that both of them provided abundant proof of that calling. Many today claim a “calling” to a certain religious activity. But that concept has no parallel in the New Testament unless the speaker is claiming divine endorsement. Of course, many today use that phrase to claim authority, but none can offer any proof beyond the claim. Many are taught to find their “calling,” which really means to pick what you want to do and appropriate God’s endorsement without His consent. Labeling my choice as a “calling” stops the discussion;

objectivity is set aside and good advice is blocked. Leaving people to discover their “calling” is contrary to how God operates. When God does something about which we are supposed to know, the evidence is blatant and physical. Never has God expected people to pick up on a hint. Further, if God were setting out a special calling for each person, God would be in the mode of constant revision of His plans, since we are demonstrably poor at picking up on clear evidence, and we are even worse with inuendo. Since the path of each person is intertwined with innumerable others, one missed calling would result in changing the plans of thousands if not millions. So, the “my calling” idea has God changing plans so often that He would be reduced to reacting to people rather than planning for them.

Instead, the New Testament concept of being called *by* something is universal. All humans receive the same call: the good news. This call is embodied in Jesus, particularly by His balanced and consistent character (glory) and by His mastery of earthly life (virtue). All humans are called *to* the same thing: the family of God, which is expressed in a dozen different ways. Some heed this universal call, most do not.

### Called as a Noun

The “called” nouns, while etymologically from *kaleo* (καλεω), are derived from *kletos* (κλετος, 2822 in the Strong’s dictionary), bearing an appointment, and *klesis* (κλησις, 2821 in the Strong’s dictionary), possessing an appointment. It is used in the following contexts:

#### Bearing an appointment

- Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1 Paul,...called an apostle
- Romans 1:6 Among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ
- Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2 Called saints
- Romans 8:28 To those who are called according to His purpose
- 1 Corinthians 1:24 But to those who are called...the power of God
- Jude 1 To those who are called sanctified by God

#### To possess an appointment

- Romans 11:29 The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable
- 1 Corinthians 1:26 Consider your calling, brethren, that not many wise...mighty...noble
- 1 Corinthians 7:20 Let each remain in the same *calling* in which he was called
- Ephesians 1:18 That you may know the hope of His calling
- Ephesians 4:4 You were called in one hope of your *calling*
- Philippians 3:14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
- 2 Thessalonians 1:11 That our God would count you worthy of this calling
- 2 Timothy 1:9 Who has saved us and called us with a holy *calling*...according to His own purpose...before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior
- Hebrews 3:1 Partakers of the heavenly calling
- 2 Peter 1:10 Be even more diligent to make your call and election sure
- Revelation 17:14 Those who are with Him are called and chosen and faithful.

Describing someone as “called” puts the initiative on the caller, God. Paul did not campaign for his apostleship. God set His plan in motion before creation, not in response to people who were diligently seeking. Although all humans are called by the gospel, only a few

respond. Those who respond are then described as those possessing a calling. Those who do not respond to the call do not possess it, but only heard it. Such is the nature of the calling of all the faithful. Biblical callings to specific tasks are well documented and abound with physical evidence, in contrast to the heart-felt self-deceptions mistakenly taught today.

## Chapter 2: Who Does God Say You Are?

A life-long church-goer I know said one Sunday, “If you don’t feel bad when you leave, it wasn’t worth going.” Unfortunately, many sincere church-goers perceive themselves as forgiven failures and therefore focus on everything they have or might have done badly. Flaws can be found in anything if for no other reason than we can invent another way we might have done something that might have been better. Imaginative hindsight becomes reality. Even doing things well becomes a source of self-deprecation.

However, the New Testament characterizes the physical lives of the faithful as joy.<sup>2</sup> A useful exercise is to read through the New Testament, taking note of how God describes the faithful on earth. I have selected 35 such descriptions as a representative sample.

### Impact of the Faithful on the World

The faithful are the “salt of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Salt was used for several different purposes in Jesus’ day: spice, preservative, and herbicide. In the Sermon on the Mount, the context indicates spice as the intention since it references flavor. The herbicide reference which follows is what happens to salt which loses its ability to season. In those days, salt was not pure sodium chloride as we use today, but rather a mixture of salts, primarily harvested about the banks of the Dead Sea. Because storage was more difficult than it is today, the salt, being hygroscopic, absorbed significant moisture over time. Since chlorides are the most soluble, they are first to be lost when the collection of salts gets moist enough to drain some of the water off. A similar comparison of the faithful as a good seasoning is made by Paul, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt.”<sup>4</sup> God sees the faithful as witty and clever purveyors of good news, not boring and confusing enforcers of rules.

The faithful are characterized as “light,”<sup>5</sup> as those who are readily seen, providing useful illumination, and causing observers to remark on the character of God. The figure of speech, light, is described as goodness, righteousness, and truth and as those who are always prepared for the Lord’s return. God sees the faithful as those who demonstrate successful life in this broken world so that the observers may find entrance into His family.

The faithful are represented as vine branches which bear fruit.<sup>6</sup> The ability to produce such fruit is supplied by Jesus, the main stock of the vine, the part that endures year by year, upon which new growth sprouts and from which it derives its energy. Continuing the agricultural illustration, Jesus also noted that unproductive vines are cut off. However, the thrust of the illustration is that God views the faithful as useful and productive, deriving their abilities from the divine.

The faithful are represented as ambassadors, those who plead with the outsiders to be reconciled to God.<sup>7</sup> Governments appoint only talented ambassadors who can articulate the message of the King well, who have the demeanor to be believed, and who speak only the

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<sup>2</sup> *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 8

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 4:6

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:5

<sup>6</sup> John 15:1 – 17

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20

message of the King without mixing in their own opinions. God sees all the faithful as having all of those qualities, not as hapless bunglers.

### **The Place of the Faithful in the Plan of God**

God's objective is to build a big family that will last. God sees the faithful as family.<sup>8</sup> Another image is that the faithful are Christ's body.<sup>9</sup> Jesus is no longer on this earth, so the faithful have been tasked with taking over that function. Further, the faithful are God's field and also God's building.<sup>10</sup> Taking that image a step further, the faithful are characterized as the Temple of God, so the Spirit of God lives in them.<sup>11</sup> More generally, the faithful are in the Spirit or in Christ or are being led by the Spirit.<sup>12</sup> That relationship is described as being controlled by the responses of the faithful to the nature of God, rather than being controlled by an authoritarian structure with rules.<sup>13</sup> The faithful are not viewed as helpless or hapless or hopeless, but as worthwhile and talented and desirable.

### **God's Characterization of the Faithful**

Life is short. If one's focus is on physical life and its duration, death will control every decision.<sup>14</sup> But God communicated that the life of the faithful is endless; only the physical part is short.<sup>15</sup> God sees value in each of the faithful.

Not only are the faithful valuable,<sup>16</sup> they are characterized as successful, putting to death the deeds of the body through the indwelling Spirit.<sup>17</sup> Their success is so remarkable that this overcoming of themselves is used as evidence of the divine source of the plan.<sup>18</sup>

Further, the faithful are seen by God to be one big family, caring about one another and emmeshed in one another's lives.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the nation of Israel with its claim to being the people of God, God announced that the faithful in the Kingdom are the true "chosen people." The majority of Israel that did not follow Jesus were the ones who made the wrong turn.<sup>20</sup> The faithful, now considered by God to be His kingdom, have taken over the functions of royalty, priesthood, and nation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:26, 3:39, 4:6, 4:7

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:9

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Galatians 5:18

<sup>13</sup> Romans 6:14

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 2:15

<sup>15</sup> James 4:14

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 10:31, Luke 12:7, 12:24

<sup>17</sup> Romans 8:13

<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:3

<sup>19</sup> Ephesians 2:19, 4:25

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 3:3

<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 2:9 – 10

### Character Traits of the Faithful

The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is consistency. Jesus expressed confidence that His audience could be as consistent as God is.<sup>22</sup> Of course, we can see in the letters that the early Christians did not have it all together. But, they were expected to grow into this expectation.<sup>23</sup> Jesus characterized those who believed Him as “learners” (disciples).<sup>24</sup> Even with all their misunderstandings, they were sufficient to be called the Temple of God<sup>25</sup> and unleavened (leaven being a metaphor for sin).<sup>26</sup> Rather than feeling bad about themselves, which is a form of self-promotion, the faithful are humble.<sup>27</sup> This humility obviates the desire for titles and self-importance within the church because of the family dynamic.<sup>28</sup>

The faithful are essential to the plan, not bumbling idiots who generally make a mess of the plan of God. God did not need to be insightful to know that this church which was left in the custody of the faithful on earth would be consistently messy. That is part of the plan. Instead, the faithful laugh at themselves, get back up, and continue growing the family.

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 5:48  
<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 4:15, 2 Peter 1:5 – 8  
<sup>24</sup> John 8:31  
<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:17  
<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:7  
<sup>27</sup> Matthew 18:3  
<sup>28</sup> Matthew 23:8, Galatians 3:28

### Chapter 3: Adoption

God's objective in creation is to build a big family that will last. He intends to attract people through observation of His goodness. The motivation He wants to instill is that of a family rather than a government. The characteristics needed by every family member are mutual trust and selfless concern. Every decision should be founded upon that trust of the family. Of course, good behavior is expected, but as a natural result of that mutual trust and selflessness, not for the sake of being well behaved. People who are self-disciplined can behave well through their own efforts and be entirely unsuited for God's desired family because they see themselves as self-sufficient and self-reliant.

As an example, one time, when Jesus was teaching a large crowd in the region of Galilee, His mother and brothers came to speak with Him.<sup>29</sup> When Jesus was informed of that fact, He replied, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers. For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."

Was Jesus' intention that the faithful separate themselves from their biological families in favor of their spiritual family? A few passages in the New Testament mitigate against this conclusion. Jesus entrusted the custody and welfare of His mother to the apostle John.<sup>30</sup> Those with unbelieving spouses were not to forsake them.<sup>31</sup> Christians were enjoined specifically to look after their own biological families.<sup>32</sup> Rather than biological and spiritual families being in competition, Christians were directed to serve both.

#### Adoption

Many mistakenly assert that everyone is a child of God. The New Testament is clear that the family relationship God seeks is by adoption (as detailed in the following paragraphs), that only the faithful receive the down-payment on that inheritance,<sup>33</sup> and that those without that down-payment are not His.<sup>34</sup>

The faithful receive the Spirit of adoption,<sup>35</sup> which is another way of describing the indwelling Spirit. By this, the faithful have a very close, familial relationship with God, characterized as "Abba, Father." The "abba" word has been variously understood largely because references from the time of Jesus written in Hebrew are few. What can be deduced is that this term of endearment used in the Hebrew culture was both respectful and emotional, not formal. A version of this may have been preserved through the Ethiopian church and absorbed into the Swahili language. In those East African cultures, "abba" is used only of elderly fathers and grandfathers as a hugely respectful term of endearment.

This adoption describes not only the status of the faithful while physically alive, but also a future event of the "redemption of our body,"<sup>36</sup> referencing Judgment and the resurrection

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 12:46 – 50, Mark 3:31 – 35, Luke 8:19 – 21

<sup>30</sup> John 19:27

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:12 – 16, 1 Peter 3:1

<sup>32</sup> 1 Timothy 5:8

<sup>33</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5, Ephesians 1:13 - 14

<sup>34</sup> Romans 8:9 – 14

<sup>35</sup> Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6

<sup>36</sup> Romans 8:23

body.<sup>37</sup> This adoption is not by physical descent, as mistakenly assumed by the Israelites, but of the “children of promise,”<sup>38</sup> those who pursued righteousness by faith.<sup>39</sup> This adoption was part of the plan from before creation, not instituted as a reaction to the mess people made of this world.<sup>40</sup>

### Children of God

In our overly-sensitive and reactive generation, some have objected to the passages in which God refers to “sons,” although the context clearly refers to all the faithful regardless of gender. That quibble comes from overlooking that the culture and language of the first century were distinctly different than the culture and language of today. Further, many have mistakenly asserted that women had no standing and were routinely denied status and civil liberties, this being reflected in their language. First, in the Roman Empire and in Greek culture, women were entirely equal to men in both law and culture. Some of the smaller ethnic groups that had been conquered by the Greeks and Romans were still male-dominated. Both Greece and Rome allowed them to co-exist, although the restrictive cultures were not allowed to prevent their people from adopting the more common gender equality. Although the Judaism of Jesus’ day was decidedly male-dominated, the Law of Moses was not. Instead, the Law gave women status unparalleled in its day (the Law was given in 1446 BC). So, I have grouped together the references to “sons of God” and “children of God” because, in the first century, people would have understood them to be equivalent.<sup>41</sup>

Paul cites one of the Messianic passages in Hosea 2 to recall the promise in which the unfortunate descriptors given to his children would be reversed: Unloved would become Loved, Not My People would become My People.<sup>42</sup> The promise was on a national scale, not individual, so in this case, the Messianic Kingdom (which was discovered to be the church) would contain the children of God. In another place, the parallel was expressed differently, between the “people of God” and “sons and daughters of God,”<sup>43</sup> further illustrating that the expressions were equivalent.

The family relationship, rather than governmental, was emphasized several times.<sup>44</sup> The sibling relationship with Jesus, not just the Father relationship, also is expressed repeatedly,<sup>45</sup> along with the relationship of the Father to the individual Christian, not just the group, as well as the individual faithful with one another as siblings.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:50

<sup>38</sup> Romans 9:8

<sup>39</sup> Romans 9:30 – 32

<sup>40</sup> Ephesians 1:4 – 5

<sup>41</sup> Romans 8:16, 8:19

<sup>42</sup> Romans 9:26

<sup>43</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:16 – 18

<sup>44</sup> Galatians 4:6, Ephesians 5:1, Philippians 2:15

<sup>45</sup> Hebrews 2:10 – 12, 2:17, 1 John 5:2

<sup>46</sup> Hebrews 12:7 – 8, 1 Peter 1:14, 1 John 3:1 – 2, 3:10, 5:2

### The Intended Relationships within the Spiritual Family

As mentioned above, God expects the faithful to relate to one another as siblings, not as members of an organization which expels the misbehaving.<sup>47</sup> The faithful are to look out for the best interests of one another with all the loyalty of a good physical family.<sup>48</sup> Sad experience reminds us that sometimes this does not work out so well, as the supposed family members do not all act that way. God's fix is to grow faith in each one so that, as images of Jesus, this relationship becomes easier and easier.<sup>49</sup> This relationship extends well beyond spiritual fellowship to include providing for their physical needs and defending them physically, to the point of physically dying for them.<sup>50</sup> Slaves were to consider a believing master to be a brother.<sup>51</sup>

One of the major motivations for good behavior is out of love for the fellow faithful.<sup>52</sup> Hating a brother reveals a fatal flaw.<sup>53</sup> The relationships between the faithful are not all like siblings. Sometimes, other faithful people are considered children, or parents. Either way, the focus is on a family environment.<sup>54</sup>

If a congregation does not have this passionate loyalty and intimacy, something is desperately wrong. The same extends to relationships between congregations, and not just ones with the same corporate title. As with all bad behaviors, the answer is not more rules, which would be counterproductive, but a focus on growing faith from which springs selflessness.

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<sup>47</sup> 1 Thessalonians 3:15, 1 Timothy 5:1 – 2,

<sup>48</sup> Romans 14:10 – 14, 1 Corinthians 6:5 – 6, 8:11 – 13, James 4:11, 1 Peter 3:8

<sup>49</sup> Romans 8:9

<sup>50</sup> James 2:14 – 15, 1 John 3:10 – 17

<sup>51</sup> 1 Timothy 6:2

<sup>52</sup> 1 Peter 1:22

<sup>53</sup> 1 John 2:9 – 11, 4:20 – 21

<sup>54</sup> 1 John 2:12 – 14, 5:16

## Chapter 4: Different and Same Gifts

### The Faithful are All the Same The Faithful are All Different

The Parable of the Talents<sup>55</sup> and the Parable of the Minas<sup>56</sup> illustrate that the faithful are expected to use what they have been given by God. In churches today, assets placed in the care of the faithful generally are called gifts, although the parables do not refer to them in that way. Those who do not use those gifts are excluded from the kingdom.

Paul referred to his apostleship in that way, as an investment entrusted to him and for which he would be held accountable.<sup>57</sup> His gifts were not something about which he might boast or which made him important. Rather, he was under obligation to use his assignment for the benefit of the spread of the gospel.

### In Some Ways, Faithful People are All Different

Paul emphasized the point that all the faithful received different gifts from the same Spirit.<sup>58</sup> Such gifts are for the profit of all<sup>59</sup> and are distributed as God desires.<sup>60</sup> Although God hands out those gifts according to His plans, the faithful may be able to influence which ones they receive.<sup>61</sup> Such gifts are never in conflict, since the same Spirit distributes them all.<sup>62</sup> Since such gifts are given by the Spirit, only the faithful receive such gifts.<sup>63</sup> Even though some gifts are deemed “greater,” all of those gifts are essential to the proper operation of the body (the church), so one should not elevate some recipients or denigrate others.

Some gifts, rather than being given specifically to a faithful individual, related more to a class of believers, such as those who have the gift of being content while being unmarried.<sup>64</sup> When Peter and John were distributing miraculous powers to some but not all in Samaria, Simon wanted to be included in the receiving group.<sup>65</sup> The Jewish Christians who accompanied Peter to the house of Cornelius were stunned by the fact that Gentiles had been given the ability to speak in languages they had not studied.<sup>66</sup>

The faithful must exercise some caution in reading, as in all the Scriptures, by checking whether certain promises or gifts have an expiration date. Just as the faithful today no longer follow the Law of Moses (because it expired when God caused the Temple to be destroyed in 70 AD), the faithful today should not expect the gift of prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, or church leadership. Both Daniel<sup>67</sup> and Zechariah<sup>68</sup> predicted the end of prophecy in concert

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<sup>55</sup> Matthew 25:14 – 30

<sup>56</sup> Luke 19:19 – 27

<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:16 – 18

<sup>58</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4 – 31

<sup>59</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7

<sup>60</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:11, 18

<sup>61</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:31

<sup>62</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13

<sup>63</sup> Romans 8:8 – 14

<sup>64</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7

<sup>65</sup> Acts 8:20

<sup>66</sup> Acts 10:45, 11:17

<sup>67</sup> Daniel 9:24

with the destruction of the Temple. Paul noted the disappearance of prophecy, tongues,<sup>69</sup> and church leadership positions.<sup>70</sup> However, Paul gives examples of a wide variety of gifts from this indwelling Spirit.<sup>71</sup>

Even though a few gifts have been specified as having passed away, a wide range of gifts are still available, all of which must be considered miraculous if for no other reason than that they are gifts from God, so they are superhuman. To be termed a gift, the particular work of the Spirit must be manifested in a manner not normally attainable by humans. For reference, a short list of available (as opposed to cancelled, as noted above) gifts follows:

- Romans 12:6 – 8
  - Service
  - Teaching
  - Exhortation
  - Sharing
  - Mercy
- 1 Corinthians 12:4 – 11
  - Service
  - Works
  - Words of wisdom
  - Knowledge
  - Faith
  - Healing
- 1 Peter 4:10 – 11
  - Service
  - Speaking (as in speaking clearly or teaching)

I find it interesting that healing remains in the list. That miraculous ability has been given a bad name by a plethora of charlatans. Jesus gave a useful analogy in response to a crowd who suggested that Jesus give them manna from heaven like Moses as a sign that He was from God. Jesus replied, “Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven.”<sup>72</sup> Obviously, Jesus was referring to Himself as the true bread from heaven, but the first part of the sentence contains an important fact: Moses did not give them the manna, he just told them about it; God made it happen. Too often we honor the conduit of the power of God rather than the One who sent the power. So, healers who make a name for themselves, usually with considerable financial gain, are not real because they are glorified instead of God. Further, healers do not control the power, God does. For example, Jesus was unable to do many miracles in Nazareth.<sup>73</sup> Paul and Barnabas certainly could have used the ability to understand foreign languages in Lystra when the people reacted to a healing by declaring that Paul and Barnabas were gods come down from heaven and wanted to sacrifice to them.<sup>74</sup> So, the faithful

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<sup>68</sup> Zechariah 13:3

<sup>69</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8

<sup>70</sup> Ephesians 4:11 – 16, see also Chapter 4, “Leadership,” in *Hegemonies*

<sup>71</sup> See Chapter 6, “The Work of the Spirit,” in *Think as a Spirit*

<sup>72</sup> John 6:32

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 13:58, Mark 6:5

<sup>74</sup> Acts 14:8 – 18

should not be hesitant to appeal to God for healing to happen. However, they need to be careful that the observers are informed that the power is God's and is under the control of no individual human. Finally, as gifts pop out as a result of the indwelling Spirit, we must all remember the warning, "To whom much is given, much is required."<sup>75</sup>

### **In Some Ways, Faithful People are All the Same**

All faithful people are treated equally in that they all receive the indwelling Spirit,<sup>76</sup> regardless of heritage.<sup>77</sup> After the list of gifts that will differ from person to person, Paul gave a second list that applies to all. Through the indwelling Spirit, the faithful all gain in love, affection, honoring others, diligence, fervor, service, rejoicing, patience, prayerfulness, generosity, and hospitality.<sup>78</sup> Peter supplies a sequential set of positive character traits through which all the faithful pass: faith, mastery of life, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.<sup>79</sup> In his description of evangelism as a characteristic of faith, Paul gave a set of gifts supplied to all the faithful by the indwelling Spirit: transformed, light, treasure bearers, overcoming, speaking, confident, and persuasive.<sup>80</sup>

James wrote, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights."<sup>81</sup> But who decides which gifts are from God and which are just things we like? First, we must remember that a gift from God is, by definition, superhuman. So, talents that we had before coming to faith are not gifts. Rather, outside observers should remark on the impossibility of the event occurring. In the context of the James quote, the nature of those good and perfect gifts was included: various trials that produce patience and consistency, wisdom, low status, and the enduring of temptation.<sup>82</sup>

These heavenly gifts are made parallel to enlightenment, partaking of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and the powers of the age to come.<sup>83</sup> The faith economy itself is termed a gift.<sup>84</sup> All faithful people receive the gift of righteousness made available through the grace of Jesus, which results in justification.<sup>85</sup> The indwelling Spirit itself is described as a gift.<sup>86</sup> Positive responses by God to the prayers of the faithful are described as gifts.<sup>87</sup>

### **Which Gift is Mine?**

How can faithful people identify the gift or gifts granted to each one by God? The author of a popular book suggests that you should identify what you enjoy and declare it to be your gift. If declared confidently, few, if any, challenges will be encountered. Since very few have researched the methods for identifying gifts, no one will be able to mount a logical opposition.

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<sup>75</sup> Luke 12:48, Matthew 25:14 – 30,

<sup>76</sup> Romans 8:9 – 17

<sup>77</sup> Colossians 3:10 – 11, Galatians 3:26 – 29, 1 Corinthians 12:13

<sup>78</sup> Romans 12:9 – 13

<sup>79</sup> 2 Peter 1:2 – 9

<sup>80</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18 – 5:11

<sup>81</sup> James 1:17

<sup>82</sup> James 1:2 – 12

<sup>83</sup> Hebrews 6:4 – 5

<sup>84</sup> Ephesians 2:8

<sup>85</sup> Romans 5:15 – 18

<sup>86</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:15

<sup>87</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:11

And, faith has been reclassified over the centuries from a fact-based evidence to a self-proclaimed feeling. Since modern church leaders all do it, the followers tend to think that such unsupported assertions are normal, even unassailable.

Unfortunately, very few have been taught, and even fewer discover for themselves, that a necessary characteristic of a gift from God is that it must be superhuman. Without an expectation of such abilities, the Spirit seems to have trouble developing them. Outsiders, unbelievers, should be the ones identifying these gifts.<sup>88</sup> The outsider skips right over thanking you for what you just accomplished and immediately praises God for what just happened. The outsider can tell that you did not have the skill to pull it off. If I must assert for myself that God did it, something went wrong.

If you could do that thing before becoming a Christian, it is not a gift because God does not give gifts to the outsider, only the faithful. Rather, that thing you do is a talent that you would have been able to do whether you became a Christian or not.

If someone feels that their gift results in status or authority, then it is not a gift. It is ego. The conduit for the power should be entirely forgettable. And finally, ask yourself if you really need to know what your gift is. Just use what you have.

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<sup>88</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:7, 1 Peter 39 – 11

## Chapter 5: Family versus Family

Jesus warned the disciples that not all members of a family would become faithful and that division in physical families would result.<sup>89</sup> Persecution would arise from unbelieving members of the physical family.<sup>90</sup> Even in family units consisting of all faithful people, competing demands between the physical and spiritual family will arise.<sup>91</sup>

Jesus made some strong statements about the priority of Himself over physical family.

- “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?...Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.”<sup>92</sup>
- “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mothers or children or lands, for My Name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.”<sup>93</sup>
- “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.”<sup>94</sup>

However, Jesus did not intend for the faithful to forsake unbelieving family, nor to place physical family second. Instead, the faithful are expected to think and to use the promised godly wisdom<sup>95</sup> to meet the needs of both physical and spiritual relationships without slighting either.

### God Uses Earthly Family Relationships to Illustrate a Bigger Picture

The New Testament often uses the relationships of a good physical family to illustrate how the faithful should treat each other. If the relationships of the physical family were intended to take second place in the priority systems of the faithful, the comparison would no longer be valid. Rather, the closeness of physical family is assumed to be understood, so is used to bring the spiritual family up to that standard. In Bible times, physical family was highly significant, the foundation of society, so the comparisons were obvious to the original audience. Unfortunately, in modern times in Western civilization, this closeness has been significantly eroded. So, parents often do not attend the school events of their children, elderly parents are relegated to a care facility, and the extended family assembles only for weddings and funerals, albeit sparsely.

Unfortunately, over the history of the church, the closeness of the spiritual family also has been shortchanged, exchanging a family environment for an authority environment.<sup>96</sup>

The following list details the importance of a strong physical family to be used as a model for the spiritual family:

- Treat elderly church women as mothers, younger church women as sisters.<sup>97</sup>
- Church women are called sisters.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Matthew 10:34 – 36, Luke 12:51 – 53

<sup>90</sup> Mark 13:12, Luke 21:16

<sup>91</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:5, 12 – 16, 32 – 34

<sup>92</sup> Matthew 12:46 – 50, Mark 3:31 – 35, Luke 8:19 – 21

<sup>93</sup> Matthew 19:29, Mark 10:29 – 30, Luke 18:29 – 30

<sup>94</sup> Luke 14:26

<sup>95</sup> James 1:5 – 8

<sup>96</sup> See *Family Gathering*, chapter 2 and 3.

<sup>97</sup> 1 Timothy 5:2

<sup>98</sup> Romans 16:1, 1 Corinthians 7:15, James 2:15, 2 John 13

- Church men are called brothers (more than 50 passages)
- Marriage between two Christians is to be an illustration of the relationship between Jesus and the church.<sup>99</sup>
- “Parents lay up for their children” illustrates the care of teachers for disciples.<sup>100</sup>
- The spiritual family includes all the faithful: angels, physically dead, physically living.<sup>101</sup>

### **The Faithful are to be Responsible to and for Their Physical Relatives.**

- Honor your father and your mother.<sup>102</sup>
- Obey parents.<sup>103</sup>
- Disobedience to parents is in two “bad lists”.<sup>104</sup>
- Men leave parents when they marry, yet still honor and obey.<sup>105</sup> In the New Testament era, a married man considered carefully and respectfully the wishes of his parents, but made his own decisions.
- Faithful people take care of their physical families; the church as a group takes care of the faithful without physical families.<sup>106</sup>
- While being executed, Jesus made sure that the future needs of His mother would be met.<sup>107</sup>
- “But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father and mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God,” then he need not honor his father.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God to no effect by your tradition.”<sup>108</sup> The leaders of the Jews thought they were being clever by inventing a loophole for the wealthy with regard to supporting aged parents. A wealthy landowner could dedicate the produce from a plot of land to the upkeep of his retired parents, thereby satisfying that cultural requirement, then dedicate that same produce as part of his tithe. Since the tithe took precedence, being of the Law, the parents got nothing. Yet, legally and in the eyes of the leadership, this double-dipping ploy was correct.

Physical family and spiritual family are not in competition. If the faithful land in the predicament of choosing one above the other, something went wrong. Back up and re-think, using the wisdom which God supplies. Whatever we determine is our calling, it must come from among the following items given by God. Christians are called *to* the fellowship of His Son, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and to the marriage supper of the lamb. All other callings are inventions of the human mind, according to the flesh, not the spirit.

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<sup>99</sup> Ephesians 5:23 – 33, 1 Peter 3:7

<sup>100</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:14

<sup>101</sup> Ephesians 3:15, Hebrews 12:22 – 24

<sup>102</sup> Matthew 19:19, Mark 7:10, Mark 10:19, Luke 18:20, Ephesians 6:2. See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 5 for a detailed description of “honor” meant to the original audience.

<sup>103</sup> Colossians 3:20. See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 5 for a detailed description of “obey” meant to the original audience.

<sup>104</sup> Romans 1:30, 2 Timothy 3:2

<sup>105</sup> Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7, Ephesians 5:31

<sup>106</sup> 1 Timothy 5:3 – 16

<sup>107</sup> John 19:25 – 27

<sup>108</sup> Matthew 15:3 – 6, Mark 7:10 – 13

## Chapter 6: Pleasing God

Faith and law are different.<sup>109</sup> Law defines behavior that is necessary to go to heaven or to be acceptable to God, producing lists of minimum requirements. All types of legalism focus on behavior, just with different lists of essentials. Often, the irrational conclusion is drawn that if one person can be acceptable to God without or despite a certain behavior, then all people can be similarly excused, as though all people were identical. Obviously, a newly faithful person will make many mistakes. Jesus already redeemed everyone, good and bad,<sup>110</sup> so the only question is whether God will forgive (push aside the error so that the relationship can be re-established). Using 1 Corinthians as an example, the congregation was seriously flawed, yet Paul continually referred to them as brethren. However, a more mature faithful person knows better than a newly faithful person. If the mature faithful person were to decide that, since the weak one was forgiven, then the strong one can be also, so sets about to do what he or she knows is wrong, I do not think God would be taken in by the manipulation.

In contrast, faith responds to the grace of God (the collection of godly character traits with special emphasis on the way that those traits are integrated and consistent). Without a response, faith does not exist. Those who love God will seek to please God. The only reasonable way to express that love is through means for which God has expressed His pleasure. Deciding how to please God without considering what God has communicated as pleasing to Him is self-serving, not God-serving.

### What Does God Find Pleasing?

- “Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God.”<sup>111</sup> Spiritual growth pleases God. Methods for that growth are found in several places.
  - "An entrance will be supplied abundantly into the everlasting Kingdom" if we diligently add these character traits to our faith.<sup>112</sup> 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."
  - 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."<sup>113</sup>
  - "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."<sup>114</sup>
  - The church in Corinth did about everything wrong, but Paul anticipated growth in their faith.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 3.

<sup>110</sup> 1 John 2:2

<sup>111</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:1

<sup>112</sup> 2 Peter 1:2 – 11

<sup>113</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:3 – 8

<sup>114</sup> 1 Peter 2:1 – 3

<sup>115</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:15

- Paul described those who were weak in faith, and those who were strong.<sup>116</sup> The transition was through edification.<sup>117</sup>
- “No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.”<sup>118</sup> Singleness of purpose is pleasing to God.
- “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”<sup>119</sup> Biblical sacrifice is a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God.<sup>120</sup> Doing good and sharing pleases God.
- “For this reason we also, since the day we heard of it, do not cease to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering and joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.”<sup>121</sup> Walking worthy of the Lord in all spiritual understanding and wisdom, both of which are products of the indwelling Spirit,<sup>122</sup> please God, along with good works and increasing in knowledge.
- “Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord.”<sup>123</sup> God is pleased when adult children are respectful of their parents and give thoughtful consideration to their suggestions.
- “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, and He gave us commandment.”<sup>124</sup> The pleasing things in this context have to do with trusting God and loving one another.

### What Does God Find Displeasing?

- “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”<sup>125</sup> Those whose decision-making processes are rooted in the physical cannot please God. One must learn to think as a spirit.
- “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”<sup>126</sup> The faith under consideration is Biblical faith, not what people call faith.<sup>127</sup> “All that is not of faith is sin.”<sup>128</sup> In short, the characteristics of Biblical faith are:

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<sup>116</sup> Romans 14:1

<sup>117</sup> Romans 14:19

<sup>118</sup> 2 Timothy 2:4

<sup>119</sup> Hebrews 13:16

<sup>120</sup> See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 5.

<sup>121</sup> Colossians 1:9 – 12

<sup>122</sup> See *Think as a Spirit*, Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>123</sup> Colossians 3:20 See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 5. The children, in the context, are adults, and the obedience is voluntary. The point is that the adult children pay attention and consider what their parents say.

<sup>124</sup> 1 John 3:22

<sup>125</sup> Romans 8:8

<sup>126</sup> Hebrews 11:6

<sup>127</sup> See *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 4.

<sup>128</sup> Romans 14:23

- Understanding of the resurrection as evidence
- Recognizing the need for a sacrifice (and knowing what a sacrifice is)
- Acceptance of the Word of God as true
- A realistic hope of heaven
- Trust in the promises of God (implies knowing what the promises are)
- Taking on the divine nature (the obedience of faith)
- Evangelism

Whatever way we determine our calling, the methods we choose must be from among those deemed pleasing to God. Further, our calling but be from the following choices: Christians are called *to* the fellowship of His Son, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and to the marriage supper of the lamb.

## Chapter 7: Responsibility

Whatever one chooses as a role in the kingdom, that role must be controlled by the responsibilities assigned to all the faithful. The faithful are called *to* the fellowship of His Son, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and to the marriage supper of the lamb. All of those callings, and the roles one may choose within those callings must be executed within certain boundaries:

### Submit to Those Whom the Follower Chooses

The kingdom of God is based on liberty, not authority.<sup>129</sup> Obedience to other humans is always expressed in the middle voice which incorporates the concept of the relationship being voluntary. For example:

- “Voluntarily obey your *hegemones* and submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”<sup>130</sup> Each faithful person must select one or more other faithful people to follow. The resulting obedience must not be merely lip-service, but rather taking the lead of one or more leaders who are of greater faith. Of course, the follower has the option of changing leaders for several good reasons: the assessment of the selected leader’s faith was inaccurately high, the selected leader stagnated and was passed by the follower, or better options became available. The follower is responsible for this selection process, not the leader, even though the potential leaders will “give an account” for the welfare of those whom they should be leading. Leaders are responsible for making themselves available; followers are responsible for following.
- “Remember those who led you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.”<sup>131</sup> “Remember” is not the same as “follow,” but enjoins a certain level of respect be paid to those who have contributed to one’s development. Their faithfulness is ascertained by observation of their lives, not by what they teach or with whom they are aligned.
- “And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them highly in love for their work’s sake.”<sup>132</sup> Those who are “over you” attain that position when the follower decides. They are not appointed by God as they were in the first century church.<sup>133</sup>
- “Submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.”<sup>134</sup> Submitting, letting someone else lead, applies to all. So, everyone leads and everyone follows, depending on the situation and the players.

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<sup>129</sup> See *Hegemones*, Chapter 1.

<sup>130</sup> Hebrews 13:17

<sup>131</sup> Hebrews 13:7

<sup>132</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:12 – 13

<sup>133</sup> Ephesians 4:11 – 16. See also *Hegemones*, Chapter 4.

<sup>134</sup> Ephesians 5:21

Church leaders have no authority or enforcement capabilities given in the Scriptures. Church leaders have no input with God as to whom will be accepted into the eternal family. Followers are responsible for their own choices of leaders, which may change from time to time based on the follower's perceptions of the potential leaders. The church was designed by God before creation. Each Christian must acknowledge someone as his or her leader. Different people will look to different leaders, even within the same congregation, but that is a reasonable result.<sup>135</sup> However, those choices cannot be made in a spirit of division.<sup>136</sup>

## Spiritual Growth

If faith is not growing, it is not Biblical faith. Many have run away from this requirement for fear that it will cause anxiety and self-doubt among the members. However, the New Testament contains a series of methods by which one may determine if God has accepted them or not.<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately, many groups recommend that each person declare to God his or her own acceptability, or a leader is tasked with that declaration, both of which are recipes for disastrous self-deception. The following passages illustrate God's expectation of growth as an outgrowth of faith:

- “For this reason we also, since the day we heard of it, do not cease to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering and joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.”<sup>138</sup> The Colossian Christians were considered faithful by Paul.<sup>139</sup> Yet, he prayed repeatedly that they grow in many areas. Probably because Epaphras was present as Paul wrote this letter,<sup>140</sup> and had taught the faithful of Colossae,<sup>141</sup> Paul did not find it necessary to recount the role of the indwelling Spirit in this growth process.<sup>142</sup>
- “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”<sup>143</sup> “Are being transformed” implies a growth process. The Corinthian Christians understood and applied many things badly, but throughout Paul's communication with them, he called them brethren and stated his high expectations of them. Continuing in the context, this development process is governed by the indwelling Spirit.<sup>144</sup>
- “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, up to salvation.”<sup>145</sup> Remember that the Word is the philosophical explanation of the nature of

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<sup>135</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:4 – 17

<sup>136</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 17

<sup>137</sup> See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 2.

<sup>138</sup> Colossians 1:9 – 12

<sup>139</sup> Colossians 1:1 – 4

<sup>140</sup> Colossians 4:12

<sup>141</sup> Colossians 1:7

<sup>142</sup> e.g., Romans 8:9 – 14

<sup>143</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:15 – 18

<sup>144</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:5

<sup>145</sup> 1 Peter 2:2

God, good and evil, right and wrong, and the purpose of creation. When Peter wrote this, printing had not been invented, a single handwritten scroll from the Old Testament collection was extremely expensive, and the New Testament was largely as yet unwritten. Spiritual growth is accelerated by contemplating those concepts of the Word, which must be sufficiently simple for ordinary people to comprehend.

- "...add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge..."<sup>146</sup> The growth process through which we become "partakers of the divine nature" is given as a process in stages from faith to love. Each faithful person is expected to set out on this journey.
- "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."<sup>147</sup> Avoiding the "error of the wicked"<sup>148</sup> is accomplished by growing the gracious nature of God and knowledge of His objectives within ourselves through the indwelling Spirit.
- "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – 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, causing the growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."<sup>149</sup> Jesus' intention was that the church grow sufficiently so that miraculously appointed leaders<sup>150</sup> would no longer be needed, which was scheduled to occur before the Temple was destroyed and after the gospel went to the whole world. The body grows because its members grow.

Maturity is not optional. The indwelling Spirit transforms us such as we allow it.<sup>151</sup> Everyone grows differently and at a different rate, yet all grow. All are equally important.<sup>152</sup>

## Evangelism

Unfortunately, New Testament evangelism has been largely replaced by specialists and mass media events. Initially, the gospel was spread across the world in one generation with some significant help from God, especially in travel and language-learning. However, although Acts records the activities of Peter and Paul, they were not the major movers. Ordinary Christians spread the gospel to more people than the apostles could have reached even with God's help. Although God helped with some of the more time-consuming tasks, one must spend significant time with someone to impart the gospel. The New Testament reveals no time-warp teaching sessions. The most effective carriers of the gospel were ordinary people who spoke to those they met in business and in society.

- Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.<sup>153</sup>
- Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> 2 Peter 1:5 – 11

<sup>147</sup> 2 Peter 3:18

<sup>148</sup> 2 Peter 3:17

<sup>149</sup> Ephesians 4:15 – 16

<sup>150</sup> Ephesians 4:11

<sup>151</sup> See *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 6.

<sup>152</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 31

<sup>153</sup> Acts 8:4

<sup>154</sup> Romans 1:7

- From you the Word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.<sup>155</sup>

The faithful are called *to* the fellowship of His Son, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and to the marriage supper of the lamb. As Paul noted, “We also believe, and therefore speak.”<sup>156</sup> Evangelism is a task common to all the faithful. 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 5 are a long treatise on how evangelism works.

- 3:18 These chapters are addressed to all who are, “with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.”
- 4:1 “As we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.” Focus on the mercy that has been received (God was motivated by compassion to fix the flaws of the faithful), not numerical success, as the motivation for evangelism. This allows the faithful to endure the fact that more than 90% of people do not care about God. In 4:16, the fact that physical bodies are falling apart is overshadowed by the fact that eternal bodies are gaining daily. (*cf.*, 4:17 – 5:6)
- 4:2 “We have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the Word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience.” Clever approaches are not desirable. Honorable people will attract hearers. What the faithful need to present are the facts, not emotional appeals. In 4:5, “we do not preach ourselves.” In 4:6, the proper evangelistic method is to let God’s character shine through, which is very similar to the thought in 3:18.
- 4:3 “Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.” If the faithful are honorable and factual, they can be certain that the low response rate is not due to them.
- 4:7 The proper evangelistic method is to be doing things that outsiders plainly can see are beyond human ability. Paul gives examples from his life in 4:8 – 12. In 5:7, doing the impossible is called faith, in contrast to sight.
- 4:13 Examples of doing the superhuman and displaying godly character must be accompanied by oral presentations. It’s a package deal.
- 5:11 Another motivation for evangelism is the fear felt by the faithful for the destination of unbelievers. Therefore, they speak (persuade).
- 5:16 Evangelism is made possible by seeing the spirits of others.
- 5:14 The love of Christ compels.
- 5:18 The task is a ministry of reconciliation, not of judgment. Those who care about being reconciled to God will listen.
- 5:20 The faithful are ambassadors: courteous, diplomatic, carefully spoken.

Note the lack of methodology. Speaking is necessary, although the type of speaking is open. Personal conversation is probably more effective than impersonal preaching and teaching. Visible and obviously superhuman behavior is necessary. The rest is open to personal preference.

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<sup>155</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:8

<sup>156</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:13

## Teaching

An essential characteristic of every faithful person is that all teach. Some have taken the legalistic approach and require all to teach regardless of ability, so education sinks to the swapping of ignorance. Others re-define teaching so that those who do not want to follow God's prescription can deceive themselves into thinking that their "teaching" can consist of the good behavior that others observe. Unfortunately, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and atheists count among their number some highly ethical people, so Christianity just blends into the background. The following passages illustrate that every faithful person is expected to instruct others at a high level of educational quality. The ability to do this arises from effort by the individual believer along with the work of the indwelling Spirit.

- For by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.<sup>157</sup>
- And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance so that they may know the truth...<sup>158</sup>
- We all have this ministry...Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...We are ambassadors for Christ.<sup>159</sup>
- The older women, likewise...admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God not be blasphemed<sup>160</sup>
- Commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.<sup>161</sup>
- Let each one take heed how he builds...If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved.<sup>162</sup>
- But he who received the seed on the good ground is he who hears and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.<sup>163</sup>

Sharing what we know about Jesus is an expression of love. Teaching takes many forms, but all forms imply speaking and must produce fruit. Avoid speculation and complication.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Hebrews 5:12 – 14

<sup>158</sup> 2 Timothy 2:24 – 25

<sup>159</sup> 2 Corinthians 4 – 5

<sup>160</sup> Titus 2:3 – 5

<sup>161</sup> 2 Timothy 2:2

<sup>162</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:10 – 15

<sup>163</sup> Matthew 13:23

<sup>164</sup> 1 Timothy 1:3 – 11, 6:4, 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:16, 4:4, Titus 3:9

## Chapter 8: The Will of God

Many church-goers are entreated to find their calling but are left without a reasonable way to accomplish the objective. Some recommend choosing what you like to do, since the fact that you like it must mean that it is your calling. Others recommend feelings as the best guide. Others suggest that, if God opens a door, that must be your calling. That tactic just kicks the problem a little further down the road, since no one has evidence of what opportunities were put in place by God. Then, once a person is convinced that the calling exists, worry sets in. First, people worry whether they have apprehended the right calling. Since they have no evidence, they must rely on nonsense, which, for honest people, is worrisome. Others worry that they will not be able to execute their calling well enough, leaving a hole in the plan of God.

These problems arise because God no longer “calls” people to certain tasks. The last people whom God actually called were the apostles, and they are all dead. Apostles had the “signs of an apostle.”<sup>165</sup> Prophets predicted things that came true every time. Judges were given specific signs that God was selecting them, with the caveat that they won huge battles while greatly outnumbered, with few if any casualties on their side. Any claim to a “call” from God needs to be accompanied by superhuman evidence. Christians are called *by* the gospel, by Jesus, by His grace (His collection of positive character traits with emphasis on the way those traits are integrated and consistent), and by His mastery of earthly life. Christians are called *to* the fellowship of His Son, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and to the marriage supper of the lamb.<sup>166</sup>

A companion problem is created when church leaders suggest that something is “the will of God.” Usually, the definition of the phrase is lacking. Sometimes they mean that God caused it, although they have no evidence to that effect. Sometimes they mean that a certain pathway has been selected by God, again without evidence. Once something is declared “the will of God,” a companion slogan, “the will of God cannot be thwarted,” casts the unproven declaration in concrete.

### The Sovereignty of God

That phrase does not appear in the KJV, nor does any form of “sovereign.” In the NIV, it appears 286 times in the Old Testament, although the number of occurrences may differ between the various editions of the NIV. “Sovereign Lord” is a rewording of the traditional Lord God, which, transliterated from Hebrew is Adonay Yahweh or “the Lord Who Is.” Charging “The Lord Who Is” to “Sovereign Lord” reverses the point God made to Moses in Exodus 6:3 that God wanted to be known as “I Am” rather than “God of Power.”

In addition to being used as part of the name of God, “sovereign” or “sovereignty” appears seven times in Daniel in the NIV. In 4:17, 25, and 32 of the NIV, the common word for ruler is changed to sovereign, although all the other occasions of that word are translated “ruler.” The same is true in 5:21, although it is a different part of speech. In 5:18 of the NIV, God gave a kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar. In all other places, the Hebrew word is translated kingdom. In both 7:14 and 7:27, the same Hebrew word is translated sovereign (or sovereignty) and kingdom

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<sup>165</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:12

<sup>166</sup> See Chapter 1.

in the same verse. “Sovereign” has been introduced into modern translations without linguistic support.

In the New Testament, sovereign appears four times in the NIV. In Romans 9:6, the word is inserted by the translators although the Greek text has no corresponding word. In 2 Peter 2:1 and Revelation 6:10, the Greek word is *despotes* (despot), translated Lord. The adjective, Sovereign, is not in the Greek text. In Jude 4, the text has been seriously manipulated so the correspondence to a particular Greek word cannot be discerned.

The concept of the sovereignty of God is an assumption through which Scripture is interpreted rather than a teaching given in the Scriptures. In order to insert the word into the Scriptures, the concept of “the God Who Is” has been replaced by the “God of All Power,” a reversal of God’s desire expressed in Exodus 6:3.

### **Two Examples of Definitions of the Sovereignty of God**

Example 1: The Sovereignty of God is the biblical teaching that all things are under God's rule and control, and that nothing happens without His direction or permission. God works not just some things but all things according to the counsel of His own will (see Eph. 1:11). His purposes are all-inclusive and never thwarted (see Isa. 46:11); nothing takes Him by surprise. The sovereignty of God is not merely that God has the power and right to govern all things, but that He does so, always and without exception. In other words, God is not merely sovereign *de jure* (in principle), but sovereign *de facto* (in practice).

Example 2: What do we mean by the sovereignty of God? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the god-hood of God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him, “what doest Thou?” (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Psa. 115:3). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is "The Governor among the nations" (Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the "Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.

### **Problems with the descriptions**

The statements above were generated outside of Scripture, then declared true due to a few citations of verses. No effort was made to disprove the generalization or to find all passages that have to do with the subject.

For example, “Nothing happens without His direction or permission” cannot be found in the Bible. Logically, this means that God is responsible for evil. The idea of “permission” is not well defined. In the context of its paragraph, it implies that God purposefully allows evil to happen, that it would not happen if God did not want it to happen. This means that sin is within the will of God. Further, this asserts that free will does not exist. Because we believe we have the ability to choose, this assertion makes God the Great Deceiver. The ideas of predestination and the foreknowledge of God are addressed in detail in subsequent section of this chapter.

1 Corinthians 7:37 says that Christians have power over their own will. “Desire” and “will” are the same word. See also Romans 7:18, 1 Corinthians 9:17, 1 Corinthians 16:12, 2 Corinthians 8:11, 1 Timothy 5:11, 2 Timothy 2:26, 3:12, 1 Peter 4:2, and 4:3, all of which say that non-divine spirits can execute their own will, including Satan.

The reference to Ephesians 1:11 in Example 1 above is an appeal to the doctrine of predestination. Although the word appears in that verse, the definition is assumed to be that God causes all things, rather than its actual definition, that God planned for certain events in advance, especially the nature of the eternal kingdom. The writer of the Sovereignty paragraph instead used “predestined” to mean that every event and every thought and action of people were pre-planned by God, again denying free will.

The reference to Isaiah 46:11 in Example 1 has nothing to do with the author’s point about the sovereignty of God. Rather, God’s message through Isaiah was to emphasize His own faithfulness; He will accomplish what He promised.

The reference to Daniel 4:35 in Example 2 also lends no support to the author’s argument, as though a mere citation of Scripture is sufficient to prove a point. Psalm 115:3 in Example 2 says that God does what He pleases, but has no relationship to the author’s point.

Psalm 22:28 in Example 2 is a description of the Messiah, who is King of all the nations of the earth. Unless one is willing to assert that Jesus controls every governmental decision in every country, we must conclude that the will of Jesus is routinely ignored. However, it does imply that Satan will lose his position as lord of this earth after the Messiah comes. The citation of 1 Timothy 6:15 in Example 2 has the same problem.

## Does God Know the Future?

### The Foreknowledge of God

The foreknowledge of God is mentioned in seven passages in the New Testament:

- Acts 2:23 ... being delivered by the determined purpose and *foreknowledge* of God
- Acts 26:5 They *knew me from the first*, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.
- Romans 8:29 For whom He *foreknew*, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.
- Romans 11:2 God has not cast away His people whom He *foreknew*.
- 1 Peter 1:2 Elect according to the *foreknowledge* of God
- 1 Peter 1:20 He indeed was *foreordained* before the foundation of the world
- 2 Peter 3:17 You therefore beloved, since *you know this beforehand*, beware lest you also fall from our own steadfastness

Of the seven times the noun or verb form of “foreknow” is used, two are used of humans who do not know the future. The word implies knowledge of the past, not knowledge of the future. One of the usages with reference to God also speaks of past knowledge (Romans 11:2).

Literally, the two parts of the word are “before-knowledge,” as in “to know beforehand.” Commonly, the other four usages have been interpreted as “to know the future.” However, three of the seven usages do not fit that definition. If all usages are to be understood consistently, the meaning should be “to have known previously,” as in past knowledge that has application to future events. So, the seven passages cited above should be understood as follows:

- Acts 2:23 Jesus' death was part of God's plan. That plan was formed in the past.
- Acts 26:5 People can testify of facts of the past.
- Romans 8:29 For whom God planned in the past (God planned the eternal kingdom, the church, in the past), He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. All who decide to become a part of the kingdom will be conformed to the image of Jesus, which is the purpose of the indwelling Spirit.
- Romans 11:2 God knew the Israelites for a long time in the past.
- 1 Peter 1:2 Elect according to God's plan. That plan was formed in the past.
- 1 Peter 1:20 God formed the plan for Jesus before creation.
- 2 Peter 3:17 You know how it went for others. Use this past knowledge to protect yourself.

### **Predestination**

- Romans 8:29 – 30 “For whom He foreknew, He also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He *predestined*, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” Note 8:28, “To those who love God.” Verse 27 is about those in whom the Spirit dwells. The “called” in verse 28 are the “called” of verse 30. Those who love God were predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. The predestination is not about who was to be called, but about what would be done for those whom loved God.
- Ephesians 1:3 – 5 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having *predestined* us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will...” What is predestined is the adoption of the faithful, not the identities of who will be faithful.
- Ephesians 1:11 “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.” What is predestined is an inheritance for the faithful, not the identities of the faithful.
- Acts 4:27 – 28 “For truly against your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose *determined before* to be done.” God planned, as revealed by Psalm 2, for the rulers of the earth to oppose the Messiah.
- 1 Corinthians 2:7 “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God *ordained before* the ages for our glory.” God planned great things for those who loved Him (verse 9).

If individuals were preselected for salvation, then God deceived people by issuing a call to respond to the gospel. The chosen were deceived into thinking they had made a choice. The rejected were deceived into thinking they had a chance.

### **Does the Holy Spirit Act upon Unbelievers to Create Faith?**

- People think they make choices. In the Scriptures, people are told to make choices. If we do not have free will, then God is deceiving us by asking us to choose.
- If the Spirit overrides free will, then both faith and love cease to exist. The Spirit cannot cause faith without superseding free will.
- From the history in Acts, many times God orchestrated the delivery of the gospel to people He knew needed to hear it. He could have inserted it into them, but that would have ruined the objective: faith.
- Romans 8:14 – 18 describes the delivery mechanism: through people, by speech.
- No passage states or infers that the Spirit causes belief directly.

The first argument with which to dispense is that which claims that God knows the future. But, people with finite minds cannot understand an infinite God. That truism invalidates all arguments including itself, not just its opponents. Further, since the Scriptures do not explain knowledge of the future, its proponents set themselves up as those who can explain what the infinite God either did not or could not explain adequately without them. Rather, our objective is to determine that which can be concluded by God-given wisdom, and to leave the rest to God.

The second argument that is commonly used but fails in its logic is that, because God is omniscient, He knows everything, including the future. The same logic could be used to assert that God is omnipotent, so He can lie and be tempted by evil. Obviously (from Titus 1:2 and James 1:13), God can do only that which is consistent with His character. Whether knowledge of the future is within the nature of God is the question, the answer to which cannot be simply asserted without proof.

Arguments are made that God's knowledge of the future would not infringe on free will. But, the future changes with every choice and every answered prayer. So, God would be required to know in advance what choices and requests will be made so only one future would be available. But if there is only one future, then our choices and requests are an illusion. And, since God would already know the evil that would be chosen, God would be guilty of the human legal concept of "depraved indifference," having the ability to prevent evil and doing nothing. Explanations exist to reconcile the concepts of knowledge of the future with free will, but the explanations are far from satisfactory. Nevertheless, if the Scriptures establish that God knows the future, then either the reconciliation is truly complicated, or the reconciliation is not knowable.

The Scriptures contain many predictions made by God. Either God knows the future and He could simply recite what He knew, or God has the ability and intelligence to cause His predictions to happen. Both explanations fit the data, so neither is supported nor disproved.

Many passages other than those concerned with predictions have been cited in support of God knowing the future. The following list is not complete, but serves to illustrate that each passage can be reconciled with either position. No passage specifically addresses whether God knows the future or whether God intervenes as necessary to make His plans and predictions become reality.

- Psalm 139 (v4) The fact that God knew what the psalmist would speak before he spoke it proves no more than God knew what he was thinking, just as Jesus knew the thoughts of men. (v16) "Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance" in the context, tells that God knew the psalmist when he was still in his mother's womb. "And in Thy book they were

all written, the days that were ordained, when as yet there was not one of them.” This description of God’s control should be placed in the same category as His planning for the Messiah, the eternal Kingdom on earth, and its citizens. God planned, wrote the plan, and executed the plan. The plan was unrolled in Revelation, when the Lamb was worthy to break its seals and reveal it. If the application of the passage is expanded to cover every event in history, if the dates of our deaths were already written, then murder would not be a crime, since the victim was ordained to die on that day. Obviously, this is not the case.

- Isaiah 46:10 “Declaring the end from the beginning” does not tell whether God knew the outcome or if He planned and executed the outcome. The last phrase of the verse implies the latter.
- Jeremiah 1:5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” This description is specific to Jeremiah, not everyone. God chose Jeremiah to be a prophet before he was born, much in the same way as God chose Jacob over Esau (Romans 9:11). This does not speak to whether God knows the future, but to whether He selects certain people for certain jobs.
- Acts 2:23 “Delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.” This confirms that God was not surprised that Jesus was executed, and that it was part of His plan. The fact that such a large number of unlikely events, all predicted in advance, came to pass on schedule can be addressed by either theory. Either God knew in advance what people would do, so He told about what could not be changed, or God is such a good planner that He made it all happen despite the exercise of free will. If God were merely reciting what was already known to be the outcome, then revealing it would not influence people to either go along with it or work against it. But, if God does not know the future, but rather makes His plans work, telling people of the details of the plan engenders considerable risk. For example, telling people that you predict that they will turn left often results in them turning right out of spite.
- Romans 8:29 “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.” As in Acts 2:23 above, what was foreknown was the plan, not the future. The same usage may be found in 1 Peter 1:2, 1:20, and Romans 11:2. These are the only places the word is used.
- Job 14:5 “Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with you; you have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass.” This was Job’s opinion which God later said was wrong (Job 38 – 41).

However, there are numerous passages in the Old Testament in which God is given the attribute of changing His mind. Obviously, these are figures of speech, anthropomorphisms. However, the image conveyed must be in keeping with the truth. For example, the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Torment and Paradise respectively cannot be literal, but must be basically true. Spirits neither have tongues nor need water. Nevertheless, we conclude basic truths about the disposition of spirits after physical death. In the same way, the following passages give us insight into the mind of God, but in human terms. For example, “seeing” the full character of God would have been too much for Moses (Exodus 33:17 – 34:7), so he was permitted to see only God’s “hind parts.” In the same way, in various passages, we are told that God changed His mind or relented or came to know. Although God may not think as we think, His communication would represent His thought processes in terms that we can comprehend, using our thought processes as illustrations.

- Genesis 2:19 The implication is that God was interested in hearing what Adam would name each animal. This interpretation was obvious to Muhammad because he wrote in the Koran a correction to the Genesis account, that God told Adam what to name each animal.
- Genesis 6:6 God was sorry that He had made man. This implies that the result, while still covered in the plan, was more evil than He had hoped. If God knew that this was going to be the result, He could not be accurately described as “repenting” of it.
- Genesis 22:12 God told Abraham, “Now I know that you fear God.” If God knew the future, He already knew.
- Exodus 32:9 – 14 God told Moses that He was going to destroy the Israelites (v9). Moses argued (v11 – 13). God changed His mind (v14). If God knew the future, God did not speak the truth in verse 9. For example, if I told you that I would help you with something on Saturday, fully knowing that I would be leaving town on Friday and would therefore be unavailable on Saturday, my promise to help on Saturday would be a lie. But, if I promised to help on Saturday with the full intention of helping, but on Friday I had to leave town because my grandmother died, that would be an unfortunate change in plans, not a lie. By comparison, if God knows the future, promises something, and then changes His mind, then the original promise was a lie because God knew that He would not do what He promised when He promised to do it. If, however, God does not know the future, unforeseen changes could cause a promise to be reconsidered, as in this case and several of the following.
- Numbers 14:11 – 20 God told Moses He was going to destroy the Israelites (v12). Moses argued (v13 – 19). God pardoned them (v21). See previous.
- Numbers 16:20 – 35 God told Moses He was going to destroy the Israelites (v21). Moses argued (v22). God changed the punishment (v24). See the previous two.
- Numbers 16:41 – 48 God told Moses He was going to destroy the Israelites (v45). Moses appealed (v46 – 48). God halted the plague (v21). See the previous three.
- Deuteronomy 9:13 – 29 The accounts in Exodus and Numbers are summarized with the same images. God changed His mind due to the arguments of Moses.
- Judges 10:13 – 16 God announced that He was forsaking Israel because they had not kept up their part of the contract. The people repented. God changed His mind. See the previous five.
- 2 Samuel 24:10 – 25 God did not carry out His announced sentence. If God knows the future, His threat of three days pestilence was a lie rather than relenting.
- Isaiah 5:2 – 5 In the parable, God portrays Himself as expecting a fruitful harvest, but it did not happen. If God knows the future, He could not have expectations that fail.
- Jeremiah 3:6 – 7 God portrays Himself as having expectations of Israel. If God knows the future, He could not have expectations that fail.
- Jeremiah 7:31, 29:11, and 32:35 God said that child sacrifice did not come into His mind, yet it happened and we can read about it.
- Jeremiah 29:11 God has plans for peace and hope, yet few find them.
- Daniel 10:12 – 14 The angel who was sent to influence Cyrus to sign the order to allow the Israelites to go back to Israel required three weeks and a backup archangel to get the job done. This implies that God sends angels to influence worldly events to come out the way He predicted.

- Jonah 3:4, 10 Assuming that Jonah was preaching the message that God intended, there was no promise of God relenting. Jonah announced that Nineveh would be overthrown in forty days. God relented. If God knows the future, either Jonah didn't get the message straight, or God lied to him.

Arguments in favor of God knowing the future become very complicated very quickly. The Scriptures cited in support of this position ignore contexts and overlook passages that contradict the presumption. The telling argument is that God has plans that do not come to pass (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:4 "...who desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.") and that He changes His mind. If the future is known, prayer is useless. If the future is known, God is deceiving us by telling us to choose.

## The Will of God

The "will" of God would be better translated as the "desire" of God. Obviously, much of the will of God is routinely ignored. Further, the fact that something happens does not mean that it was the will of God (*e.g.*, sin).

The God of the Bible has never been subtle. Any desire of God will be clearly stated or made unmistakable with physical evidence. Speculation is condemned.<sup>167</sup>

God does not have a plan for each individual. If He did, He would be required to communicate it clearly, not with hints, so we could follow our individualized plans. Further, the number of times we deviate from a supposed plan of God would require that God be constantly updating every plan multiple times per day, which means the plans are not plans at all, but desires for the future that may or may not happen.

We should make choices based on our understanding of what God wants. Many times we do this badly. But, if we have made the choice with the faith we had at that moment, God is pleased and can work with it. We walk by faith, not by innuendo.

## The Will of God Defined

Descriptions of the various facets of the desires of God are given in various letters in the New Testament. The first objective is to combine them so that they all contribute to a bigger picture without contradiction.

- "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."<sup>168</sup> God desires that the lifestyles of the faithful cause their detractors to look foolish to the rest of the unbelieving world.
- "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."<sup>169</sup> Part of God's desire and plan is that the faithful be dedicated solely to godly purposes. They are qualified to do this based on their redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus, not because they performed superbly and were thereby selected for the task.
- "Who desires (wills) all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>170</sup> God's desire is that all spirits choose faith. Obviously, God will not get His way on this.

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<sup>167</sup> 1 Timothy 1:3 – 7, 6:4, 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:16, 4:4, Titus 3:9, Romans 12:3

<sup>168</sup> 1 Peter 2:15

<sup>169</sup> Hebrews 10:10

<sup>170</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4

Most translations switch the verb to “desire” rather than “will” without linguistic support. This is the same Greek word throughout all the references.

- “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”<sup>171</sup> God’s plan is for the faithful to be always rejoicing and giving thanks. Obviously, this is not always the case, if for no other reason than bad things happen to good people. Certainly, the faithful are comforted by God and by fellow faithful when things go badly, and they will be able to return to joy and thankfulness, but not instantaneously. For example, Paul commented that he would have had “sorrow upon sorrow” if his friend, Epaphroditus had died.<sup>172</sup>
- “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.”<sup>173</sup> God’s plan for the faithful is that each one be reserved for godly purposes. Based on the subject matter of several of the letters of the New Testament, not every Christian in those congregations was as sanctified as Paul or God would have liked.
- “Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will...having made known to us the mystery of His will.”<sup>174</sup> Prior to the time of the Messiah and the subsequent bestowing of the indwelling Spirit on all the faithful (one of the functions of which is to impart understanding<sup>175</sup>), the desires of God for the faithful were a mystery. In the Kingdom, the plan for adoption, as opposed to servanthood, was revealed.

### **Results of Harmony with His Will**

- “If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”<sup>176</sup> If “will” is defined as “what God has unchangeably and irrefutably pre-ordained,” then prayer becomes useless. If that were true, the prayers of the faithful would be “answered” if they happened to match what the future already held, which is meaningless. Rather, using the correct definition, if the faithful ask for something that is seen as desirable by God, then He will change the course of history for them.
- “He who does the will of God abides forever.”<sup>177</sup> The faithful seek to do what God desires. Free will is implied in the sentence. The controversy centers around how to know what God’s desires are. Some seek that which they glean from inuendo and emotion, whereas the previous section lists what God has revealed are His desires. The Scriptures are validated by overwhelming evidence, whereas inuendo and emotion result in guesswork. Those who seek what God has verified are His desires will live forever. Those who guess are on their own.
- “For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.”<sup>178</sup> This passage implies that the reward for seeking and performing what God desires does not happen immediately. Perseverance is required.

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<sup>171</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18

<sup>172</sup> Philippians 2:27

<sup>173</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:3

<sup>174</sup> Ephesians 1:5, 9

<sup>175</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:9 – 12, Ephesians 1:17 – 19, 2 Corinthians 3:18

<sup>176</sup> 1 John 5:14

<sup>177</sup> 1 John 2:17

<sup>178</sup> Hebrews 10:36

- “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”<sup>179</sup> Jesus emphasized the need for knowing what God desires as opposed to conventional religious wisdom.
- “If anyone wills to do His will, he will know concerning the doctrine.”<sup>180</sup> If the faithful desire to do what God desires, even if they do not execute their own expectations as well as they had expected, they are promised a superhuman understanding of the teachings of Jesus. The early church had significant problems in this area, stepping out on misguided faith several times, prompting inspired writers to offer corrections. The same promise remains for the faithful today.<sup>175</sup>

### **Bits and Pieces of His Will**

- “Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good.”<sup>181</sup> Sometimes, physical suffering is what will make the plan of God (to build a big family that will last) move forward. Certainly Jesus, Peter, John, James, and Paul all had considerable discomfort, which Paul characterized as “momentary light affliction.”<sup>182</sup> So, the prosperity or comfort of the faithful may or may not be from God. The faithful do not need to know. They just need to use their situation for the good of the kingdom.
- “For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”<sup>183</sup> Sometimes, doing a good thing brings persecution. A case in point is Jesus, who enraged the scribes and Pharisees by healing on the Sabbath. Both those who do good and those who do evil may suffer at the hands of the government, and outsiders may or may not be able to discern whether the one suffering is doing so justly or not. Peter’s caution is neither to back away from doing good because of repercussions, nor think that the action was misguided because of the negative consequences.
- “Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.”<sup>184</sup> Interestingly, this citation from Psalm 40 starts with “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire,” although the same Greek word is used in the citation but is translated “Your will.” All of them should be translated “desire.” Once again, using “Your will” to mean the predetermined plan of God would cause the psalmist to be stating the obvious, “I have come to do Your will” because I have no choice in the matter. Obviously, “Your will” in this passage represents the desires of God which were routinely ignored by the nation of Israel. The leadership of the nation had adopted the attitude that the sacrifices and offerings were somehow magical, forcing God to accept them into His kingdom. Instead, the psalmist and the New Testament author were reminding their audiences that God is looking for those who seek to address what God wants, not what God causes to happen. Sacrifice and offering should have been the result of faith, not a replacement for it. Because this psalm was considered Messianic, the New Testament author concludes that a system based on faith supersedes and replaces a system based on the performance of rituals.

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<sup>179</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>180</sup> John 7:17

<sup>181</sup> 1 Peter 4:19

<sup>182</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:17

<sup>183</sup> 1 Peter 3:17

<sup>184</sup> Hebrews 10:7, 9

- “God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will.”<sup>185</sup> During the time when Jesus was on earth, God desired to provide evidence that He was the Messiah through various miraculous events.
- “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”<sup>186</sup> Paul began four of his letters with the statement that he had been appointed an apostle because God desired it to be so. Paul was not forced to change from persecutor to spokesman of the church, but rather responded to the evidence with which he was presented. Neither did Paul consider himself to have reasoned it out for himself and changed, but that God had sought him out while Paul was in the midst of persecuting Christians. If Paul were merely acting out a foreordained plan, Paul could not later describe himself as faithful, because faith requires choice.
- “According to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”<sup>187</sup> God planned for the Messiah to redeem all people of all time through His sacrifice. Not everyone responds to that gift. In this passage, Paul referred to the early Jewish Christians who were the first to trust in the Christ. Certainly, not all Jews, not even all religious Jews, believed. Those who did announced the integrated and consistent character of God, who was unlike any of the gods known to man. This was how God desired to spread the good news, through the remnant of Israel who believed.
- “Who gave Himself for our sins that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.”<sup>188</sup> God’s desire was (and is) that the faithful be rescued from this broken world. Note that God did not rescue the faithful who lived before Jesus. Certainly, they were redeemed like everyone else and will spend eternity in heaven, but they did not receive the indwelling Spirit such as Christians do, so they remained beset by their cultures and the mistakes of their pasts.
- “Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.”<sup>189</sup> Certainly, God has used various people for various purposes in the execution of His plan to produce a big family that will last (the eternal kingdom). Some people God used positively, like the prophets and judges. Some He used negatively, like the Pharaoh of Egypt who opposed Moses, the nation of Assyria, and the nation of Babylon. God did not force any of those people to do evil or to do good. Each had a choice. Those on whom He had mercy (those whom He repaired so they could do the task at hand) were not chosen for their skill or diligence, but because God chose them. Sometimes God purposely chose those who had done neither good nor evil (Jacob versus Esau)<sup>190</sup> just to make that point. The same was true for those chosen to take the opponent’s role. The Pharaoh was not forced to reject Moses, but he was used. God knew Pharaoh’s character, and therefore how he would respond to Moses’ requests. Nineveh was chosen to punish the Northern Kingdom, but was rebuked by Nahum for going too far with that power. Nebuchadnezzar had a checkered history with God, allowing his success to go to his head when that success clearly came from the God of Daniel. Paul’s point was that people should not complain to God that they were not selected for specific tasks in the eternal kingdom. God chooses

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<sup>185</sup> Hebrews 2:4

<sup>186</sup> 2 Timothy 1:1, Colossians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1

<sup>187</sup> Ephesians 1:11 – 12

<sup>188</sup> Galatians 1:4. See also 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>189</sup> Romans 9:18

<sup>190</sup> Romans 9:11

whom He wants to choose and does not need to explain to us why He selected those people for history-making jobs.

- “The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will.”<sup>191</sup> Saul of Tarsus was selected by God to know some of God’s desires so Saul could then spread that understanding across a large part of the Mediterranean world.
- “When he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, ‘The will of the Lord be done.’”<sup>192</sup> Paul was determined to get to Jerusalem and participate in the famine-relief effort. Paul encountered several prophets who warned him that he faced chains and imprisonment if he did so. Luke did not record that God told Paul not to go to Jerusalem, just that dangers lay ahead. Of course, those who met with Paul along the way tried to dissuade him from going. When Paul remained resolute, they turned the problem over to God, “God, do what needs to be done to achieve Your objective of a big family that will last.”
- “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.”<sup>193</sup> After hearing Jesus’ prediction of his manner of death, Peter asked for a similar prediction about John. Jesus reminded Peter that, if He so desired, He could divert the murderous intentions that had befallen Him and would befall Peter, but that should not be of Peter’s concern. As recorded in Acts, several life-threatening situations were miraculously relieved. But, not for John’s brother James.<sup>194</sup>
- “I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who sent Me.”<sup>195</sup> Of course, Jesus and the Father are One.<sup>196</sup> But, in the Garden, Jesus’ prayer revealed that the desires of the human Jesus could have been different (but, as revealed in that same prayer, were not) than the desire of the Father. If both of these “wills” represented immutable futures, Jesus was announcing that, in human form, He could set that pre-arranged path. Obviously, Jesus’ point was to relate that He would not place His human desires above the objectives of God.
- “As the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.”<sup>197</sup> Those who insist that only one future exists and is already set in place may use this passage to assert that Jesus decides who will believe and who will not. Such an understanding destroys the nature of faith, which is based on choice, and removes God’s purpose for creation (an incubator for faith) and His terminal objective, a big family that will last characterized by mutual trust and selfless concern, both of which require the ability to choose.
- “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>198</sup> This snippet from the Lord’s prayer given in the Sermon on the Mount actually is a bit humorous. While Jesus was on earth, Satan had free access to heaven and was known as the accuser.<sup>199</sup> This situation did not end until after Jesus returned to heaven to claim His kingdom, and after the war between Michael and his angels versus Satan and his angels ended with the exile of the bad spirits. So, when Jesus included this line in His model prayer, He was asking that things on earth go at least as well as things in heaven, which at the time was not all that great.

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<sup>191</sup> Acts 22:14

<sup>192</sup> Acts 21:14. See also Acts 20:23

<sup>193</sup> John 21:22

<sup>194</sup> Acts 12:2

<sup>195</sup> John 5:30

<sup>196</sup> John 10:30

<sup>197</sup> John 5:21

<sup>198</sup> Matthew 6:10

<sup>199</sup> Revelation 12:9 – 11

- “It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”<sup>200</sup> Obviously, some humble people have decided to leave faith and go their own way. God does not desire for any humble person to perish (implied in the context, perish eternally). But He will not be achieving this goal.

### **Doing His Will**

- “He should no longer live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past time in doing the will of the Gentiles...”<sup>201</sup> “Will” is used twice. Obviously, the Gentiles do not establish the future, rather the various non-Christian cultures influenced many people. In both instances in this paragraph, desire is the apparent meaning.
- “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’”<sup>202</sup> If the reader has the presupposition that God has already established the future, this passage would feed that sentiment. However, this passage would then be recommending a fatalistic outlook. The point is not that one’s business will prosper or fail based on God’s manipulation, but that the desire of God will be in the forefront of future business decisions.
- “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, equip you in every good work to do His will, working in us what is well pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ.”<sup>203</sup> If God’s will is immutable, then appealing to God to equip and work in us is pointless. In fact, all prayer would be pointless, since God could not change the outcome. But, as noted in a previous section,<sup>204</sup> God has changed His mind on many occasions, so the future is not fixed.
- “Always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand consistent and fully assured in all the will of God.”<sup>205</sup> If the will of God cannot be thwarted, then prayer would be of no use, since the future is already settled and no amount of prayer can change that.
- “For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”<sup>206</sup> If the will of God cannot be thwarted, then knowledge of that will would be knowledge of how the future would play out. However, the clear intention of the context is that the faithful want to know the desires of God so that they can work in harmony with them.
- “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters...doing the will of God from the heart.”<sup>207</sup> Doing what God desires is an appropriate intention of the heart. If the will of God defines the future as inevitable, the heart has no function.

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<sup>200</sup> Matthew 18:14

<sup>201</sup> 1 Peter 4:2 – 3

<sup>202</sup> James 4:15

<sup>203</sup> Hebrews 13:20 - 21

<sup>204</sup> See *Does God Know the Future*, page 32.

<sup>205</sup> Colossians 4:12

<sup>206</sup> Colossians 1:9

<sup>207</sup> Ephesians 6:5 – 6

- “Understand what the will of the Lord is.”<sup>208</sup> The context fits well with understanding the desires of God, not the inevitable.
- “They first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God.”<sup>209</sup> If God’s will caused this sharing to happen, Paul was wrong to praise their generosity. Rather, the context implies that the Christians of Macedonia made a real choice to participate in this collection for future famine relief.
- “I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills.”<sup>210</sup> Paul made plans as though he had many choices. However, he always was flexible in his plans to allow for a desire of God of which he had not been aware. If Paul wrote in this place of the immutable will of God, then he was wrong to hold out hope of a visit, since the future was already decided.
- “That I may come to you by the will of God.”<sup>211</sup> Paul had a desire to travel to Rome and regions further west. If he considered such a trip to be already decided by the sovereignty of God, then he was incorrect in holding out hope of a choice.
- “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”<sup>212</sup> If the future is already settled (the sovereign will of God), proof is not necessary since whatever happens was, by definition, the will of God. However, the context is clear that Paul’s desire was that the Christians in Rome understand God’s desires, not God’s pre-arrangement.
- “Know His will and approve the things that are excellent.”<sup>213</sup> Either Paul wants the Christians in Rome to know the future so that they can approve of what God has already chosen (a pointless exercise, to say the least), or Paul wants his audience to know God’s desires and then endorse the choices of this world that are in keeping with His desires.
- “Now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you.”<sup>214</sup> If the future is fixed, Paul would have no reason to find a way to come to Rome. It was already decided, either for or against. But instead Paul was expressing his desire that he would be able to find a way to visit Rome that was in keeping with his own charge as the apostle to the Gentiles.
- “I will return to you again, God willing.”<sup>215</sup> Either Paul was reminding the Christians of the obvious, that he would return to them if God had already written that into the plan, or Paul was expressing to them his desire to see them again if it fit in with his charge as the apostle to the Gentiles.
- “A man after My own heart, who will do all My will.”<sup>216</sup> Paul combined two statements about David from the Old Testament and drew a conclusion about them, that God chose David because David would do the will of God. If the will of God is a description of the immutable future, then describing the condition of David’s heart does not fit; God made David that way and caused him to do the things he did. Paul’s point was that David sought to meet God’s desires by making real choices, although not always very well.

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<sup>208</sup> Ephesians 5:17

<sup>209</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:5

<sup>210</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:19

<sup>211</sup> Romans 15:32

<sup>212</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>213</sup> Romans 2:18

<sup>214</sup> Romans 1:10

<sup>215</sup> Acts 18:21

<sup>216</sup> Acts 13:22

- “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work.”<sup>217</sup> In the Woman at the Well scene, the disciples wondered out loud if perhaps someone had brought Jesus some food while they were pursuing the same in town. Jesus’ response related to the fact that townspeople were streaming down the road toward Him, so there would be no time for eating right then. Rather, He would need to convey the gospel to a new audience. If the “will” of which Jesus spoke was immutable, He had no point. Rather, Jesus was relating to them that sometimes the desires of God will interrupt normal things like eating.
- “Whoever does the will of God is My brother, sister, and mother.”<sup>218</sup> Jesus’ point was that the spiritual family is extremely important. If Jesus was merely relating a fact that those who had been already selected for that family were His family, the audience would have no situations in which that information would be important, since they would all be incapable of making meaningful decisions since their inclusion or exclusion had already been chosen for them.
- “If this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, Your will be done.”<sup>219</sup> When Jesus prayed in the Garden, if the future was already set, then the pray was without purpose, not having the potential to change anything.
- “I desire (will) mercy and not sacrifice.”<sup>220</sup> Jesus’ quotation of Hosea 6:6 implied what God desired, not that the future was already established.

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<sup>217</sup> John 4:34

<sup>218</sup> Mark 3:35, Matthew 12:50

<sup>219</sup> Matthew 26:42

<sup>220</sup> Matthew 12:7, 9:13

## Chapter 9: You Have a Mission

### Our Mission

What is your mission in life? People have all sorts of goals and aspirations, but generally those change throughout their lives. Does God have a mission specifically for you? If you believe that you have free will, that your choices are real and not a great deception put upon us by God, then, no, God has not plotted out a specific mission for you, which is a great relief. You can stop trying to figure out which specific path is supposed to be yours and only yours. Instead, every decision you make (good, bad, or indifferent) puts you in a place. Plot your path from there, accounting for the fact that God has made specific promises about the help that is available to you. You can't change the past or any of your decisions that got you to where you are, but you can set your course for the future. Of course, your future rarely goes the way you planned. But, that's OK, too. Plan from the next place where you are. God can work with that.

But that does not mean that God is indifferent about which way you should go. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to play out the natural characteristics of Biblical faith.

Some years ago, I looked up all the passages that contained the word faith (the noun) or believe (the verb) and sorted them according to what they told me about the characteristics of what God calls faith.

- The first was evidence; Biblical faith must be based on physical evidence: verifiable history, predictions and their accomplishments, the resurrection, and such like. This implies that you know the evidence. Without evidence, our faith is worthless.
- Second, we must know what a Biblical sacrifice is and that we need one. Sacrifice is not giving up something you would rather keep; that's pagan sacrifice. Biblical sacrifice is a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God. I need that forgiveness because, after an uncountable number of failures, God would not be expected to trust me again, yet He offers to do just that.
- Third, based on physical evidence, we must accept that the Scriptures are true. Again, this implies that I know the evidence and what is in the book.
- Fourth, we must have a realistic and confident hope of heaven.
- Fifth, we must make decisions based on what God has promised without knowing how He is going to pull off the impossible parts, which implies that we know what those promises are.
- Sixth, we must be in the process of taking on the divine nature. Again, this implies that we know what the divine nature is.
- And finally, getting back to the question about your mission, we must be evangelistic. For our claim to faith to be real, we must spread the message.

Everyone who makes a claim to faith has this mission. But what are the details of my mission? This is where the Christian world tends to start guessing. The best way to answer the question would be to read through the New Testament with that question written on a 3 x 5 card sticking out of the top of your Bible. Every time you find a passage about ordinary, generic Christians and evangelism, write it down. When you are done, look them all up and make your list. Leave out the ones aimed at special people. The apostles had several very specific things to get done. We are not apostles. In my opinion, the best passage (meaning the longest with the most details) is 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 5. We can be certain that this is addressed to the

ordinary, doesn't-have-it-all-together Christian because 4:1 starts with "Therefore." The end of chapter 3 says, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord." "We all," not just apostles. In fact, not just those of great faith. The congregations of Corinth were composed of a bunch of misfits and weaklings. If it could go wrong, it went wrong in Corinth. Yet, they were charged with evangelism as a natural outgrowth of faith. They had a mission, and their mission is the same as our mission.

How do I know that evangelism is a natural outgrowth of faith? Look at 4:13, "We have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, 'I believed and therefore I spoke.' We also believe and therefore speak." It does not say, "Drop money in the plate on Missions Sunday." It does not say, "Be a good person." Psalm 116 and 2 Corinthians 4, Old Testament and New, faith results in speaking about it.

But many object, "I'm no good at speeches." He didn't say speeches, he said speak. My experience has been that far more people come to faith through one-on-one conversation than through sermons. You don't need to know the exact right response to every question – you can ask your favorite resource person later and get back to them. Chapters 4 and 5 give the message for our mission, the subject matter that works.

## **Our Methods**

The first guaranteed method for our mission, in 4:1, we do not lose heart. Did Paul have a few bad days? Every Christian will suffer. Peter guaranteed it (1 Peter 4:12 – 19). Here, in 4:8 – 12, Paul lists areas in which most people are destroyed by life, but we not only endure but also triumph. We do not lose heart. How is that evangelism? Because people will ask how you do it. You tell them. "We have received mercy."

That word, mercy, has been badly abused in Christianity for the past 1000 years. If you look it up in something a bit more scholarly than Vine's dictionary, you will find that mercy is one step beyond compassion, that extra step being a compelling desire to fix the problem that caused the pain. For example, you can have compassion for someone with a chronic disease by providing comfort and assistance until the episode passes. Or, you can have mercy and obtain the treatment or medicine to fix the problem at its source. God had mercy on us by giving us the Spirit who transforms, fixing that which has been our chronic disease – our damaged characters.

When people want to know how you can handle life while they are falling apart, you have the perfect opportunity to talk about the work of the Spirit who dwells in every faithful person. We all have this mission. And, if no one is asking, you might want to check the image you are projecting about your adversity. Your ability to handle the chaos and injustice of life should be compelling, not just slightly better.

A second method for our mission, (4:2) we renounce the hidden things of shame, which are, in this case, manipulating people with deceitful renditions of Scripture for power and wealth. Of course, every religious teacher sounds good. Many of them honestly believe what they teach because they have never questioned what they were taught. Many insist, "But that is what the Scriptures say," when, in reality, everyone suffers from flaws in reading comprehension due to the cloudiness imposed by strongly held beliefs. Instead, we must question ourselves constantly, and thereby grow. We look up every passage related to the topic at hand, not just the one passage that seems to make me right. We even have the courage to say, "I've never found an answer for that in the Scriptures." How is this evangelism? Your reputation for simple,

complete, logical answers will cause people to come to you. If people are not seeking you out, you might want to review your recent answers from the vantage point of unbelievers. That your explanation makes sense to you is unimportant. Your message must be simple, concise, even a little witty, and reasonable to them.

A third method for our mission (4:7), “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” How does this work and how is it evangelism? Remember the promises of God, those promises upon which we base our decisions even though we have no idea how God will ever pull it off? If we know and act upon those promises, we will routinely have unbelievable things happening around us. I’m not talking about the ones you can’t prove. Certainly, we should pray for small stuff as well as big stuff. We need to be comfortable with not knowing whether God changed history just for me, or if it would have worked out that way even if I were an atheist. For example, some time back we drove to southwest Virginia to attend our #2 grandson’s high school graduation and to watch several of his high school baseball games. Spring rains are common in those hills and were exacerbated by Tropical Storm Alberto. So, I put in a few requests that the games would not be cancelled. Well, Alberto did not amount to much and pop-up afternoon thunderstorms 20 miles away failed to come our direction. Can I prove God did it just for me? No. But I did learn that I need to be more specific, because three of the games were played in the rain.

But, I do have a long list of events for which the power of God is the only logical response: transformed lives ranging from anger management to addiction, medical miracles complete with MRIs 24-hours apart that show unexplainable changes, money appearing from seemingly nowhere at the right time to pave the way for an evangelistic opportunity, and the list goes on. God makes the humanly impossible happen for evangelism. People need to look at us and skip right over thinking that you and I are marvelously talented or in some special relationship with God and go straight to concluding that God does stuff for ordinary, untalented, fragile people. They will want to know how to be a part of that. Again, if they aren’t asking, then either you aren’t speaking or your claims aren’t sufficiently well documented.

A fourth method for our mission (4:15), “grace, having spread through many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.” Grace is the collection of God’s positive character traits, with special emphasis on the way those traits are integrated and consistent. Glory is a parade of whatever makes you noteworthy. For example, remember when the sons of Laban complained that Jacob was stealing their glory because Jacob was eclipsing them in the livestock market? In God’s case, His glory is a parade of His character traits, which is exactly what happened in Exodus 33 and 34 when Moses was given one wish. Moses requested “Show me Your glory.” God showed Moses His goodness, quality, graciousness, compassion, mercy, longsuffering, truthfulness, and justice.

One of the major tasks of the Spirit who dwells in the faithful is character development. The gracious natures of the faithful should cause observers, outsiders, to thank God, effectively causing a parade of those godly characteristics. The obvious transformation of the faithful should be an attraction. Outsiders should be asking how this works. And if it is not happening, if the congregation is characterized by turmoil, divisiveness, and selfishness, it is time to work on being filled with the Spirit.

The fifth method for our mission (4:17 – 18 and 5:16), we are focused on the unseen and we regard no one according to the flesh.

What does it mean to be focused on the unseen? Of course, that is not a normal point of view. All the information from which we have learned, all our lives, has been through our

physical senses. Trying to focus on that which is outside of those normal physical senses is, to say the least, disconcerting. Getting a handle on the connection between our intellects and our characters, between our minds and our spirits, let alone the connection between spirits, is not normal dinnertime conversation. But, the fact that we are willing to discuss such things as readily as the in-season sport should cause people to ask about it. If we are groaning to be clothed with our eternal self (5:2), people who know nothing more than the disappointments of life on earth will be interested. Those who are afraid of death will want something better than fear of the unknown.

In addition, because we are to evaluate people by their spirits, not their earthly qualities, we will be attractive to a great number of people at the margins of society. As an example, we have a prison in Fulton, and there was, at one time, a half-way house next door, outside the wire. Most people getting out of prison are penniless: no job, no car, no place to live, maybe a change of clothes. The half-way house gives them a cheap place to live as they accumulate a few dollars to get started again. And, the half-way house will transport them to church services. One Sunday, a young man showed up. We treated him like a human being, fed him at our weekly potluck, and took an interest in him and how things were going. The next week, there were two. Then five. Then ten. Certainly, a home-cooked meal was a big attraction. But more than that, they really liked being accepted as they were. Some have fallen back and are behind bars again. But they tell those just getting out to give us a shot.

It's not about teaching them the right Scriptures and the right practices. It's about seeing dead people and bringing them back to life. Like 5:11, knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. As in 5:14, the love of Christ compels us.

Even in the few weeks that Paul was in Thessalonica the first time, Paul instilled in those new converts an attitude that caused the gospel to spill out of them constantly. As Paul wrote back to them not long after that first, abbreviated stay (1 Thessalonians 1:8), "For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything." Speaking about faith was normal for them, as it should be for all faithful people.

Peter (1 Peter 3:15) wrote to the Jewish Christians of central Turkey, "Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you." Therefore, people were asking. Of course, a large percentage of the population cares nothing about God and never will. This technique outlined by God in 2 Corinthians is about doing what normal humans can't do, and then fielding questions about how to get in on it. Many people want to overcome themselves; they just don't know how. Many people want to be able to handle life in an obviously broken world; they just don't know how. We do.

And one last point about our task before moving on to the nuts and bolts, Ephesians 3:10 says that we have an even larger audience, "To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenlies." We also teach angels how this faith stuff works. Even when the outsider humans aren't being responsive to the supernatural, the angels are learning. Sometimes, admittedly, we teach by negative example, "OK, guys, I know you saw that. But that wasn't quite right. I was trusting myself and flopped. Try harder, fail bigger. What I should have done was trust the boss."

If it is my mission to connect with outsiders, when it finally happens, what am I supposed to talk about? This second of the three parts of this lesson is the shortest, because the subject matter is pretty simple. It has to be. It's for people.

## Our Subject Matter

Sticking with 2 Corinthians (5:18 – 21), “Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us, ‘We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.’” All faithful people are ambassadors from Christ’s kingdom to all outside its borders. God is pleading, not threatening. The faithful are imploring, not condemning. The objective is reconciliation, implying that a relationship existed in the past. God wants that fellowship, that connection between spirits, restored.

This is our subject matter. Outsiders who care about the unseen will recognize the opportunity. Outsiders who think only in terms of personal comfort or position will not.

1 Corinthians 2:12 – 14 “We, moreover, have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is out of God, that we might know the things that have been granted to us by God, which also we speak, not in words of human wisdom but in those the Spirit teaches, communicating spiritual things by spiritual means. Further, the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for indeed they are foolishness to him; nor can he understand, because they are spiritually discerned.” Talk about spirits; those who can still rise above will listen. In fact, spirits are our only subject matter: faithful spirits, dead spirits, connected spirits, God is a spirit, the character of spirits, and so on. Have you noticed that the subject matter is all about the unseen? The New Testament does not focus on physical responses like obedience and practices, but on character development.

1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” We don’t talk about failure, we talk about what a wonderful guy God is. He is patient; He is kind; He is gentle; He actually wants you back, warts and all. He calls us out of confusion and pointlessness and frustration into a life that matters, that is described by peace and joy and purpose.

In this mission of ours, we have methods, we have subject matter, but what is our message? God is pleading for reconciliation; God is interested in the part of you that lasts forever, your character. He can fix the broken parts.

## Our Message

But what was that part about “calling”? 1 Peter 2:9, “That you may proclaim the praises of Him who *called* you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” I’m sure you have heard people speak confidently about being called by God to this or that, which is a concept not found in the New Testament. Other than people like the apostles and prophets who got special powers to prove their calling, no one was called to a specific task. Everyone who makes such a claim is just blowing smoke. So, the third part of this lesson is about the calling of God. What is it, really?

Why do people start coming to church? Why did you? I suppose there are as many reasons as there are people. Some start associating with whatever church they picked because they decided that something in their lives needed to change. Others have always been there – that’s how they grew up. Others are looking for social interaction. Some really don’t know why

they started – it just seemed like the right thing to do. Some heard about this God stuff and decided to check it out. I cannot say that one reason is better than another in terms of starting out. But I can say that some reasons may not work as well as others in the long run.

For example, if you started checking out this God stuff because you thought it would make your life run smoothly, you are likely to be disappointed. Certainly, church may help you stay away from some behaviors that would land you in prison, but you are just as likely as anyone else to be hit by a drunk driver, lose everything in a fire, or get cancer. Some people give up on church because their major motive for going was to have a comfortable life. If that's why they came, we need to fix that perception quickly and substitute something that works over time.

Many come to church because they admire this or that church leader. Then the leader messes up, big time – makes headline news, and not in a good way. So they quit. If that's why they came, we need to fix that perception quickly and substitute something that works over time.

So, again, I'm not saying that any reason to latch onto the gospel is bad. If it got you here, I'm happy. But, there are some motivations you might consider that are in the New Testament as guaranteed reasons that won't fall apart later.

What are the guaranteed attractions that will work over the long haul? In this mission of ours as ambassadors, how do we flesh out that simple message of being reconciled to God, and of thinking in terms of your eternal part, not your temporary part. Here's my top five mission statements.

The first part of the message with which we call is the goodness or, depending on the translation, the kindness of God. Romans 2:4, "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and patience, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"

God is a really good guy, to the extent that you are inclined to make Him a role model because He has it together and has demonstrated that He knows how to live a joyous and meaningful life on this earth. Unfortunately, many have been introduced to God on an authority basis, so they follow out of fear or obedience or self-interest. That is not the point. Rather, we turn around because His character attracts us

Unfortunately, through most of its history, the church has focused on the wrath of God, punishment, heaven-and-hell, so people didn't see much goodness. Most people came to church because they didn't want to go to hell. That is not how the Bible presents it. Every place where fear is used in connection with a faithful person, that fear is for the fate of the outsiders, never for themselves. Of course, many people became regular church-goers because of the message of the wrath of God. But, it doesn't work over the long haul. People get tired of being afraid all the time. Constant negativity is just depressing. It is the goodness of God, not the wrath of God, that has the greater and longer-lasting impact.

Of course, goodness among people doesn't always work out so well. Manipulative people, opportunistic people, self-centered people tend to try to take advantage of good people. Do those con artists really think that they are clever enough to take advantage of God? As Paul put it, "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and patience?"

God can afford to be just plain good – the nicest guy around: patient and gentle and understanding – somebody you would like to hang out with because it is peaceful and interesting and safe. He even went to the trouble of coming to earth – like John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus, God in the flesh. So, He understands life on earth, and how disappointing it can be. On top of that, He paid off our debt to justice, to the right-and-wrong system. And, on top of that, He pushes aside our well-deserved reputations as colossal

flops and trusts us anyway. The goodness of God leads us to turning around, to waking up to the possibilities of a satisfying life.

And how can I get a good look at this goodness? If you are into reading – even just short things – I suggest the psalms. In a lot of them, the author starts out with a complaint, but by considering the goodness of God, the poem turns around. Or, if you just want to think on the idea rather than read it, ponder what it would be like if you were God and you were taking a look at someone who has your history. Would you want to hang out with you? Would you trust you? God does. It takes a lot of patience, gentleness, understanding, and kindness to do that.

The second part of the message with which we call is His mastery of life and His character, from 2 Peter 1:3, “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and mastery.”

The way that God played out His life on earth, the life of Jesus, gives us a realistic, down-to-earth picture of what God’s character looks like when put into practice in this messed up world. Jesus was a real person who lived in a country under military occupation with no hope of advancement or justice or freedom. He wasn’t some air-head who floated through life on philosophical nonsense. Jesus was kind and patient and understanding with those who needed that. He was pointed and harsh with the self-righteous. He even turned to violence twice, that we know about, when He drove the animal sellers and money-changers out of the Temple with a whip. And, by the way, He was using that whip in full view of the local police – and they decided it was time for a donut, or perhaps a bagel, because they weren’t going to mess with someone who was that obviously right.

And how do I gain that mental image of this guy, Jesus? Of course, there are the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And, if you are into reading short stories, you can picture how it all happened. It’s an easy read, made for the common man. The speeches Jesus made are entertaining. Look for the humor. Jesus was by no means stiff or boring. I picture Him using lots of body language and arm motions and gestures to sort of act out the parables in a dramatic, even sometimes hilarious way. If reading isn’t your thing, there are CDs. Several quality movies have been made. Whatever works for you is fine. Put yourself in the scenes, first as the observer, then as Jesus. What would you think about what Peter just said? Or the Pharisees. Or questions from the crowd. When you get the picture in your head, you can relate to God a whole lot better – because you know Him.

The third part of the message with which we call is through His promises. And these are not just theoretical, complicated doctrines about things I can’t see. These promises are concrete.

I’ll use Acts 2 as my example, although there are hundreds of such examples in the New Testament. Peter and the apostles were displaying some fantastic stuff, so the holiday crowd knew that these guys spoke for God. Peter started off reminding them of current events – about the execution of Jesus which everyone knew. Then he attested to Jesus’ resurrection, which was also local big news. It had happened seven weeks prior, and two governments were expending every resource to find that body. Everyone knew that something big had happened, not to mention the three hours of darkness at mid-day witnessed by millions, the earthquake, and many formerly dead people seen walking through town. Peter reminded them of what the prophets had predicted and pretty much sealed the deal, proving that Jesus had been that long-awaited Messiah around which the whole Jewish religion had been built.

The people in the crowd were in a panic. They knew the history of their country, how God had reacted negatively to previous national embarrassments. Now they had messed up the

biggest event in history. Any sensible person would think, “We’re toast.” So they holler out to Peter, “What should we do?”

Peter answered, “Repent.” That meant, “Wake up,” or “Turn around,” or “Pick another path before you run off a cliff.” Peter said, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized.” He was saying, “Demonstrate that you agree with what I’m saying, that Jesus really was God in the flesh, on earth, that you buy into the promises that He made.” Peter said, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized upon the name of Jesus, the Christ.” The name of someone was not what you called him, it was his nature, his essential quality. They were to commit to these promises because of Jesus’ mastery of life and character, not because of authority. Peter said, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized upon the name of Jesus, the Christ, into the remission of sins.” Jesus had already paid off everyone’s debt to justice some weeks previously when He offered His own blood in the tabernacle in heaven, described toward the end of Hebrews 9. Being baptized said that you buy into that purchase, that you will let go of your own past and leave it behind. Most people hang on to their guilt and their mistakes as though those things defined them. Letting go of them is difficult. But, that’s what Peter said. Finally, Peter added, “And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

That’s the promise part. How are we going to fix ourselves after spending years messing ourselves up? Jesus promised that we would get help – called the Holy Spirit – whose major function was to fix what ails you, to repair the holes you have torn in your character, to give you purpose and importance in a world where you likely have neither. And, as the New Testament records, there are about 500 more such promises that end up with growing the character that God is looking for. If God is going to let people live with Him in heaven forever, they had better be the right sort, or they will shortly make heaven just like earth, only longer. That’s what those promises are for – promises that we can be reformatted into the right kind of folks

The fourth part of the message with which we call – liberty. You might be justifiably skeptical about this new creation stuff. Maybe I don’t want to be the kind of person the Spirit is going to massage me into. Certainly, we want to let go of the parts that hold us back, that wreck our relationships, that make us misfits. But there are parts of me I sort of like and I’d like to keep them.

The New Testament repeats over and over, like in Galatians 5:13, “You have been called to liberty.” Or, 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” We can all be different. It is not that God just puts up with our quirks. He genuinely values and encourages them. He wants us to be different from each other – even to an extreme degree. He just wants everyone to agree on two fundamental axioms of divine geometry: trust God, love people.

Trust God – when God says that He will remake the damaged parts of your personality, accept it as a sure thing and go with it. Love people – do what is best for others without regard to yourself. Beyond that, being a little weird is a good thing. It keeps us all on our toes. Can I love people who are different than I am? Very different? Can I trust God when He has not given me a clue how He is going to pull this off?

The founders of our country saw liberty as a really big deal. But what if you lived in some run-down backwater little junkyard of a country in the Third World that was run by some petty, ruthless, truly evil dictator? Could I depend on God to get political liberty? Free speech? Free press? The right to have and bear arms? Not likely. But, no matter what, you have the right to be you. Even if the government kills you for it, God’s got your back. Really, are you so in love with this place that you would not rather get rid of this hunk of flesh and hang out with those who really appreciate you for who you are? Of course, this liberty does not include doing bad

stuff. Don't abuse the liberty of someone else; you don't get to do that. But, personal liberty is what the Good News is all about. That is a draw, a calling, you can hang your hat on.

And, finally, my fifth part of the message with which we call is peace. Colossians 3:15, "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, into which also you were called in one body, and be thankful." But what is this peace? Nearly all of the letters in the New Testament begin and end with the hope that the recipients will experience peace – and those people lived in some rough times.

In those letters, peace is the opposite of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33) and the desired normal state. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, contrasted peace with darkness and the shadow of death (Luke 1:79). The mind set on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6).

Peace is a gift from God (Romans 15:13) and mysteriously guards our hearts (Philippians 4:7). Yet it is something we pursue (2 Timothy 2:22, 1 Peter 3:11, 2 Peter 3:14). It is the peace of being reconciled to God.

Lastly, this peace extends to the relationship between Christians, overcoming discord caused by issues which might seem important at the time, but, by comparison to brotherly love, are not (Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 7:15, Ephesians 4:3, James 3:18).

Unfortunately, peace does not characterize all congregations; people actually are driven away because they don't want to live in confusion, darkness, upset, and self-doubt. But the gospel promises peace, something highly to be prized. If the congregation is a place to relax, lower your defenses, and discard your stress, it's a pretty nice place compared to the craziness of life on this earth. So, if we will just follow the prescriptions of trust and selfless concern in the New Testament, it is a never-ending refuge that continuously draws us to God.

The kindness of God, the mastery of life and character of Jesus on earth, the promises, especially those about the Spirit that transforms us, liberty to be yourself, and peace are God's draw, God's carrot, that which keeps us in the family. The last two require that the congregation buy into the plan and allow personal liberty and foster peace. If we don't, as John put it in Revelation 2, Jesus will take away the lampstand that represents us in heaven – we will just be a group of stressed-out people who come together in the same room and gain nothing. God's goodness defines who He is. Jesus' mastery of life and character are well recorded. The promises of help from the Spirit are well documented. All we need to do is let people be themselves and be peaceful. With those five things pulling us in, nothing on the outside will be able to pull us away.

That's our mission, our methods, our subject matter, and our message.