

{ ONE ON ONE }
BEGINNINGS

IMPORTANT FIRST
STEPS IN THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE

LEX LOIZIDES

‘For years, Lex has equipped the church as an evangelist to help people cross the line of faith and now he has provided us with a brilliant resource for new believers.’ Bryan Mowrey,
Jubilee Church, St. Louis, MO, USA

‘Lex Loizides is a master communicator with a passion for bringing people into solid enjoyment of God's good news. In 'Beginnings' he has provided an excellent tool kit for doing just that.’ Joel Virgo, Emmanuel Church, Brighton, UK

‘Lex has provided an easy accessible, biblical and practical book which will help many new Christians take important first steps as they move forward in their new life as a Christian.’
Steve Tibbert, Kings Church London, UK

‘This book makes the perfect gift for anyone who just became a Christian.’
Adrian Warnock, Blogger and author of *Raised with Christ*

Beginnings

Lex Loizides

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Beginnings...

Table of Contents

Preface	
The Bible	7
Church Life	16
Getting to Know God	25
Christian Symbols	34
New Life, New Challenges	41
The Mission of Life	48

New Beginnings

Congratulations! Welcome to a new life in Jesus Christ!

The step you have taken in giving your life to Christ is very important.

Being loved by God brings wonderful changes. Following Jesus brings joy and genuine freedom as well as new responsibilities. You have started a brand new life. Your home may look the same, your circumstances may have not changed yet, but inside of you big changes have happened. A new life is yours!

I want to encourage you to take hold of that new life and give yourself to God every day.

These studies are a great way to begin applying the changes that God is making in your life and character. Not everything will be easy but Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ (John 8:31)

As you study God’s truth, your experience of God’s love and the freedom He brings will increase! Jesus said, ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life!’ (John 14:6)

These studies are best used as interactive guides between you - a new Christian - and a more experienced Christian. You should plan to meet once a week and work through the material together. If you have time, there are suggestions for further discussion as well as some recommended reading.

If it’s not possible for you to meet with a more mature believer, you will still gain much from carefully studying on your own.

Gospel truth

The simple gospel message is this: God created the world, and men and women, in His image. But, in the exercise of their free will, the first humans rebelled against God and sin entered the world. But, out of His wonderful love, God had initiated a rescue plan – to save people from the eternal consequences of their sin through Jesus Christ. God loves us. He loved us so much He gave His Son to die for us. This is true of you individually. When Jesus died on the cross, He took the punishment for all your sins – every one. On the third day He rose from the dead and many people saw Him over the next 40 days.

This is the Christian message - the gospel of Grace - which you have heard and believed. You have trusted in Christ.

And He promises that having believed:

- You are now forgiven of all your sins
- You can live a new life in Him
- You can change from your negative old ways to constructive new ways
- You have a loving God as your Father
- You have the Holy Spirit as your Helper
- You have a new mission in life – to tell others about Jesus and make a difference in your world
- You have a new family, the family of God: the Church

As with others in the church, you are about to begin a new adventure – the adventure of walking with God. As you take your first steps it is my prayer that God would fill you with grace and understanding so that you will know Him and grow into all that He has for you.

This study is an introduction to some great new realities that have opened up for you in Christ. The Christian life is one of constant growth and learning. This series will help you to get to grips with the basics. There are other studies in this series that will help you progress in your walk.

As you work through each chapter with a more mature Christian, feel free to ask questions. The goal is not to rush through as much material as possible, but to understand what is being taught and reflect on its implications for your life.

Enjoy!

Lex Loizides

Note on looking up Bible verses: Please find the Contents page of your Bible. The references in this booklet are as follows: e.g. John 1:10-14 = Name of the book (John), Chapter number (1), verse/s (:10-14). Please ask a more experienced Christian to help you find the correct verses if you are finding it difficult to locate the verses we are referring to.

Note on Bible translations: The Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew. We enjoy a wealth of new translations of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts into modern English. Newer translations reflect recent changes in English and can help us enjoy the meaning of the original writers. Several English versions of the Bible will be used in this study.

I'd like to thank Leigh Berg for preparing the questions, and John Bradshaw and Jan Winter for their fine editorial help.



The Bible

One of the great blessings of the Christian life is the Bible itself! God has not left us in the dark but has given us light through His written word!

The Bible is still the top selling book worldwide

In his book *Questions of Life*, Nicky Gumbel writes that it is estimated that more than 44 million Bibles are sold every year! He then quotes the *London Times* reporting that ‘As usual the top seller by several miles was the Bible. If cumulative sales of the Bible were frankly reflected in best-seller lists, it would be a rare week when anything else would achieve a look in. It is wonderful, weird or just plain baffling in this increasingly godless age - when the range of books available grows wider with each passing year - that this one book should go on selling hand over fist, month in, month out. All versions of the Bible sell well all the time. Can the Bible Society offer an explanation? “Well,” I am told disarmingly, “it is such a good book!”’

What is the Bible?

Is it just a story book for children, great for them but not really relevant as we get older?

Is it a so-called ‘Western’ spiritual book, just one of the world’s many sacred books?

Or is it more?

If it is merely the result of human reasoning about God then perhaps the U2 song applies: ‘I still haven’t found what I’m looking for’. But if God has spoken, and this is His word, then perhaps we should take it more seriously.

The prophet Isaiah was convinced he was speaking the word of God and boldly said, ‘Listen O heavens, and hear O Earth, for the Lord speaks!’ (Isa 1:2)

That’s a pretty big claim – for a pretty big audience!

We are convinced the Bible is of God

As Christian believers we are convinced that the Bible was inspired by God, and although we can see the style and concerns of the writers in their books, we believe it is not only human words, but God’s words spoken to us through human writers.

The Bible claims this for itself. Consider these verses:

‘Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.’ (2 Peter 1: 21)

‘This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit.’ (1 Cor 2:13)

‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.’ (2 Tim 3:16)

Believers through the ages have testified that God has directed, guided and spoken to them through its pages.

Believers assert that the Holy Spirit Himself has illuminated passages to them at different times and in different ways that leaves them in no doubt that the Bible is the word of God. This comes with power, application, conviction, amazing relevance and real authority.

We want to respond to the Bible appropriately

With excitement, awe and gratitude, and with hunger for more!

If you respect someone, you also respect what they say. John Calvin, a great Bible teacher, said, ‘We owe to Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God.’ He doesn’t mean worship - but he is suggesting that it is a sign that we take God seriously when we take His word seriously.

Let's study one of the hymns of the Bible.

Psalm One (NASB)

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,

Nor stand in the path of sinners,

Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,

And in His law he meditates day and night.

He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

Which yields its fruit in its season

And its leaf does not wither;

And in whatever he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,

But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,

But the way of the wicked will perish.

The contrast in Psalm One

The Believer (how we are now)	The Unbeliever (what we were like before)
The Blessed man	A mocker, a scoffer
Freedom	Carried along by the crowd
Delighted in God's Word	On the pathway of sin
Sweet meditations – image of refreshing streams	Dry withering tracks, barrenness
Stability in life - like a planted tree	Insecurity that comes from mockery and cynicism
Fruitful lifestyle	No fruit, withering, hungry
Sure expectation of success	No hope, but judgment
God looks after him	Excluded and rejected, perishing

The way to this happiness is by delighting in God's Word

‘But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.’

The Bible is different from other books. Usually, we read a book once. Occasionally we'll read a book twice and then we're done. But the Bible is a different kind of book and it can keep nourishing you through the years of your Christian life. It is a book that can feed your soul and bring life to you – so it is

good to begin to develop the habit of reading the Bible, even if it's only a little each day at first.

It's as natural for a baby to want food as it is for you to want God's Word

Peter tells new believers: 'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation' (1 Peter 2:2)

Babies tend to cry and howl until they are given milk. It feels like an emergency! They need their milk! But then peace is restored when they are fed! We, too can feel agitated and upset, but a simple, pure word from God can bring peace and calm to the soul and nourish us! That's why we should desire God's word, and learn as much as we can so that we can grow.

Jesus, when He was being tempted, knew His Bible and said, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matt 4:4)

God wants us to delight in His Word – AND it's the best thing for us!

The believer described in Psalm One is a 'blessed' person. The source of their strength and the secret of their success is delight in God's word.

God tells Joshua in the Old Testament that knowing, loving and obeying His word is a key to living a life characterised by God's blessing:

'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.' (Joshua 1:7-8)

How do we delight in God's Word?

Start reading!

For your devotional reading, I suggest you use a printed book version of the Bible rather than an app on your smartphone or iPad. You need to be able to focus. There are excellent Bible apps for referencing, but for focused reading, you're just too near your device to be distracted by incoming mail or notifications. Go to a bookstore and buy a Bible. The New Living Translation, the ESV or the NASB are excellent English versions.

In the front of your Bible there is a contents page. You can start reading one of the books and when you're finished put a tick next to that book and go on to another. The Bible is a small library of books so there's plenty to enjoy. As you finish book after book you can keep track of the progress you're making at the Contents page. Make it your goal to read the whole Bible, book by book.

You could begin with the Gospel of Mark, which is a fast moving biography of Jesus Christ.

Stop, pray and make notes

As you read you will be learning new things. Suddenly something will strike you as truly wonderful. Stop and take a notebook and write it down. You can copy out the verse or verses or just the thoughts that came to you as you read. Feel free to discuss what you are learning with a mature believer. If God speaks to you stop, pray and make notes.

Obstacles and their answer

Objection - I don't have enough time to read the Bible properly!

Answer - Sometimes we are genuinely rushed for a whole day without a break, but often we just fritter away our time. You can surely carve out 20 minutes of each day to read God's word.

Objection - I can't really get into it. Reading my Bible never seems attractive!

Answer - You need to revive your appetite and learn to concentrate. Many of us are so attracted by trivia that we need to re-learn how to give time to more important things.

As you develop your knowledge and experience of the Bible you might like to begin a Bible reading plan. There are many online. Ask a mature Christian friend to help you.

If you feel you can give the necessary time to read the Bible through in a year here is a very popular Bible Reading Plan:

<http://www.esv.org/assets/pdfs/rp.one.year.tract.pdf>

Objection – Someone in the Bible did something terrible. If they did it in the Bible does that mean God is okay with it? I’m not sure I want to keep on reading!

Answer – No, it doesn’t mean God’s okay with it. The Bible is an accurate reflection of both God’s grace and of human folly. The characters in the historical portions of the Bible often did unwise or sinful things.

The results of delighting in God’s Word

Stability and strength

The psalmist says that if we learn to love the Bible we will be like a ‘tree firmly planted by streams of water’. The promise is of stability and strength, as well as nourishment and refreshment. When we consider such promises, it is surprising that we don’t want to spend more time delighting in God’s Word!

Jesus also said that those who hear and do His word would be building a house on rock - on a solid foundation - rather than on sand, which can collapse easily under the pressure of life’s storms.

Fruitfulness

A further promise is that we would be fruitful. This tree ‘yields its fruit in its season’.

Jesus also promised the same thing. There is a connection between knowing God’s Word and bearing fruit. ‘If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this My father is glorified, that you bear much fruit.’ (Jn 15:7-8)

Perseverance

Life can get tough. We can get tired. But the promise here is that if we delight in God’s Word our ‘leaf will not wither’. We will have access to nourishment – it’s an open secret, but it’s a secret source of strength for you.

We see this truth both in Scripture and in experience. At times of real pressure God's word can lift us up again. Psalm 119:50 says, 'This is my comfort, Your word has revived me.'

Prosperity in all of life

Jesus said that He was announcing the 'year of the favour of the Lord'. Those who believe in Jesus begin to live life under the banner of God's favour. Psalm One helps us how to stay under that banner in our daily lives.

In fact, it even suggests that if we put God first in everything and delight in His word, we will know His prosperity for us.

That doesn't mean we won't encounter difficulty. It doesn't mean we avoid suffering or loss. And it certainly doesn't mean we will be rich. But in everything we will know the love and favour of God over us. He will make us to prosper!

Psalm One says that if we delight in God's word, turn away from cynicism and walk in the right paths then our 'leaves never wither', and we prosper in all we do.

You can claim that as a promise and immediately apply it to:

- Your prayer life
- Your attempts to share the Gospel with friends
- Your ability to serve others
- Your ability to earn and provide
- Your relationships with people in the local church
- Your desire to see increase in your sphere of influence
- The wellbeing of your loved ones

While those outside the Christian faith still need to hear the Gospel, and those who are 'scoffing' still need to understand, nevertheless you have now entered the privilege of a relationship with God. Keep going forward and keep enjoying your Bible.

For further discussion

1. Read Psalm 119:1-16 and consider what the writer says about God's word.
2. Read Matthew 7:24; James 1:22; and 1 John 2:4-5. What do these verses tell you about God's word?
3. Do you have any questions regarding the Bible being the Word of God? Discuss these – and refer to the resources in the suggested reading list if this is an area you'd like to investigate further.
4. What are the implications for us in believing that the Bible is the Word of God?
5. How could you make more time available for regular Bible reading?

Suggested reading

FF Bruce - *The New Testament Documents. Are they Reliable?* (IVP)

Amy Orr-Ewing - *Why Trust the Bible* (IVP)

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart - *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Zondervan)



Church Life

Becoming a follower of Jesus Christ is a personal decision. For conversion to be real it must be an individual, internal, spiritual process.

There are certain things that must happen to you individually:

- You are personally invited: Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger.’ (John 6:35)
- You see your own need of forgiveness: David confessed to God, ‘Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.’ (Psalm 51:4)
- You have to repent personally: Peter said, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.’ (Acts 2:38)
- You decide to follow and to continue to follow Jesus: ‘So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.’ (Acts 2:41)
- Your own mind, heart, strength and will are all involved in genuinely loving God.

So the gospel and all its implications are for you as an individual.

BUT...

The Gospel is worked into our lives in the community of the church. Repentance is intensely personal – but the way we work out our Christian life is in relationship with other Christians. God deliberately places individuals in community!

While Peter was urging each individual to repent and believe, he was speaking to a group. And although each of the 3,000 new converts individually responded to the gospel message, they were being united as a group. Peter tells us they were

‘added’. They were joined to the existing believers. They became part of the church in their city of Jerusalem.

It’s obvious for a reason!

To most people the idea that a new Christian should join a local church is obvious and inevitable. This has been the pattern of Christian discipleship from the beginning.

When Jesus called the earliest disciples to follow Him, the immediate and obvious implication was that they would join themselves with the already existing number of disciples. In other words, if people decided to follow Jesus it meant they began a journey alongside others who were also following Him.

In the Book of Acts there is no doubt that the normal process was for individual believers to be added to the local church. The churches had leaders (elders) and structures for teaching the believers and helping them grow in Christ and impact their world.

When is it right to be a lone-Christian?

Generally speaking, it’s not normal or healthy for a follower of Christ not to be part of a Christian church community. There may be exceptions to this general rule but then the circumstances would usually be exceptional.

For example, there are contexts where conversion or church attendance could endanger your life or your family’s life. In such situations it is reasonable to be cautious and, if possible, get wise counsel to know the best way forward and to hopefully win others to Christ. Similarly, some Christians find themselves imprisoned for their faith and this obviously restricts their access to other believers.

But these situations are certainly not faced by most of us and probably not by you. Our challenge is to be whole-hearted disciples and to understand that becoming a Christian and being added to a local church is part of the same process of discipleship.

Your lifestyle up until your conversion may have been highly independent and individualistic. God loves you as an individual with all the gift He has given you – and He has called you to be part of His family; to join the worshipping community of His Son.

A challenging bit!

You know you have a problem with individualism (or self-centeredness) if just about everything in your life is evaluated on the basis of how closely it aligns itself to your own interests, preferences, convenience, goals and desires. This is not a reason for you to give up, but rather to face up to the challenge of genuine repentance.

God, no longer you, must now be 'on the throne of your life'. He must come first. You can trust Him and you need to know that His will is for you to be part of His earthly, wonderful, but not-yet-perfect church.

Identifying areas of our life where God is not on the 'throne seat' is a constant part of Christian life and a key way we grow in our walk with God. Don't give in to discouragement but do be deliberate about following Christ!

The Church: His people

Through the Old Testament God promised a solution to the rebellion of humanity and began gathering a people. He spoke to Abraham and Moses and promised that through His people would come the Saviour, the Messiah. God did this because His eye was on the whole world, all the nations. He had promised that through Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed. That promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And even to this day, God is still gathering a people to Himself from all over the world and from every ethnic group.

Paul tells us that 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.' (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

Our individual lives have been transformed in the context of God's overall mission to reconcile the world to Himself through Christ. That means the church will be made up of people from all around the world: people different to you. Some of this finds expression in local churches in major cities where people from different ethnic groups have settled. This can be a glorious reflection of God's wisdom and of the power of the gospel to reconcile people in Christ.

The Apostle John directed our attention to the future of the church in the book of Revelation. How diverse do you think the church will be in its perfected condition in heaven?

‘After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.’ (Revelation 7:9)

Even in Jesus’ small band of disciples there were major differences in terms of former beliefs – from money-grabbing tax collectors, to revolutionaries and simple fishermen. In a modern church community we would expect to see different backgrounds, racial groups, age groups: different types of folk from us. Yet we have the opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of the gospel in bringing genuine harmony to a wounded and divided world.

The Church: His body

The basic idea of membership comes from the New Testament concept of individual Christians being members of Christ’s body. The New Testament recognises our individuality and our individual giftedness while impressing upon us the fact of our being joined together in Christ.

Paul argues, ‘For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.’ (1 Corinthians 12:12) and tells the believers, ‘Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.’ (1 Corinthians 12:27)

This was written to a local church in Corinth. So obviously Paul expected the individual believer to work out his or her ‘membership’ within that local church context. There was never a suggestion of someone asserting, ‘No! I am a member of Christ but I am not a member of a local church! I just float from group to group!’

As individual members we are not to neglect meeting together regularly (Hebrews 10:25). In most westernised contexts this means gathering the congregation or congregations at the end of the week, usually Sunday, and often in smaller groups during the week.

The New Testament makes it clear that local eldership teams oversee local churches – like responsible shepherds overseeing flocks – and that each believer should know who their leaders are.

Acts 14:23 shows that the Apostles appointed elders in the churches. In Acts 20:17 Paul calls the elders of the various churches together.

Paul's instruction to the elders gives us a clear picture of the local church structure: 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.' (Acts 20:28)

Church leaders are to be servant-hearted, like Christ, and oversee and lead the church diligently.

The clear expectation of the New Testament is that each believer would be in a local church led by a servant-hearted eldership team.

Hebrews 13:7 says, 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.'

Each believer, then, needs to see the priority of local church membership for their own good and to participate in serving others and building a community that demonstrates the love of God.

The Church: His strategy

What is the Church's mission?

The disciples were told by Jesus that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem' after they had been 'clothed with power from on high'. (Luke 24:47)

Jesus had said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' (Matt 28:18-20)

We will look at this later in this booklet but the mission of God to the world is primarily being advanced through the planting of local churches that are proclaiming the good news (gospel means good news) and impacting their communities. You may hear this referred to as 'evangelism', which is telling people who don't know Jesus the message, that they might turn to Him.

Is the Church's mission only about evangelism?

No, not at all. It must include evangelism at its very heart, but the mission involves influence at many levels.

Chris Wright, in his book, *The Mission of God's People*, suggests that the church in the world:

- know the story they are part of
- care for creation
- is a blessing to the nations
- walks in God's way
- concerned about issues of justice and mercy: 'The Church...is a Jubilee Community'!
- represent God to the world
- attract others to God
- know the One Living God and Saviour
- bear witness to the Living God
- proclaim the gospel of Christ
- send and are sent – they are an 'apostolic' people
- live and work in the public square
- praise and pray

Although there is much that is directly evangelistic, there is nothing there that is fundamentally self-serving or not connected with our responsibility to represent Christ to our world.

The Church: Your involvement

The best thing for your progress towards Christian maturity is that you join a local church. If you are studying through this booklet with an older believer, why don't you accompany them to their church this weekend?

Most churches have mid-week small groups called ‘Life Groups’ or ‘Home Groups’. It is vitally important that you join one of these groups in order to make new friends and to continue to grow as a believer.

One of the worst things that can happen to you at this point in your Christian life is for you to be non-committal and unaccountable to Pastors and elders whom God has provided to help you grow. We would never think of hoping for the best with new-born babies – and we should not just hope for the best with newly born believers!

A New Community is Born!

After the 3,000 had responded publicly to Peter’s gospel message, they were baptised and they were joined to the local church.

This is an amazing picture of how a vibrant local church could be:

‘Those who accepted (Peter’s gospel) message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.’ (Acts 2:41-47)

This is where you can grow through hearing Bible-based teaching, where you can learn to serve others, where you can give and advance the work, and where you can receive encouragement and support.

In very practical terms, now that you are an ‘Acts 2’ believer, as a first step, you should make the following a priority:

- Regular attendance at the weekly (Sunday) Church congregational meetings. Don’t fall into the bad habit of attending once in a while: the regular discipline of teaching and worship and refreshment in God’s presence will help you grow.

- Find out how to join a mid-week church small group. This will increase the opportunities you have to make new friends and see believers interacting up close, as well as to inquire and apply about the Bible teaching from Sunday.
- Find out about the next opportunity for a baptism service in your church. (More about baptism in Chapter 4)
- Find out about your church's introduction to membership course. This will help you learn about distinctives of the church, introduce you to some of the leaders and give you a chance to ask questions.
- Finding out which are the most appropriate opportunities to invite your non-believing friends to get to know the church and hear the gospel.

Now that Jesus is your Lord and God is your Father you have a new family. They are there for your good!

For further discussion

1. Read the following scriptures about God bringing us into His family: Galatians 6:10; Hebrews 2:11; and 1 John 3:1.
2. In the family as God, we are called to love one another (1 John 4:20 – 5:1), be one (John 17:11) and make every effort to keep unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3). This helps us to 'demonstrate the superiority of the gospel in bringing genuine harmony to a wounded and divided world'. How might this be a challenge for you?
3. What stands out most for you in the description of the Acts 2 (verses 41 – 47) church?
4. Based on the teaching in the chapter, discuss in your own words why it is biblical to belong to and participate in a local church?
5. How do your past experiences and impressions of church, if any, differ from the teaching in this chapter on God's design for church?
6. Looking at the practical first steps regarding church involvement listed above, which of these do you still need to prioritise? What do you have further questions about?

Suggested reading

Terry Virgo - *No Well Worn Paths* (Kingsway)

Chris Wright - *The Mission of God's People* (IVP)



Getting to Know God

Enjoying the Bible and joining with other believers to worship God are, of course, key ways of getting to know God.

In fact, knowing your Bible well and learning and worshipping alongside other Christians will keep you from making some basic mistakes that could hinder your growth, so continue those spiritual disciplines.

In this chapter we will look at two important personal aspects of your relationship with God: personal prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Learning to pray

Your journey in prayer will probably follow a progression from

Desire
to
Discipline
to
Delight

Desire gets us started but discipline helps us get through to the pure delight of prayer.

In Hebrews 11:6 we read, ‘And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.’

This phrase comes in a chapter that describes the lives of men and women who believed God's word, who sought Him, found Him and were powerfully rewarded by Him.

That God should reward any of us for anything is surprising in and of itself! If you and I were to spend the rest of our days in sackcloth and ashes, repenting of our sins and wailing we still wouldn't deserve to be rewarded – we would just be recognising our faults!

Some expressions of religion are comprised only of guilt and ritual.

But, through Jesus Christ, we have come to experience the grace of God. His smile is now upon us and He even encourages us to come to Him in prayer that our faith might be rewarded by Him! We can sometimes forget this and start to try to earn ourselves into Gods 'good graces'. No! We are right with God because of what Jesus has done, not what we have done.

He is

The heart of atheism is the idea that 'He is not'. This is, of course, the devil's characteristically uncreative response to the One who calls Himself 'I am' (Exodus 3:14). And the reality of 'I am' will continue to be the major challenge for atheism!

'Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists (literally, 'He is' in the original Greek).

The Apostle John, introducing the book of Revelation writes, 'Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come.' (Rev 1:4)

If we just believed in a God who was, then prayer could become irrelevant. We would say that in the old days God did amazing things.

If we just believed in a God who is to come, then likewise, our hope would only be in God's activity in the future, in eternity, but not for today.

What makes prayer such an adventure is the reality that God is active now – and wants to respond to us now!

So when we come to God in prayer – we come to the God who is! Knowing that God has acted in the past helps fuel our prayer for today. And, we do have a right expectation that He is the God 'who is to come!'

This means that as we pray about our day, our week or into the future – we must believe that that future is a future filled with Him!

He rewards those who earnestly seek Him

Hebrews 11:6 tells us that we are to ‘believe that He is and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.’

It is true that there is a psychological benefit in prayer – a ‘boost of well-being’, if you like. But the most important ‘boost’ comes from the realisation that the God of Heaven and Earth is listening to you, and actually changing events and answering in response to you!

Jesus said, ‘Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.’ (Matthew 7:7-8)

The emphasis on this promise isn’t that we would learn humility by not receiving, finding or gaining entrance. The emphasis here is that God wants to respond to you positively. He wants you to receive, to find and to ‘get in’. That should be a very real motivation in prayer.

We do learn lessons through delays and the redirections of our own desires, but God wants to show you how He loves to reward those who seek Him. So seek Him!

‘And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.’ (Hebrews 11:6)

Therefore, let’s throw off every hindrance and begin to learn the discipline of prayer.

Hindrances

- Unbelief – or excessive worry. Paul tells us, ‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.’ (Philippians 4:6-7)

- Continuing to deliberately sin. James warns us about becoming double-minded: wanting God and trusting Him to meet our needs and yet believing that sin (i.e. disobedience) can meet our needs. (See James 1:7-8)
- For husbands, we're told that being inconsiderate towards your wife, not caring for her, can hinder your prayers. (See 1 Peter 3:7)
- When the thing you're asking for is against the word or will of God (See James 4:3). Obviously God is not somehow obliged to answer your prayer your way. Sometimes the answer is a straight no if what you're asking for is wrong!
- Wrongly interpreting God's answers. This can discourage us. Someone said that God always answers. He either says yes, not yet, no, or yes but not how you imagined it! One thing is certain, He will reward you if you diligently seek Him.

Remember, you are on a spiritual journey from

Desire
to
Discipline
to
Delight

See the end of this chapter for some practical resources for prayer.

The Holy Spirit

When you were converted you were enlisted into a family (as a brother or sister) and into an army as, what Paul calls, a 'fellow soldier'. In fact, Paul uses the imagery of soldiers several times. (See 2 Timothy 2:3-4, Philippians 2:25, Philemon 1:2)

God has called us to fight and win very big battles. We are called to reach people with the message of Christ's love, and to help establish healthy churches across the world.

We are happy that God has called us to these things but we need some help! We need some power!

The promise of the Holy Spirit

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon certain people to accomplish certain tasks. For example:

- the prophets in order to prophesy,
- Samson to overcome Israel's enemies,
- David to be king, and to write many songs,
- Elijah and Elisha to perform miracles etc.

You will discover many examples as you read through the Old Testament.

In the New Testament we see Jesus doing amazing miracles because of the Spirit:

- 'The Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove' at His baptism (Luke 3:22)
- Peter said, 'You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.' (Acts 10:38)
- 'All the multitude were trying to touch Him for power was coming from Him and healing them all.' (Luke 6:19)

The Holy Spirit was promised to His followers

John the Baptist said, 'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one more powerful than I...He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!' (Matthew 3:11)

After His resurrection, Jesus said, 'I am going to send you what My Father has promised. But stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' (Luke 24:49)

Before He ascended, Jesus gathered His disciples together and reminded them, 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

He promised them an experience of God's power: 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.' (See Acts 1:4-8)

They would have remembered their experience of baptism. They went down into the water and came back up out of it again, dripping wet. Likewise, Jesus promises them an experience they would know they had received.

Jesus explicitly makes us a promise of power for service. It's for us to use to reach the world, and help build the church!

The coming of the Holy Spirit

There came a particular day when the believers were together. You will hear this day referred to as the 'Day of Pentecost'.

Thousands were in Jerusalem for the Jewish Feast of Pentecost (50 days after Passover to celebrate the new harvests). And then, in the room where about 120 believers were gathered, it happened...

'Suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.' (Acts 2:2-3)

The power that Jesus had spoken of suddenly came! The Holy Spirit came down and what seemed to be fire separated and blazed upon each one! They felt it and knew it had happened.

Luke, the writer of Acts, tells us, 'And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.' (Acts 2:4)

They were all filled (not only the leaders). They were filled with the Holy Spirit in addition to these sights and sounds and they spoke in tongues! That is, in languages that they had never learned or spoken before.

Suddenly, the church burst out of the upper room and out into the streets below where they preached!

They immediately became witnesses, ‘speaking of the mighty deeds of God!’ (Acts 2:11) Everyone noticed, although not everyone understood what was going on. Some even thought this bunch of believers were drunk!

Peter then got up and explained what was happening – and powerfully preached the gospel. The amazing result was that about 3000 were ‘cut to the heart’ and believed, following which they were baptised in water. (Acts 2:37-41)

The result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was pretty amazing!

Many people came to believe in Jesus – verse 41

The church was formed – verse 42

People were healed, and many miracles happened – verse 43

Christianity began to spread – generally, historians point to this moment as the birth of the Christian Church

This amazing event was not a once-only experience though. We see that the church was later filled with the Spirit again. In Acts 4:29-31 the believers pray for boldness to keep telling people about Jesus, and for power to heal those who were sick and God answered! Luke tells us that even the building where they were meeting was shaken and, once again, they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

We are encouraged to ask and be filled with the Holy Spirit

It is God’s will for each of His children to be filled with the Spirit. Paul encourages all believers to ‘Be filled with the Holy Spirit’. (Ephesians 5:18)

Jesus said, ‘Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more

will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!’ (Luke 11:11-13)

It is therefore right for us to seek to be filled with the same Holy Spirit that the believers in Scripture and through church history have received.

Talk with the person leading you in this study and ask about their experience with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps there is an opportunity coming to receive more in-depth teaching on the Holy Spirit as well as to receive prayer.

But most of all, ask God the Father to fill you with His Spirit. At the end of his sermon on the Day of Pentecost Peter declared, ‘Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’ (Acts 2:38-39)

You can see in that very promise that this experience has never been limited to one generation or one special time, but is a promise from God for all believers – ‘for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.’

This is a promise of power for you. And it’s not difficult to remember:

Ask (you’ll receive),

Seek (you’ll find),

Knock (the door will be opened to you).

For further discussion

1. Read Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:5-15. How should we pray? What must be avoided?
2. Read Hebrews 11:6 and 1 John 5:14. How might you act upon these scriptures?
3. What hindrances do you experience in your prayer life?
4. Scripture instructs us to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Have you been filled with the Holy Spirit? If so, have you continued to ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit? What barriers do you experience in this regard?
5. Does the teaching in the chapter challenge your experience or previous thinking, if any, regarding the Holy Spirit in the church today? If so, how? Do you have further questions?

6. In what areas of your life should you ask the Holy Spirit for power to serve God?

Suggested reading

Richard Foster – *Prayer* (UK:Hodder and Stoughton, US:Harper Collins)

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones – *Joy Unspeakable* (Kingsway)



Christian Symbols

If someone with no knowledge of Christianity were to visit Christian cathedrals or sites of historical interest they would be impressed, or possibly confused, by the numerous symbolic artefacts on display.

Some church traditions use different coloured robes which each have different meanings, others revere icons and lavishly decorated displays, some have developed certain utensils which are treated as holy, while in many of the historic church buildings the architecture itself symbolizes aspects of Christian belief. There are strengths and weaknesses in the rituals and paraphernalia of centuries of faith.

But Jesus actually only gave the church two symbols, both simple yet powerful, rich in meaning and to be continually part of the expression of living faith: baptism in water and the practice of breaking bread (often called, Communion).

In this chapter we will look briefly at these two symbolic acts and see why they are important and relevant for us today.

Baptism in water: the first symbol

Why get baptised?

You may already have been at a baptism service where those who have recently become Christians publicly declare that they are now following Christ. These are times of celebration and joy and those being baptised are usually joined by their extended families.

There are three primary reasons why you, too, should be baptised in water.

Jesus commanded the first disciples to preach and baptise those who believe

Jesus Himself was baptised by John the Baptist. John struggled with the idea of baptising Jesus because Jesus did not need to repent of any sin or be baptised as an expression that he was now living a new life.

Nevertheless, in order to identify with fallen humanity, Jesus was baptised. Jesus was the only exception to the baptism rule – and even He was baptised!

And Jesus commanded those who were to become His disciples to be baptised. He said to the apostles, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ (Matthew 28:18-19)

This is the normal Christian entry procedure

This is exactly what the apostles taught and what the new disciples did.

After Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, some 3,000 responded to his message. ‘Those who accepted his message were baptised.’ (Acts 2:37-38, 41)

When the evangelist Philip shared the gospel to an Ethiopian and the Ethiopian was converted, Philip did not delay or suggest that because he was from a different country he should not be baptised. Even though a public service was not available to them Philip still baptised him at the earliest opportunity. (Acts 8:35-39)

When Paul first preached in Philippi, Lydia, a businesswoman believed the message along with several others. They were all baptised following their conversion to Christ (Acts 16:14-15). We see a similar process when Paul visited Corinth (see Acts 18:8).

It is very clear that, following a person’s conversion to Christ, the Christian norm is baptism in water. This should not be seen as a chore or some kind of difficulty, rather as a privilege because of what the act symbolises.

What baptism means

It symbolises that the pre-Christian you (dead in sin [Eph 2], separated from God) has gone forever and a new you (given to God, alive in Him) has come!

Jesus called this experience being ‘born again’ (John 3:3), and Paul describes it as becoming a ‘new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). And it’s true!

Paul uses the language of baptism to describe our conversion in Romans 6:1-8. He tells us that we died with Christ, were buried with Him and have been raised up again with Him. So baptism perfectly illustrates what has already taken place in each true believer in Christ.

It symbolises being washed from sin – After Paul was converted, Ananais said to him: ‘And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’ (Acts 22:16)

It symbolises how you have been joined to Christ and to His body, the church (not one specific local church this time) in both heaven and earth.

‘You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,’ Paul writes, ‘for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.’ (Galatians 3:26-27)

‘For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.’ (1 Corinthians 12:13)

When should you get baptised?

Clearly, after you become a believer and not before. There are no examples of Christian baptism before conversion in the Bible. The expectation was first a spiritual transformation followed by the act that symbolises it. This order of belief then baptism can be seen in the following verses:

- ‘Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved.’ (Mark 16:16)
- ‘Those who accepted his message were baptised’ (Acts 2:41)
- ‘When they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised.’ (Acts 8:12)
- ‘Many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised.’ (Acts 18:8)

Can any of these verses about hearing, understanding and believing the gospel, receiving Christ, turning from sin to Christ, be said of a newborn? Clearly not. While we need to respect the beliefs of Christians from a wide variety of backgrounds, we also need to make sure we ourselves are practicing our faith in line with what God has revealed in the Bible.

Christian baptism, understood from the New Testament practice, should take place after a person is converted to Christ; after they have made a conscious decision to follow Him. If you have been baptised (immersion) or christened (sprinkled) as a baby you may need to speak to a Pastor about baptism as a believer.

Baptism into a denomination or congregation is not biblical

Can any one local church or denomination demand the covenant allegiance of your life in the way that baptism signifies when it talks about you being joined to Christ's body? Clearly the answer is no! We are eternally joined to Christ, not to a specific church or church tradition.

So baptism is Christian baptism if you were baptised after believing, no matter the church context in which you were baptised. If you are clear in your conscience that you have already been baptised as a believer then you do not require a further baptism in water.

You don't become a Christian by being baptised in water

You do not become 'born again' by being baptised in water – rather baptism in water is the symbol that signifies you have already been born again.

How should I be baptised?

The Greek word for baptism ('baptisma' = baptism, 'baptizo' = to baptise) simply means to submerge or immerse. It doesn't mean anything else. It was used of dying cloth – it meant that when you submerged the cloth into dye and brought it out again you had 'baptised' it.

What now?

Your baptism in water will be a joyful occasion. Baptism is an expression of celebration and joyful obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ and is usually to be shared with the church publicly. So inquire for an opportunity to be baptised soon.

Breaking bread: the second symbol

The second symbol that Jesus gave to His church was that of breaking bread together. This is also called ‘communion’ or ‘The Lord’s Supper’.

Luke gives us the origin of this symbol. On the night Jesus was arrested He ate a final meal with His disciples:

‘And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.”’ (Luke 22:19-20)

The instruction of Jesus to ‘do this in remembrance of me’ has persisted throughout church history and most Christian churches follow the practice in various ways.

The Apostle Paul also instructed the churches to continue in this practice:

‘For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”’

In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.’ (1 Cor 11:23-26)

What does it mean?

In terms of its symbolism, communion illustrates that believers have fully received the work that Christ has done for them on the cross. They have, as it were, ingested it, fully taken it in. In that sense it is a remarkable expression of faith.

Individual acceptance

As we share this meal on Sundays, each individual believer is expressing his or her faith, and being nourished by God's grace in Christ as they eat and drink.

Church unity

But we are also conscious that this was not a purely individual expression of faith. In fact, the disciples ate and drank together, after examining their own hearts. This is, therefore, a powerful expression of the unity of the Church in response to the death of Christ.

Remembering the cross

As we eat the bread, we are reminded of the broken body of Christ. His cross was a deliberate act of sacrifice on our behalf. His body was broken for us.

As we drink the wine (or grape juice, as is often used) we are reminded of the blood of Christ, shed for us, for our forgiveness.

Our standing before God, our hope, is forever fixed at the completed work of Jesus on the cross. We are reminded that our acceptance before God is not based on our own work but on His.

Looking forward to Christ's return

But the Lord's Supper also includes a note of resolve and celebration. Paul tells us that we are proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). This means that the symbol is to continue to be practised until Christ returns, but it also means it is a statement of trust and faith. The continued confidence of Christ's Church is in His work on the cross. We will remain true to Him until the day we see Him appear in His glory!

Recognising Christ

As with baptism in water, breaking bread is an act of obedient faith and a means of grace to us as we believe.

At one point, after the resurrection, two disciples were depressed and distraught by the circumstances. Jesus met them on the road to Emmaus and

taught them from the Old Testament. They were unaware of who this stranger was until they sat down to eat.

Luke tells us, 'When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognised him.' (Luke 24:30-31)

Indeed! They recognised Him when they broke bread together. May God give you such moments of revelation as you break bread too.

For further discussion

1. Read and discuss the following scriptures: Colossians 2:12 and Galatians 3:26-28.
2. Does the teaching in this chapter contrast with your previous experiences or thoughts on baptism, if any? If so, how? Do you have any further questions?
3. Have you been baptised? If so, discuss your experience. If not, discuss making a plan to get baptised.
4. In your own words, what does communion symbolise?
5. Does the teaching in this chapter contrast with your previous experiences or thoughts on communion, if any? If so, how? Do you have any further questions?
6. In what contexts might you expect to break bread?



New Life, New Challenges

Now that you have committed yourself to following Jesus and His teachings, you will probably have noticed new pressures.

The Bible teaches that you are now a ‘new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5:17) and, as we saw in Chapter 3, the Apostle Paul refers to believers as soldiers in a battle (2 Timothy 2:3-4). One obvious reason that Paul talks to believers as soldiers is because we are not in neutral territory; we are in a battle.

In Ephesians 6:10-20 Paul urges us to continue to apply the truth of the Gospel to our lives because it is like spiritual armour:

‘Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.’ (Ephesians 6:14-17)

The main thrust of these verses is that we are always to be vigilant, and quick to apply the truth to our thinking and our circumstances in order to avoid being tricked into sin, compromise or defeat.

There is an ‘evil one’, Satan, who is firing ‘flaming darts’ or ‘arrows’ at believers, seeking to unsettle our peace, erode our confidence and undermine our witness.

We have always been in a spiritual battle but we didn’t really become aware of it until conversion – nor were we ever as fully protected, guarded and assured of ultimate victory until we came to Christ.

Now that you are ‘in Christ’ you are in the safest place in the universe from a spiritual point of view. The devil cannot take away your salvation. In fact, once you are truly born again you cannot be lost, because your salvation is not built on your work but on Christ’s. Your peace need not be disturbed. But we must remain alert. Peter exhorts us to ‘be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.’ (1 Peter 5:8)

The world, the flesh and the devil

Christians through the centuries have identified key areas of temptation and difficulty that we face. One writer, Richard Foster, captured the essence of these pressures as ‘money, sex and power’. These three areas of life need to be controlled under the discipline of Christian principles and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle John put it this way, ‘For all that is in the world - the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life - is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:16-17)

We can expect, therefore, to face pressure throughout our lives that are fleshly (sexual lust, greed, gluttony), that produce coveting, jealousy and pride (snobbery, elitism, classism, one-upmanship). These are sins that offend God and, until Christ returns and we are perfected in the new heavens and earth, we will be subject to various temptations. One strategy of the devil is to push our desires beyond God-given boundaries so that we transgress.

He may tempt you to be ‘slightly’ dishonest in order to gain more money, or fill you with resentment because a colleague or neighbour has some luxury that you can’t afford.

Whatever the nature of an individual temptation, God has ensured that we need not be overcome: ‘No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.’ (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Perhaps that verse could become part of your spiritual armour when fiery darts are heading your way.

The Christian at work, school or university

There is, of course, much overlap between our private and public lives and we are to be consistent. This is obvious to everyone even though some public figures try to deny it.

God wants each of His children to have a good reputation. ‘Choose a good reputation over great riches; being held in high esteem is better than silver or gold.’ (Proverbs 22:1)

We are to be men and women of integrity as we live and work alongside others – whether their standards are rooted in Biblical thinking or not.

Peter encourages believers, ‘Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles’ (1 Peter 2:12) and Paul urges us: ‘Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.’ (Ephesians 4:29)

As Christians amongst non-Christians we are to be sober-minded and actually sober (i.e. not getting drunk), honest and fair in all our dealings, not self-centered or selfishly motivated, not rude or abusive. We can be competitive as business people and as sportsmen and women, but we have our eye on serving and fearing God and therefore refuse to cheat.

Success honestly gained and humbly acknowledged can bring great glory to God. Advancement, promotion, or obtaining a greater market share are admirable attainments but we are to see our engagement with the market and with our city to be in the overall context of a Christ-centered mission, not a self-centered one (more on that in the next chapter).

Money, sex and power

Let’s look at Richard Foster’s three outlined areas of temptation in the context of work, school or university:

Money:

Are you willing to compromise to get more money? Are you greedy? Is money more important to you than your conscience? Are you willing to push your family through seasons of suffering because you are being lured by the company’s offer of more money? Do you consider the role of the local church, or your elder’s

advice when making major decisions like taking a work relocation? Do you constantly find yourself worrying that you won't have enough money?

Sex:

Do you flirt in the workplace, or at college? Are you becoming emotionally attached to someone at work? Do you accept a real drop in your standards when you are outside the home environment? Would your father or your husband be comfortable with your behaviour? Would your wife be comfortable with your conversation or behaviour? Would you be happy for your actions to become public knowledge?

Power:

Are you driven to get to the top at all costs? No? So what would stop you? Are you gracious towards those who are senior to you but dismissive of those junior to you? Do you get some of your sense of value from your position, profession or achievements? Do you treat your employees with dignity and respect? Are you courteous and well-mannered in your dealings on the phone? What kind of reputation do you have as a person in the workplace? What adjustments need to be made now that you are a follower of Christ?

The Christian at home

Although many of the same issues come up in the home and in the midst of the family, it may be helpful to separate the two spheres.

If the devil can attempt to make you ineffective as a Christian at work or amongst non-believers, he can certainly attempt to disrupt you at home.

Meet the parents

If you still live with your parents then your goal should be that they see a change in you. It may be that they are quick to point out where you haven't changed, but you can respectfully show by your good deeds that you have.

When you are wrong, apologise. When there is disagreement, seek peace. Paul tells us, 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.' (Romans 12:18) Where you can help then offer to help around the home. A

willingness to clear up after dinner may well strike the average parent as a miracle of biblical proportions!

If you are a parent then examine your behaviour and see if there are areas in which you can demonstrate that a change has taken place in your life. Obviously you will want to encourage your whole family to join you at church each Sunday.

I would strongly recommend that you model faithfulness and consistency to your children – in terms of both weekly church attendance and in giving. This will impart faith to your own kids in a way that may have been lacking in your own childhood.

If you behave wrongly you can apologise without it denting your parental authority. You will want to model wholesome talking to your children.

One of the greatest blessings that you can give to your family is being truly affectionate, loving and respectful towards your spouse. This will build stability into their lives and they will thank you for it.

Many men are easily distracted away from their children by work, sport or other pursuits. You can model godly fatherhood by focusing your attention on your precious children while you have time.

If you are a single parent then you can also model godly behaviour both in your relationships within the church community and with your children in the home. Your children are also going to enjoy a range of new friendships in the life of the church.

If you are married but your spouse has not yet come to faith in Christ then, likewise, you need to manage your attitudes and reactions carefully. Be in prayer for your spouse while you seek to win them to Christ by your good deeds, affection and joy.

Money, sex and power

Again, let's briefly examine these three areas of temptation and how they can affect us in the home:

Money:

What kind of budgeting process do you? Do you need help in this area? Are you modeling generosity to your children in the way you handle your resources?

Are you giving regularly to the local church and are your children aware of this practice? Are you tight-fisted with your children, but lavish with your own needs? Are you living above your means and could you be heading for a major financial problem?

Sex:

If you are married, are you loving each other, and enjoying being together? Would you benefit from being part of a marriage enrichment course at the church? Are you being disciplined in terms of what you are watching on television, on DVD, on the internet, or in your reading? Do you need extra help in this area? Are you training your teenage son/daughter in a Christian view of relationships?

Power:

Are you, as a parent, insisting on your own way rather than evaluating the needs of the family? Are you in any way taking advantage of your influence either as a parent, husband or wife? Are you manipulating, or genuinely serving?

This chapter has been merely an introduction to these issues. But we can see that God has our good in His mind in terms of how our relationships should function, both in our professional, student or home lives. We have an enemy and we are tempted, but we now belong to Jesus Christ and are living new lives for His glory.

Perhaps Paul's instruction to the Philippians will serve as a good place to end our study:

‘Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life.’ (Philippians 2:14-16)

For Further Discussion

1. Consider Philippians 2:14-16. How does this scripture instruct us in terms of how we conduct ourselves in the world? In what context do you find yourself in currently where this can be applied?
2. Read 2 Timothy 2:3-4 and 1 Peter 5:8. Have you been aware of a spiritual battle and enemy thus far? Discuss your experience.
3. Read Ephesians 6:10-18 and Luke 10:18-19. How do these scriptures give us confidence to handle spiritual battles?
4. In which of the areas mentioned (money, sex and power – or other) are you experiencing temptation? How should you respond?

Suggested Reading

Richard Foster - *Money, Sex and Power* (Hodder and Stoughton)

CS Lewis - *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper)



The Mission of Life

When a person gets converted, they are a new creation, they have a new identity, they join a new family, they encounter new battles and they have a new mission in life!

Aspects of those realities will look different for each of us, particularly the nature of our conversion and how quickly we realise we are on a mission in life.

Some new converts immediately understand the privilege and responsibility of telling others about Christ. Others are nervous (sometimes justifiably) about what to share and how much to share.

Usually when a believer is baptised in the Holy Spirit they experience a new kind of boldness in their witness, as Jesus promised.

However we have reached this point, the truth remains that we have a new mission in life. We've been drawn into God's mission!

God is on a mission!

Understandably, God's heart to bring forgiveness of sins to the human race is expressed in many places in scripture, and Paul sums it up in one passage particularly:

This passage begins with our personal conversion and reconciliation, and then draws us into a 'ministry of reconciliation' which is much bigger than our own forgiveness. It is bigger, in fact, than your town or city. We've been drawn into God's mission to the whole world, and are called Christ's ambassadors!

Paul writes, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!'

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.' (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

The idea of us being ambassadors for Christ on God's mission to a fallen world fits well with the material we looked at in the last chapter. We truly have become witnesses of the truth of the gospel.

The Bible begins with Creation and ends with a new creation – the driving dynamic of the story of the Bible is God's mission to reconcile the world to Himself through Jesus Christ.

Our purpose, while we are on the earth, is to participate in God's mission

God's mission began to unfold immediately after Adam sinned and death entered the world: God promised to crush the serpent's head through 'the seed of a woman' (Genesis 3:15)

The mission of God was spelt out in worldwide terms to Abraham when he was told, 'In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' (Genesis 12:3) It was never ultimately going to be mono-cultural.

God was determined to reach every ethnic group with the good news.

Beginning with Abraham, God formed a new tribe in the earth, the people of Israel. From this tribe the Saviour of the World would come and the new tribe would be fulfilled in the Church, formed from every people group; they would be a people for God's own possession.

God has always been on a mission. The ethnic people of Israel alone were never intended to be the destination of God's purpose. Israel had a missional reason for existence: that through them, as a distinct people owned by God, Christ would come and salvation would spread to the ends of the earth.

The result is the formation of the Church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles. This is what Jesus is building. He is Israel's Messiah (Matthew 16:16) and the world's Saviour (John 4:42), the head of the Church, the fulfilment of God's promises to have His own people, a new 'Israel' from all peoples (Galatians 6:15-16, Romans 9:6).

Ethnic Israel is not going to be left behind, for scripture speaks of an end-time salvation of Israel which gives us confidence that many from that nation will turn to Christ. (Rom 11:26)

So God's purpose in the Old Testament was to establish a distinct people of God for the purpose of bringing global blessing through Christ.

The New Testament shows that, in the coming of Christ, the reconciling power of the gospel is available right up to the establishment of the new creation.

And so, the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a description and a product of the mission that God is on. He will save! He will have a people! He will redeem His fallen creation!

Author Chris Wright says that God's mission is the driving dynamic of the Bible's grand narrative! It's the key to the story.

It's important that you grasp this as you seek to understand your own purpose in life. There is purpose in history, there is meaning in life, there is a movement towards a final victorious outcome that you and I have been drawn into!

It's not just personal forgiveness of your sins – your life story has been grafted in to God's grand story. And in the power and illuminating brilliance of God's grand story – each of our stories is significant and perfectly placed.

All of life is lived in the context of mission

The Church is now in a missional' phase of her existence.

Just as the Old Covenant people of God kept forgetting the missional purpose of their existence, so the church too often forgets her missional purpose.

The church often forgets that we are in a missional phase of our existence: we have a responsibility to help reconcile people to God through Christ.

We must be careful not to think that mission is only one aspect of Christian life here on earth, rather than the whole context of life. So, to list individual Christian disciplines in this way - worship, fellowship, prayer, Bible reading, mission - is a

mistake, because it gives the impression that mission is something we occasionally do rather than the reason we are on the earth!

God is on a mission, the Church is on God's mission - mission is the umbrella under which everything else on earth takes place including worship, teaching, sanctification and fellowship.

If we fail to understand that life as a Christian in this world is lived in the context of God's mission then we can easily be distracted by other things – introspection, personal pursuit of pleasure or comfort or wealth, accumulation of material things, to name a few.

Actually, you are living life with purpose. You're not drifting!

You can say, 'I'm a father or mother in the context of mission, I'm a supermarket employee in the context of mission, I'm a radio broadcaster in the context of mission, I'm a lawyer in the context of mission, I'm a grandparent in the context of mission, I'm looking after my children in the context of mission.'

Sadly, not all Christians are clear about this and can drift through life. Their attendance at church is patchy, their commitment to lifting the profile of the gospel can be almost non-existent. It's possible to have a steady job and be earning good money and, even as a Christian, be wondering, 'What's my purpose in life? I'm just going through the motions!'

Make a decision now that you're going to be a genuine thorough-going disciple of Christ. Your life is to be a life of purpose, with Jesus at the centre, and lived with the faith-edginess and adventure of mission.

All that we do: work, church, worship, prayer, recreation, friendship, family, pleasure – is all under the umbrella of God's mission.

This opens up not only the possibility of personal faith adventures, but also of engaging with the culture at broader levels: in the academy, in the arts, in business and in the social structures of our context.

Some questions:

Isn't sanctification of believers the main task of the church?

Sanctification – the process becoming more like Christ, more holy – is, of course, crucial but shouldn't be divorced from mission. The apostles never lost

sight of this. Paul didn't see a division between our sanctification and our mission. He urged good attitudes, 'that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.' (Philippians 2:14-16)

Why can't the local church simply be a place of personal restoration, sanctification and worship?

The church certainly should be a place of personal restoration, sanctification and worship (personal restoration may need to happen before mission can), but in this pre-heavenly state, personal restoration, sanctification and worship take place in the context of mission.

What is the Church's mission?

Jesus told disciples that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem' after they had been 'clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:47). They were told, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8)

The most famous statement of mission is at the end of the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' (Matt 28:18-20)

Clearly, we are to preach the gospel and make disciples. We have seen that the very context of our lives is mission – that all of life is mission, and that will certainly include telling others about Christ.

We must remember why we are on the Earth!

God could have taken us instantly to heaven, where holiness, fellowship, worship and even we ourselves will be perfect. But He left us here on the earth, with all the difficulties and trials for a reason: mission.

If we think that some Christians are on a mission, but most are ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ believers attending church every Sunday and just living life, then we have a sub-biblical view of our life, of family and of our purpose on the earth!

Mission is not something a few are called to – it is the momentum, the drive, and purpose, the cause for which God has enlisted us!

There is a determination in the heart of God to reconcile the world to Himself. And all who are called to follow Jesus Christ are called into that mission.

Remember the words of Jesus: ‘Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.’ (Matthew 4:19)

Your life has purpose: The purpose of Life is to know God and to enjoy and glorify Him, and the context in which we are to do that now, is by serving Him on His mission on the earth.

Don’t waste your life: You’re a new creation, in a new family on a new mission that will ultimately triumph when the centre of it all, Jesus Christ, returns in power and glory!

For further discussion

1. What is the big mission that your life has been rescued for? How does this challenge your idea of your life’s purpose?
2. Read Acts 26:9-23. In this text, Paul gives his testimony, describing his life before Christ (v 9-11), what it meant to meet Jesus (v 12-15) and what it’s meant since (v 19-23). Describe your conversion story in similar steps.
3. Are you developing relationships with a range of people outside the faith? Can you articulate the gospel or give reasons for your faith if asked?
4. Are you seeking power from the Holy Spirit to increase your boldness in witnessing?
5. What aspects of the mission do you feel specifically called to?
6. Is there a ministry which you could develop to help advance the purposes of God in a particular area of need?

Suggested reading

Bill Hybels – *Just Walk Across the Room* (Zondervan)

John Wimber – *Power Evangelism* (Regal)

Chris Wright – *The Mission of God's People* (Zondervan)