

Our Chief Aim: To Glorify God

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To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.? {2Pe 3:18} (b)

Sometimes we pass over the salutations and closings of the various New Testament letters, thinking them more a conventional form than communicating a meaningful spiritual truth. We tend to think of them as little more than the "Hello" that we speak when our phone rings and we answer it. Actually these segments of New Testament letters often contain invaluable gems of truth. If regarded, they enrich our spiritual lives and round out our experience with greater depth and balance.

In today's world of the "church growth movement" numbers sometimes are viewed with far greater significance than any other single factor in a church's existence. "How many members does your church have?" may be the first question someone asks. We should not adopt a "smaller is better" attitude; no one can read the book of Acts with an open mind and reach such a conclusion. The more significant factor in the book of Acts is that greater numbers and deeper faith should go hand in hand. When churches boast of large numbers, but they must constantly work to get new people attending to replace the people who quietly walk out the back door and don't come back, depth of faith is not a factor in the church's program. While the pastors of mega-churches are hosting seminars on church growth, factors that build spiritual depth, growth in faith rather than growth in numbers, are largely neglected. If you listen to the dominant themes of these seminars, the church's chief aim is to grow larger. Any other objective is viewed as secondary.

This view faces a rather questionable standing when compared with New Testament teaching on the church's chief objective and purpose. The various editions of Reformed tradition catechisms all begin with the same primary question.

"Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of man?"

"A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." (Westminster Greater Catechism)

Twenty first century Western Christianity pays superficial lip service to this theme, but it has essentially neglected any effective priorities that actually address giving glory to God. The shallowness of contemporary Western Christianity predicts that our country's Christianity will follow the rather pathetic pattern of European Christianity. In most European countries today, despite their rich Christian heritage, Christianity is tolerated as a marginal and irrelevant factor in the greater culture. Our country is barely behind that trend, if at all. While most of the men who framed the Constitution stood tall as believing Christians (Many of them were actually leading ministers in their denominations.), Bible believing Christians in today's political culture are labeled as "Conservative, right wing, radical extremists" by the leading figures in the nation's political establishment. The only way that Christians will ever regain their former honor in our culture is for them to return to their Biblical roots and purpose. Giving glory to God, and all the factors of commitment and conduct that makes that objective possible, is the only strategy that will restore robust and relevant Christianity to our culture. The battle for our culture will not be won by conservatives or by Christian political activists, though either or both groups might well be used by God to effect positive change. The battle will be won by God, by divine intervention, not by anyone's political strategy.

Christians who make their boasts of faith, but whose lives before people outside their churches are little different, if at all, from non-Christians will not make a difference in the culture. In fact they are part of the marginalized problem for Christianity in our culture for they are marginal Christians at best.

In 1Pe 3:15 Peter gives us the secret to both effective evangelism and effective apologetics (presenting a convincing case for your faith to those outside the faith). Most Bible readers miss the central point of the lesson. Peter directs us to sanctify the Lord in our hearts, not just in our outward appearance. Then he directs us to be ready, fully equipped and studiously prepared, to give answers to those who ask us to explain our "hope." The only effective Christian is the believer whose life is so different from the ordinary that it compels those who know this believer to ask the question, "What makes you tick? Why are you so different from other people who also say that they are Christians?" If we aren't living so differently as to compel the question, we are not prepared either for evangelism or for apologetics. The Christian who lives such a distinguished life is living for the glory of God, not for the glory of his/her personal reputation.

We have spent several months going over one of the most difficult and challenging letters of the New Testament. From beginning to end, Peter's aim was to equip us to recognize and to resist false teachers. In the first chapter of his letter he sets the positive stage for this task. Biblically, the positive comes first, preparing us to resist the negative. An energized and informed faith is the only effective insulation from false teaching. Energy alone is the false teacher's best tool. Blind or uninformed energy leaves us vulnerable to the false teacher's strategies. He will mesmerize the energetic, but uninformed, believer with his false message and get them energized in his teachings.

Dr. J. P. Moreland wrote a book a few years ago regarding the crying need for Western Christians to worship, and love, our God with all our minds, not just all our hearts. He accurately notes that many Christians consistently check their minds at the door of the church every Sunday morning. They take their emotions into the pew with them, but they leave their minds outside the church building. They react to the sermon, and often to their fellow-believers, from a basis of sentimentalism, of emotion, not of Biblical thought and knowledge. Many times during my years as a pastor I have counseled with believers who brought emotionally charged hurts to me regarding other believers. When analyzed, their hurt was far more imagined than real, and grew out of mindless Christianity. If you mention the requirement that Jesus placed on His followers to practice Mt 18, they simply respond with a blank "deer in the headlights" look. They don't have the slightest idea what Mt 18 means or how it applies to them and to their situation. They feel entirely free talking about other believers behind their back, a practice that Solomon in Proverbs calls backbiting and tersely condemns, but they never consider talking graciously and gently to the person who offended them.

These same people will listen to radio or television preachers more with their minds set on the appearance and speaking manners of the teacher than the content of his teaching. He can say just about anything he wishes and, if he said it with the right sentimental overtone, convince these people that he speaks directly from Scripture.

There can be no substitute for believers engaging their minds and their study time in Scripture, and taking their spiritually disciplined minds with them everywhere they go, even into the pew on Sunday morning.

Peter's next step in the second chapter was to confront the character and guile of the false teachers. He is direct and blunt with his assessment of their evil intentions.

Finally in the third chapter he gives us an example of their false teachings. In this example we see false teachers (I believe the scoffers of chapter 3 are the same people as the false teachers of chapter 2.) denying the Second Coming and the related final and epochal judgment that God will administer at the end. As an example of a similar contemporary teaching, I drew a number of specific parallels between these teachings and the teachings of extreme preterists of our time (the teaching that all Biblical prophecy, including end times prophecies, culminated with the Roman siege of Jerusalem in A. D. 60). I do not judge all preterists by this model, but I did offer specific points from a leading teacher from

that school who speaks regularly on a southern California radio station. At one time I held to a mild form of preterism, but I moved away from that school because of the unusually large number of adherents to this teaching who migrate to the extreme view that denies the Second Coming (though a follower of this philosophy would say that the "Second Coming" occurred at A. D. 70), any epochal divine judgment, general resurrection, and related other doctrines that have been held historically by the Christian community. Many other aberrant teachings could have also been singled out. The similarities between the error that Peter analyzed in this chapter and this teaching prompted my use of the preterist example.

May we find the Biblical knowledge and spiritual vitality to equip ourselves to be winsome and effective followers of our Lord, at the same time effectively resisting the perpetual flood of false teachings that confront conservative, historical Bible believers in our age and culture. Our greatest tool for effective Christianity appears in Peter's closing salvo to this letter. May we dedicate ourselves to the glory of God no less now than we hope to do in eternity, do nothing for personal glory or praise, invest the time, mental energy, and intellectual effort to know what the Bible teaches and to have it at our skillful and ready command when we encounter interested inquirers or antagonistic false teachers. To Him be the glory.

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