



Jesus said, *"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock (Peter's confession) I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."* Mt 16:18 We understand that Jesus was describing His church in a universal sense (as the sum of all baptized believers; Acts 2:47). However, on the day of Pentecost after Jesus ascended back to heaven, Peter stood up with the other apostles and preached the first gospel sermon. And we rejoice with the angels in heaven that about 3,000 souls were baptized into Christ; . . . *"that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."* Acts 2:41b-47 Thus from this initial assembly of saints in Jerusalem the first local church was established. Soon the gospel spread so that by about 48AD, Paul could address his Galatian Epistle to, *"the churches of Galatia."* Gal 1:2b This publication issue examines early churches like these so that we can learn from their actions and experiences. *"Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you."* Rom 16:16

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JERUSALEM

Jon Hall

As recorded in Acts Chapter 2, Peter, along with the eleven, preached the first sermon after Jesus' ascension into Heaven and about 3000 souls were saved that day. These Jews were not added to a physical church located at a specific address in Jerusalem. They didn't have their names physically recorded in a church directory or on a church website. They did, however, comprise the body of Christ, in Jerusalem. They were the church in Jerusalem, established after their obedience to the word of Christ which Peter preached. They repented of their sins and were baptized into Christ, thereby becoming part of the Body of Christ. Thus, the Jerusalem church was established.

There are several unique aspects of the church in Jerusalem. First, among these who heard Peter's sermon were some who probably cried out for Jesus' crucifixion not many days earlier. This Jesus they now accepted and proclaimed as their Savior. (Acts 3:14-16) However, note in verse 17 that Peter declared that they did this in ignorance. This didn't excuse their actions, as we note in verse 19 that he again commands them to repent of these actions. If a church can be established from a group of men and women who cried out, "*crucify Him, crucify Him*" (Mk 15:14) then who is it that cannot become a Christian? Which one of our friends or neighbors doesn't deserve the opportunity to be added to the Lord's Body, the Church? Can we be like Peter and reach out to lost souls today without prejudice for who they may have been in the past?

Another unique aspect of the Jerusalem church is the self-righteous practices of many of their Jewish counterparts in Jerusalem. As we see early on in Acts 4; the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees were greatly annoyed at their teaching and the miracles they were performing. They even arrested Peter and John for proclaiming, in Jesus, the resurrection from the

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dead (the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection). The next day they are before the high priest and others, questioning their authority to heal a man crippled from birth. Imagine the challenge of living as a Christian in an environment where even a good deed, such as this, becomes an opportunity to question and challenge you and your service to God. Would we stand up and declare plainly and openly that it is by the authority of Jesus Christ that we teach what we teach and do what we do, as Peter does in verse 10? More importantly, are we, as the body of Christ, teaching and living according to the authority of Christ?

The final point about the uniqueness of the church in Jerusalem is directed again to the fact that they were the first church established. They had the Apostles to guide them, but no doubt they struggled. From this point forward, as other churches are established, they are the examples for those Christians to follow. Today, we have the benefit of knowing members of other congregations across the country and across the world; we're not alone.

We can also identify aspects of the church in Jerusalem that are common to other churches. All are made up of people who have come out of the world of sin. There are also aspects of the church at Jerusalem that we should hope to have in common. The church in Jerusalem, and every church since then, has been comprised of individuals who have come out of a world where sin often dominated their lives. Let's look at two examples the Jerusalem church experienced. Both were driven by the fact that the church was made up of regular men and women,

just like all other churches since. First, we find some complaining, and likely for a valid reason. It appears in chapter 6:1 that those Jews who spoke Greek may have been treated differently, than those who spoke Hebrew. This looks to be caused by prejudice. Their complaint, as you may remember, was that they were being overlooked as food was distributed to those in need, while the widows who spoke Hebrew were being well taken care of. The solution was to place faithful men over this effort to ensure things were done properly and orderly for all. We should pray for Jerusalem's good outcome when differences arise among members of the body of Christ today. Vs. 7 says that the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. When conflicts arise, we should embrace solutions that allow us to continue to worship together and honor God.

The second issue is found in chapter 5. Many Christians in Jerusalem, at this time, had traveled far for the Jewish Passover, but with the events associated with Jesus and the establishment of the church, they now found themselves lacking the basic necessities to live as they remained in Jerusalem to hear God's word taught and to worship with other new Christians. Because of this, we see those in Jerusalem providing for the needs of these saints. However, there was a couple, Ananias and Sapphira who sold a piece of property and brought "some" of the proceeds to the Apostles. While there was nothing wrong concerning giving all or a portion of the proceeds, Ananias and Sapphira decided to keep a portion of the proceeds while presenting it as though they were giving all the proceeds. It

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seems obvious that they wanted the credit, or praise maybe, for selling this property but lying about giving all the proceeds to help others. There are few among us who wouldn't want others to see our actions as noble and of great character. Even as Christians, we are still just men and women who have weaknesses and challenges, and will struggle. This is true whether you're the one sitting in the audience or the one teaching or preaching, leading a prayer or song service, etc. We all have to fight the good fight of faith together.

Finally, I wanted to look at the overall example above from a positive standpoint, as it relates to the early church in Jerusalem. Notice again that there were brethren in Jerusalem who had not been prepared to stay as long as they had; so they had run out of provisions and funds. We know from the story above what other brothers and sisters were doing to help. They were selling their possessions in order to help those who found themselves in a difficult situation, at no fault of their own. What I'd like to bring our attention to is the statement recorded in verse 5:32. Here, God's word states that *"the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common."* What a powerful statement regarding these early Christians. Verse 34 continues on to say that *"There was not a needy person among them."* What would we do if we found ourselves in a situation where a large number of Christians could not provide for themselves? I pray that we would be like the church in Jerusalem and do whatever we could to provide for the needs of our fellow saints.

ANTIOCH

Tom Rutledge

The future Church at Antioch actually had its beginning from the events recorded in Acts 6 through 8. Stephen delivers his gospel sermon to the Jews in Jerusalem; he is stoned with the consent of Saul and in chapter 8:1 – *"Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria..."*

As we read forward in Acts and come to chapter 11:19ff, there we see the dots connected when Luke records in v. 19, *"So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone."* And then he records in V.20, *"But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus."* As a result, a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

With news of these great events reaching the church at Jerusalem, Barnabas is dispatched to Antioch where he spent considerable time encouraging them to all (V.20) *"with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord...for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord."* Antioch is now a strong and sizeable church consisting of both Jewish and gentile believers.

According to most scholars, the events

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recorded in these few verses consisted of a span of approximately 10-years. Saul has already been converted and is now living and teaching in Tarsus. So Barnabas (V.25), goes to Tarsus which is about 130-miles to the north, and brings Saul back to Antioch with him. As verse 26 records, they met with the church for a year and taught considerable numbers. (V.26) ***“...and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”***

It will be from here that financial relief will be sent to the Christians in Judea for the great famine that will be occurring “all over the world.” (V.29-30) *“. . . each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea and this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.”*

There is no doubt that the church at Antioch was a strong and vibrant church where the gospel was spread, and they were a beacon of both spiritual and financial support. As we fast forward several years to Acts 13:1ff – In the church at Antioch were several prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon, and Lucius, and Manaen and Saul. The Holy Spirit selected Barnabas and Saul to send out on what we know as the first missionary journey.

It will be years later, that Paul will launch his second (Acts 15:30-41) and third missionary journeys (18:22-23). Notice that after his first and second journeys, he reports on his efforts to the church at Antioch who had sent him out

The church at Antioch is one of those early New Testament churches that did not begin as a result of one of Paul’s missionary

journeys. It was a church that was started as a result of the great persecution (Acts 8:1-4). It was a church that Paul was a great part of and many years later would be part of the spreading the gospel.

What a great lesson of how out of adversity, this early church of believers would get its birth when the first Christians left Jerusalem due to persecution and be so instrumental in the spreading of the gospel that would lead to the establishment of many other churches.

PHILIPPI

Mark Gray

Somewhere around 50AD Paul wanted to go into different parts of Asia Minor, but was prevented by the Spirit. He had also received a vision of a Macedonian man *“urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”* Act 16:9 Heeding these divine directions, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke sailed from Troas and went into Philippi, one of the leading cities of Macedonia. After being in the city for a few days, they went down *“to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together”* Act 16:13 Paul’s normal method of teaching was to go to the synagogue in each town and city. Here there were not enough Jewish men to have one. We only read of women who had gathered. One of these was Lydia, originally from Thyatira, who was a seller of purple dye which was a luxury item of this time; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Lydia

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was a woman of wealth. She also was a worshiper of God and listened to Paul's teaching. Her belief and faith led her to be the first person (that we know of) to be baptized on the continent of Europe. Her household also believed and were baptized as well; thus, the church in Philippi began.

Paul and Silas ended up in Philippian jail after exorcising a demon possessed girl who had been following them around. These two were jailed for being "*Jews, and they are disturbing our city.*" Act 16:20 They were bound in stocks after having been stripped and beaten with rods, yet "*about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*" Act 16:25 A great earthquake shook the prison so that the doors came open and the bonds released. The jailer awoke to see all this and "*drew his sword and was about to kill himself,*" but Paul stopped him in time. The jailer fell down before Paul and Silas asking, "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" Acts 16:30 He and his household listened to the Word and were all baptized. This is a much different situation from Lydia, as there is no indication that this man had any prior knowledge of God. His introduction was purely through the actions of Paul and Silas praying, singing out loud, and witnessing the power of God in the earthquake. The jailer and his house were now the second family of believers added to the church in Philippi.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had more preaching to do on their journey, so they "*visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*" Act 16:40 Luke appears to stay behind as well ("we/us" used in vs 16 & 17 to "they"

in 17:1). The membership of the Philippian congregation that is revealed to us is Lydia and her family, the jailer and his family, and Luke. One family had a Jewish background and some wealth. The other is Greco-Roman gentile, possibly a roman soldier.

Paul wrote his letter to this congregation around 61AD. They have had about a decade to grow, mature, and stand on their own. They have grown enough in this time to not only have a few saints, but have elders/overseers and deacons as well.

Paul thanked them for their "*partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*" and he prayed that their "*love may abound more and more.*" Phil 1:5,9 They have helped him financially even though not all of them were wealthy. Paul wrote about them to the church in Corinth, "*their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints ... they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us*" 2 Cor 8:2-5 They were thoughtful of other brethren and of Paul as well.

He knew that they worried about him while he was under imprisonment in Rome. Perhaps Paul thought most of the Philippian jailer who understood more than others about the Roman system of justice when he wrote, "*what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprison-*

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ment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” Phil 1:12-14 It is difficult at times to think that circumstances we would consider awful would actually be beneficial to the gospel and to ourselves as well. Paul was confident that “Christ is proclaimed” in a new place because of his chains, but also that *“through your prayers and the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance...that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.” Phil 1:19,26*

This church at its beginning was made up of members of different backgrounds, but all were brought to a knowledge of Jesus through the efforts and preaching of Paul. He reminds the church to be *“of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Phil 2:2* Apparently, the church had become factious and needed to focus. They needed to be reminded of humility, *“to count others more significant than themselves;”* they were given the example that Christ was equal with God and took *“the form of a servant... and was humbled “by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Phil 2:3-8*

CORINTH

Bethany Gray

In Acts 18:1-8 the church of Corinth is established. Paul goes first to the Jews but he’s rejected, then he

goes to the Gentiles and is received. Usually when Paul would teach the gospel in a new city he would be attacked or run out. However, Paul received a vision from the Lord that said *“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” Act 18:9-10* God provided Paul with “opportunities” to spread His word among the Corinthians and in the newly established Corinthian church for a year and a half.

There were many Christians and the power of God was there with them protecting them. That’s something that we can absolutely think about and ponder if we’re making that kind of impact; by letting our faith be so loudly known that The Father Himself allows us to protect and be someone else’s solace. Are we the kind of people that God was speaking of to Paul in the vision? Are we the Christians that would make the city safe so that Paul could stay and spread the word for a year and a half? Are we the many that would provide solace for new Christians? Do we do that?

Diving into Paul’s epistles, we get a further insight into the first century churches through the letters he wrote. In 1 Corinthians Paul praises the saints in the church he helped establish by saying *“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.” 1 Cor. 1:4-5* While they were very gifted in the spirit of the Lord, even they fell short of what God has commanded of all of us. They were divided: they followed the different men who

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taught and baptized them, and also were divided by different economic circumstances. Paul tells the Corinthians that, *“the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”* 1 Cor 1:25 and that, *“God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God,”* 1 Cor 1:28-29 to show the Corinthians that the divisions were not pleasing to God. Paul showed them that they were all smaller and less than God and yet equal in His sight, no money could put any man higher than the other in the Lord’s sight. This is something we can use and take mind of. No matter our material blessings we are all God’s children and are equal before Him.

The church in Corinth also struggled with picking and choosing which sins were acceptable and which ones weren’t. They had sexual immorality, boastfulness, greed, drunkenness and more; and they were tolerating their brothers’ and sisters’ sin in their own local church. When Paul heard of their unacceptable tolerance he told them to, *“Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.”* 1 Cor. 5:7 Even when they had grievances with one another, they went to the law before going to the brothers themselves. Paul was appalled by their behavior and said *“Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?...Or do you know the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?...And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sancti-*

fied, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Cor. 6:5;9;11 When we have problems and disagreements with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, we should go to them first and let the Lord help mend the bond we have. We should learn from the Corinthians’ mistakes and the lessons they learned from Paul’s letters. Are we like the Corinthians in Acts? That made the city a safe haven and allowed Paul to preach for a year and a half without fear of harm or attacks. After his first epistle, they changed their ways and became even better Christians that Paul thought they could be. They heard Paul’s warnings and understood God’s word further, so that they weren’t falling into sin any longer. This is another thing that we as Christians today can take as a lesson. We should ask ourselves the question, *“Is this what God has asked of me?”* A question that many of the Corinthians in the first letter did not ask.

Taking some of the mistakes and the successes of the Corinthian church that we see in Acts, and the letters to the Corinthians we can learn to be stronger and more faithful Christians. We can be like the Christians who made the city safe for Paul, we can be like the Christians who understood that their tolerance of sin in the church was causing their brothers and sisters in Christ to suffer in sin and help them change their ways, we can be like the Christians that Paul praises in his letters. Are we the Christians who are praised by Paul and avid listeners and doers of the word? Or are we Christians that allow sin

to be rampant in our church, and division and disagreements to cause wedges between us? These are some lessons we can learn from the early church in Corinth.

EPHESUS

Aaron Lumpkin

Much is said about the church in Ephesus, at least more so than many others. Luke, in the book of Acts, records Paul's visits there, as well as other events and characters involving the Ephesian brethren. Beyond Luke's work, we can find numerous references to this group of believers, as well as a letter from Paul to the saints there, and finally, John delivers a message to the Ephesian church from Jesus Himself, in the book of Revelation. These many references tell a story of our Ephesian brethren that continues to speak to us today.

The origin of the church in Ephesus is unclear, and yet fascinating. Incredibly, Paul finds there disciples of John the Baptist, (who had been dead for 25+ years at that point) suggesting that there may have been men in Ephesus since before Jesus even died! (Acts 19:1-7) Also, since we read that Jews from the region around Ephesus were present to hear Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, it is certainly plausible that some were among the 3,000 who "received the word and were baptized" and then subsequently carried their new faith the five hundred miles home to Ephesus. (Acts 2:9, 41) What is certain is that when Paul first stops very briefly in Ephesus at the tail end of his

2nd missionary journey (about 52 AD) he leaves Aquila and Priscilla there, then sails back to Judea. (Acts 18:18f) Luke then mentions the "brethren" in Ephesus when introducing Apollos, which suggests that a church in Ephesus is already in existence prior to Paul teaching there. (Acts 18:27)

Since a church already existed there, Ephesus was a logical place for Paul to set up shop for the bulk of his 3rd journey. Ephesus was A large port city on the intersection of two major highways, it is from Ephesus that Paul and his helpers are able to preach to all of the surrounding region of Asia (the western portion of modern Turkey) until *"all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."* Acts 19:10 Paul spends three entire years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31), which is longer than he spends in any other place on his journeys. This extended stay (by Paul's standards) leads to a high degree of familiarity and great affinity between Paul and the Ephesian saints. When Paul finally journeys on from Ephesus, he leaves his "true son in the faith", Timothy, behind, giving him clear instructions to help the Ephesian church continue to grow in their faith in which Paul is so heavily invested. (1 Tim 1:3f) This sincere love between Paul and the disciples in Ephesus is most evident in Acts 20, where Luke records Paul's final meeting with the Ephesian elders. Amid prayer, weeping aloud, embracing, and kissing, Paul tells them of his imminent arrest, and that he would see them no more. Yet among this outpouring of emotion, Paul's chief concern is clearly the spiritual well-being of the Ephesian flock, who he loved so dearly.

Paul's concern for these saints was not

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unwarranted. Though not dysfunctional to the level of the Corinthian church, the text of Paul's Ephesian epistle suggests that the Ephesian church struggled with their unity. Ephesus was a large, prominent Greek city, but with a sizeable Jewish population. The church likely also had a mix of members, whose backgrounds differed culturally and religiously. Paul emphasizes that "so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." Eph 2:19 What they had in common infinitely exceeded the differences between them. He urged them to show "tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Eph 4:2-3 This was easier said than done. Ephesus was home to the massive Temple of Artemis, the largest building in the Greek world and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The significance of this temple and related practices in Ephesian culture is evident in the events of Acts 19, and undoubtedly relevant in the struggles between the Greek and Jewish Christians in the Ephesian church.

Furthermore, Paul's stated reason for leaving Timothy in Ephesus, upon his departure, was primarily to combat false teaching. (1 Tim 1:3f) The same geographic qualities that made Ephesus such an ideal base for spreading the gospel in the region (a major port and highway crossroads) made it also a hotbed for new ideas and religious error. Ephesus was a bustling center of both commerce and cultic worship. This revolving door of merchants and pilgrims brought with it a constant influx of new and different ideas and doctrines. Combine this with the fact

that saints in Ephesus already struggled in leaving behind their former idolatrous practices (for the Greeks) and their obsolete customs from the old Law (for the Jews). Paul strongly warns the church leaders of this danger: "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." Acts 20:29-30 In his epistle to these saints, Paul cautions the entire group: "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." Eph 5:6 Fortunately, the brethren seem to have taken this instruction to heart, for Jesus later commends this church for their stand against false teachers in Rev 2:2-3,6.

Despite this commendation of Jesus, we learn one other piece of information about these saints from His letter to them in Revelation 2:1-7. Jesus charges the Ephesian disciples with having "left their first love." He seems to be addressing the lack of passion that they once had in their walk with God. But this was not just an area that needed a little improvement, it needed so much improvement that Jesus threatens judgment unless they repent! Our Savior expects spirited service, not mindless obedience. He seeks zealous discipleship, not empty religion. The Ephesians' fire for the Lord had waned and needed rekindling before it became too late!

The early church in Ephesus leaves us with some powerful examples. We see the mutual benefit of cultivating a close relationship with evangelists that we support. We're

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reminded of how essential unity is to every group of saints. Also, the danger of false teachers and their divisive doctrine is just as present today as it was in 1st century Ephesus. And finally, we're reminded that our passion for the Lord can fade over time, even while standing firm for the truth. Our relationship with the Creator requires deliberate and continual investment and maintenance if we seek to be pleasing to Him.

ATHENS

Ron Gray

The apostle Paul was shepherded away from the Jews at Thessalonica who were intent on silencing him. When they heard that he was in Berea, they came after him there. To protect Paul from the vengeance of the Jews that seemed to be imminent, some of the brethren accompanied Paul, taking him to Athens. This was very likely by sea rather than a journey of 12 days by land.

Paul was alone in Athens while waiting for Silas and Timothy who did not actually arrive at Athens, but later joined up with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). Paul could have used this time for rest and relaxation since he expressed strongly that he needed these brothers in Christ to join him quickly. But we see that Brother Paul, moved by all that he saw, was not willing to delay his effort to seek and save the lost in this idolatrous city. This is a powerful example for all of us as Christians.

"So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." Acts 17:17

Paul took advantage of the Athenians' desire to hear something new as his approach to teach the gospel to them. The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers ushered him to the Areopagus where he was branded by one side as a "babbler" and described by the other side who said "he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities." As they pressed him to tell them about his "new teaching," Paul stood before them and began his sermon: *"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription, 'to the Unknown God.' What therefore you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you."* Act 17:23

This is one of the scriptures in the Bible that holds a glowing place in my heart. I tend to believe that this altar "to the unknown god" was built by mortal man as a catch-all to cover all of the bases, as if there are any gods who were out there and therefore were not placated by those other shrines in a city that was "full of idols." As we look at Paul's oration, he pays the listeners a compliment, "you are very religious." Then he brings the lesson that will echo in their minds each and every time that these scholars pass by this altar to the unknown God.

Paul continues by declaring that the God that he is speaking of had created the world and all that is in it; He is the Lord of heaven and the earth, not living in temples made by man's hands. He made from one man every nation and set the boundaries where they would live and seek the one true God. In all of this Paul is pointing out the oneness of God, of mankind, and of salvation.

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In quotes from Epimenides of Crete and Aratus, Paul uses the words that these scholars would know, to say that in Him we “live and move and have our being” and we are His children. Because we are His children, we cannot think of Him as an image carved in stone or cast in gold or silver. God had ignored such things in days gone by, *“but now commands all people everywhere to repent. There is a day coming when He will “judge the world in righteousness.”* Act 17:30-31

When Paul began to conclude his oration, with the promise of a resurrection and a final judgment, it may be that both the Stoics and the Epicureans stopped him, because neither of those philosophies embraced a resurrection. The Epicureans believed that this life is all that there is for each of us. Enjoy all of the pleasures and after that you cease to exist. The Stoics believed that they would just be absorbed into the godhead. [from the H. Leo Boles commentary] Those who remained said, “We will hear you again about this.” The scripture says, *“So Paul went out from their midst.”* Act 17:30

So, it seems like this is the end of the Gospel in Athens, but we see a glimmer of hope in the last verse of this chapter: *“But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysus the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.”* Act 17:34

There are three socio-philosophic classes among those who heard Paul. (1) Epicureans who mocked the truth. (2) Those who procrastinated and promised to hear him again. (3) Those who believed him. Among those who believed was “Dionysus the Areopagite,” several men, and at least one woman who believed. Her name was Damaris.

We all understand that mockers of God have always existed, from the ones who mocked Noah as he fabricated the ark that the “Master Naval Architect” had commissioned him to build for those who were faithful. And there are those who mock us today as we try to walk in the pathway of righteousness.

The apostle Paul would come across another individual who procrastinated when he stood before King Agrippa; who told him, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

In the book of Acts we see the small beginnings of the church at Athens. We might assume that they were off to a poor start, but Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.”*

THESSALONICA & BEREIA

Ephriam Davis

The early churches in Thessalonica and Berea were established as part of Paul’s second missionary journey. He traveled along with Silas in the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony at that time, and known today as part of the country of Greece. (Acts 16 & 17) Along this journey, according to Paul’s custom, they went into the Jewish synagogues in Thessalonica and Berea, to teach and preach the gospel message of Christ; reasoning from the Scriptures. While located only about 20 miles apart they had completely opposite

responses to the exact same gospel message of Christ.

Responses by Jews in Thessalonica: Act 17:4-9 “And some of them [*Abraham’s Descendant (AD) Jews*] were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks [most likely Proselyte Jews], and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the [AD] Jews who were not persuaded, *“becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.”* Act 17:4-5 While we don’t know exact numbers, the first underlined phrase, “some of them” written here in the context of the above referenced verses 4-9, suggests that only a small number of the AD Jews in Thessalonica were persuaded by the gospel message taught by Paul and Silas. Conversely, a larger number of un-persuaded AD Jews who were jealous and vindictive could not find Paul and Silas in the house of Jason where they evidently had been staying. Furthermore, the NKJV here in verse 5 includes the second underlined phrase, “who were not persuaded” which makes it explicitly and abundantly clear that in Thessalonica there were groups of Jews who were persuaded, as well as Jews who were un-persuaded. The KJV also includes here a similar phrase, “which believed not”. However, a similar phrase is NOT in the ESV or NASB Bibles. One potential reason is because they were translated from a slightly different original manuscripts.

We observe a level of compassion towards Paul and Silas from the brethren of the newly established church in Thessalonica

when they sent them on to Berea in part because of the vindictive behavior of the un-persuaded Jews. However, this was even more importantly, a fulfillment of God’s plan for disciples to continue to spread the gospel. (Act 17:10)

Responses by Jews in Berea: (Act 17:11-12)

Acts 17:11 is perhaps the most familiar passage comparing the early churches in Thessalonica and Berea. The general message is the same for all of the more commonly used study Bibles below.

ESV – Now these [Berean] Jews were more **noble** than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

KJV – These were more **noble** than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

NASB – Now these were more **noble-minded** than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

NKJV – These were more **fair-minded** than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Consider the fact, that there is only one gospel of Christ, (Gal 1:6-9) but the Bible includes four different gospel accounts, and each account provides parallel as well as unique details recorded by that gospel writ-

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er. Is it appropriate then for us to make statements like, “*There are four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*”? For an English speaking rather than Greek language scholar contextually studying scripture, does the comparative wording variation and definition details used in each Bible version listed above for Acts 17:11 help us gain a more accurate and in-depth understanding of this **Key Phrase**: “...*these [Berean] Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica...*”

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, Key Word Variation Definitions:

noble: (adj.) possessing very good or excellent, outstanding qualities or properties

noble-minded: (adj.) having or characteristic of an honorable, upright, and superior mind

fair-minded: (adj.) marked by impartiality and honesty: JUST, UNPREJUDICED, [UNBIASED]

These definition details are extremely important indicators of “the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb 4:12, Prov 14:12, Isa 55:8-9) and “individual life choices”, (Josh 24:14-15). Therefore many of them [Berean Jews] believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. (Act 17:12 NKJV) We all live with “relative truths” that are learned through our personal life experiences that can consciously or subconsciously lead to righteous or un-righteous behaviors. God’s Scriptures are the “absolute standard of truth” that we must daily study and meditate upon to better understand how to become more

noble, noble-minded, and fair-minded.

Finally, there is one more significant early church event to discuss involving Paul, together with specific brethren of both Berea and Thessalonica along with other disciples. “Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; ... These ... were waiting for us at Troas, ..., and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.” (Acts 20:4-6 ESV) “On **the first day of the week**, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.” Act 20:7 This verse explicitly identifies “the first day of the week”, (Sunday), as when these disciples had come together for the purpose of partaking of the Lord’s supper, and it implicitly identifies every Sunday as the pattern to follow in the early churches, as well as in faithful New Testament churches today.

ROME

Ed Wittlif

The church in Rome existed before Paul arrived there around 61 A. D. (Acts 28). It is not clear when the church was established or by whom, but perhaps by Jewish Christians returning to Rome after Pentecost (Acts 2:10). In 52 A. D, the Edict of Claudius banished all Jews from Rome, including Christians, whom Rome considered a Jewish sect. The other possibility for the beginning of the church there was after the death of Claudius in 54 A. D.

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If the church in Rome was started by Jews who had been converted on Pentecost around 33 A. D., the church could have been in existence as early as the mid-thirties. It is possible that some returning to Rome had been given gifts by the laying on of the apostles' hands. We do not know that for certain, but Paul mentions gifts given through grace in Romans 12:6-8. One gift mentioned is prophecy. Prophecy means what is revealed of God's will and is not limited to predictions of future events. This was needed in the first century before the written Word was finished.

When Paul was in Corinth, he stayed with fellow tentmaker Aquila, a certain Jew (Acts 18:1-3). Aquila and his wife Priscilla had moved to Corinth from Rome because of the Edict of Claudius. Aquila and Priscilla, had moved back to Rome sometime after Claudius' death. A church met in their house in Rome (Romans 16:3-5).

After appealing to Caesar, Paul arrived in Italy. He landed at the main port of Puteoli, 170 miles from Rome, and stayed with brethren there seven days (Acts 28:14). The news of Paul's arrival in Italy reached the brethren in Rome. *"And the brethren, when they heard about us, came as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage"* Acts 28:15 The Market at Appius was forty-three miles from Rome, and the Three Inns was thirty-three miles. Three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul met with the Jewish leaders and they set a time for a gathering. Paul taught a large crowd from morning until evening. Some were persuaded, but others did not believe. Paul then

turned his attention to the Gentiles (Acts 28:17-29).

Paul was under house arrest in Rome and had a soldier guarding him (Acts 28:16, 23, & 30). *"And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered."* Acts 28:30-31

Paul's presence in Rome greatly influenced the church. Brethren preached the gospel with boldness. Clearly, some of the praetorian guards were converted by listening to Paul as they guarded him (Phil 1:12-14). *"All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household."* Phi 4:22 Those who were converted among the praetorian guard possibly taught fellow soldiers, slaves, and servants in the palace.

The church in Rome grew and had peace until 64 AD when there was a major fire in Rome. To stop the rumors that he was behind it, Nero blamed Christians. This time it was not banishment, but torture and death. Paul was beheaded in 68 A. D. under Nero's reign. Persecution could not destroy the church of Christ, for it grew during those times.¹

Based on the ethnicity of the names mentioned in Chapter Sixteen, Jew and Gentile converts made up the church in Rome. The body consisted of the upper-class all the way to slaves, both men and women. Ronald Brown, in his book *Who's Who in the New Testament*, lists the following members:

Jewish converts: Prisca and Aquilla, coworkers with Paul, and their house

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church. Andronicus and Junias, Hellenistic Jews, converted before Paul. They were fellow prisoners with Paul. They were not of the twelve, but were called apostles because they were sent, and not one of the Apostles. Herodian, a fellow Hebrew of Paul.

Gentile Converts: Phoebe was from Cenchrea, which was part of Corinth. Scholars consider that she carried the Letter to the Romans from Paul. She was also a respected servant of the church. Aristobulus was a possible slave in the house in Rome owned by Herod the Great's grandson. Epaeetus was the first convert from Asia. Ampliatius was a common name of the upper class Aurelii family. Often the given name was an equal family identifier in Rome as the surname. Urbanus was a common slave name connected with Caesar's household. Urbanus was a fellow worker with Paul. Stachys was a special friend of Paul. Apelles had a reputation of approved by Christ. Tryphaena and Tryphosa were either twins or sisters and fellow workers with Paul. Both names are in found in Latin inscriptions listings members of Caesar's household. Persis, Greek for *Persian woman*, was a common slave name.

Possible Additional House Church Groups in Rome: Greet those of the household of Narcissus. Tiberius Claudius Narcissus was connected with the emperor Claudius and executed by Nero. His slaves became Nero's slaves, but still kept the name of their former master. Casaer's household: Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, and Hermas. The Roman Historian Tacitus mentions a freed slave of Nero by the name of Hermas. These are connected with additional

brethren. Philologus was most likely the husband of Julia. Both names are common slave names. Paul names Nerus, his sister, Olympas, and the saints with them.

Unknown: Mary was one of six Mary's in the New Testament. Rufus was perhaps the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus (Mark 15:21).

We see that there were no great problems like those dealt with harshly in the epistles to the Corinthians and Galatians. The brethren in Rome seem to have an issue of judging in matters of conscience. They were told to not judge matters of conscience such as meat, apparently because of the possibility that it came from a pagan temple. We can see that their faith needed a firm grounding in God's word.

As we examine Paul's letter to this church, we could say that Romans is Christianity 101. a. The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God 1:1-17. b. God's wrath against sinners is righteous 1:18-3:20. c. Saving righteousness of God 3:21-4:25. d. Hope is a result of righteousness by faith 5:1-8:39. e. God's righteousness to Israel and the Gentiles 9:1-11:36. f. God's righteousness in everyday life 12:1-15:13. 7) God's righteousness seen in the establishment of churches among the Gentiles and faithfulness of believers 15:14-16:23.) Summary of the Gospel of God's righteousness 16:25-27.

The historical information comes from *The Book of Romans* by Jim McGuiggan and *Introduction to The New Testament* by Henry C. Thiessen. *Who's Who in the New Testament* by

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Ronald Brown.

The outline of Romans from *ESV Study Bible* printed by Crossway.

COLOSSAE

Rusty Moore

The church at Colossae was most likely founded around the middle of the 1st century AD when Paul was at Ephesus (see Acts 19:10). The church at Colossae was most likely not founded by Paul himself. Rather the church seems to have been established by Epaphras one of Paul's friends and close associates in preaching the gospel (Colossians 1:6-7; 2:1). Quoting from the Colossian letter 1:7 Paul, referring to the gospel, says *"just as you learned it from Epaphras..."* Epaphras is mentioned by name in the New Testament three times. In Colossians 1:7 he was described as *"our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our/your behalf."* In Colossians 4:12 he is mentioned as a *"bondslave of Jesus Christ."* We also see from this verse that he is from Colossae (*"Epaphras, who is one of your number"*). Since Epaphras is not a Jewish name and, in 4:11, is not mentioned as one of those *"who are from the circumcision"* we can conclude that he was a Greek/Gentile. The only other mentioning of Epaphras by name is found in Philemon 1:23 where Paul calls him *"my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus."* Since Paul wrote Colossians and Philemon most likely while in his first Roman imprisonment, we can surmise that Epaphras, for a time, was also a prisoner of Rome. Tradition records

Epaphras eventually returning to Colossae where he remained a faithful servant, and later became a martyr for the cause of Christ.

The city of Colossae was located 12 miles from Hierapolis and 10 miles from Laodicea and all were in the region of Phrygia (southwest corner of modern Turkey). Churches were established in all three of these cities possibly by Epaphras. It can be noted that in approximately 60 AD a severe earthquake occurred which significantly damaged each of these cities, especially Laodicea.

Not unlike the community which resided in Colossae, the Colossian church probably included both Jews and Greeks. This church, like much of the region, was influenced by both Jewish and Greek religious and philosophical ideas & practices of the time. It is believed that Epaphras reported concerns for these false teachings directly to Paul (see 4:12-13), which resulted in his (Paul's) writing the letter to the Colossians.

The teachings of "Theosophy" (holding that God can only be known through mystical experiences), "Gnosticism" (only through attaining a secret or special knowledge can one find salvation and overcome the evil material, fleshly world), and "Mysticism" (belief that knowledge of God, spiritual truth and reality are obtained by one's personal insight, intuition, and experience) were commonplace in society and therefore were a threat to the churches in this region. These false teachings were often "add-ons" to Christ's gospel taught by Paul and his followers. This is why in Paul's letter to the Colossian brethren he describes the finality and perfection of Christ's revelation. Or in other words, noth-

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ing needs to be added to it !!

Note the following verses in his letter to the Colossians where it appears Paul is battling these false gnostic and mystic teachings: 2:2-4 "...attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument." 2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception..."

In addition, since Gnostics believed that flesh was evil, they therefore surmised that Jesus, who was deity, could not actually have lived as a man in a fleshly body. He would only "seemed" to have been human (Note 1 John 4:2-3).

Paul addresses this problem in the following verses:

2:9-10 "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete,"

Gnostic beliefs included the idea that one needed to have a special personal revelation or experience in order to acquire true spiritual knowledge. Angels were also believed to control certain realms and were therefore to be worshiped. Again, Paul addresses each of these false ideas.

2:18 "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,"

"Add-on ideas" to Christianity also exist-

ed with the Jewish false teachers who believed that a Greek would need to obey the Old Law (i.e. be circumcised) before becoming a Christian. Paul addresses this too:

2:11 "and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ;"

2:16 "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day"

2:14 "having cancelled out the certificate of death consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

Epaphras probably came to Paul in Rome as a result of concern for his fellow brethren's vulnerability to false teachers. However, it is evident by reading Paul's Colossian letter that these brethren had not yet succumbed. We can see this in 1:2 where Paul addresses them as "saints and faithful brethren in Christ..." In 1:3-4 Paul says "We give thanks to God,...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints;" In 1:5-6 Paul says the gospel ..."is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth;" Paul's letter to the Colossian brethren was certainly, in large part, a letter intended to admonish them to maintain their faith in Jesus Christ.

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A very applicable verse to them, and to us today, Paul says in Colossians 3:17 **“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”**

LAODICEA

Austin Caldera

Many of the early churches recorded in the New Testament remind us of the LORD’s people today. Each of them brings lessons to the table for us to reflect on. Most of these first-century churches had their good points and their weaknesses, with some having plenty of good points and others struggling with weaknesses greater in degree or number. I say “most” because the Bible preserves for us one church with no good points at all. That is the church at Laodicea, appearing in Chapter 3 of the Book of Revelation. God’s scathing review of this church should make us sit up, take notice, and carefully examine ourselves.

One of the schoolteachers I had growing up would frequently tell us that there were lessons to be gleaned from everyone around us, even if the only lesson from a given person was “how not to live your life.” In their roles as Christians, the Laodiceans fit that bill. And perhaps the scariest part is, the Laodiceans didn’t earn this title by actively opposing God or otherwise acting against Him. Instead, Revelation 3:15 tells us how God, in His infinite wisdom, perceived the Laodiceans: *“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot.”* The Laodiceans weren’t “cold” in their relationship with God; instead, they were worse. *“Would that you were either*

cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.” Rev 3:15–16 The Laodiceans were totally devoid of the love and passion they had (presumably) once had for God. They were just coasting along. Such an attitude is repulsive to God. Even worse, as the Laodiceans drifted along, they thought to themselves, *“I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,”* Rev 3:17, but unbeknownst to them, God viewed them as *“wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”* Rev 3:18 As Christians, we are expected to have zeal for the LORD and His kingdom (see, e.g., Titus 2:14; John 2:14–17; Gal 4:18 NKJV). One lesson here—and a fearsome one, at that—is that being lukewarm about God can be just as detrimental to our spiritual condition as being His enemy.

Another point from this text is that the LORD knows His people’s circumstances and what messages to use to reach them. Jesus told plenty of parables about agriculture, shepherds, vineyards, and similar topics because the people of that time understood them. In Revelation chapter 3, God is doing the same for the Laodiceans! One of the most memorable tidbits in Steven’s Revelation class concerns the water in Laodicea and two neighboring cities. Hierapolis to the north had prized hot springs. Colossae to the south (geographically close enough for Paul to mention that the Laodicean brethren in Colossians 4:12–17 had fresh, cold water. Laodicea, meanwhile, had lukewarm water that was not just unappealing but utterly useless—except to induce vomiting. By metaphorically saying He will spit the Laodiceans out of His mouth, God’s message to them is, “You’re acting just like your town’s dis-

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gusting water, and you need to shape up.” The Laodiceans, who lived near that water every day, could not possibly have missed the point unless they did so willfully.

But there are encouraging lessons to be learned from God’s message to the Laodiceans, too. Even though they have fallen this far, God has not given up on them. Instead, He advises them to buy from Him *“gold refined by fire, so that [they] may be rich.”* This is ironic, considering the Laodiceans already thought they were rich—but how wrong they were. Similarly, the LORD offered them “white garments” to cover their nakedness and “salve to anoint [their] eyes” so that they could see. The LORD’s counsel is a direct reference to verse 17: the Laodiceans thought they were rich and needed nothing, but God considered them poor, blind, and naked. Yet in the next breath, God extends to the Laodiceans the solutions for those troubles—refined gold to solve their spiritual poverty, pure clothes to cover their nakedness, and ointment for their eyes to restore their sight (although the Laodiceans, as with us, were still expected to walk according to a nobler guide: faith (2 Cor 5:7)). This should give us hope; while none of us are perfect, God understands that and gives us what we need each step of the way. *See also 2 Chr 16:9.*

In verse 19, God also assures the Laodiceans that His stern rebuke is out of love: *“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”* This conveys the same idea as does Proverbs 13:24: *“Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.”* If God was done with the Laodiceans, He would

have left them to their own devices. He did not do that. Instead, He showed His love for them with His admonishment. Although God will not send a new revelation with a message for the North Beach Church of Christ today, He loves us just the same and providentially provides us with what we need. *See Rom 8:28.*

One final illustration from the Laodiceans pertains to our own country today. In the first century, Laodicea was an unusually affluent city located on major Roman trade routes and hosting substantial textile production and banking business. The Laodiceans thought they were rich because, physically, they probably were. But spiritually, they were in dire condition. The parallel jumps off the page. The United States of America may well be the most materially prosperous country in world history. We have three meals a day, houses with all sorts of amenities, wardrobes unknown in past eras, cars, bank accounts, and perhaps retirement savings or investments, too. But physical wealth has no correlation to spiritual status. There are many in America who have great material possessions but are lost in sin. We should take heed from both the Laodiceans and our physical compatriots and learn how not to live our lives. Each of us has to work out our own salvation (Phil 2:12) and will answer to God on the last, great day (2 Cor 5:10). Are we hot for the LORD?

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