



TRUTH

“... thy word is truth” (John 17:17)

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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A STRONG CONGREGATION OF THE LORD?

After Moses died, when Jehovah spoke to Joshua to encourage him in his role as Israel's new leader, at least three times God told him to “be strong” (Joshua 1:6,7,9). The Lord gives the same instruction to His church. For instance, the saints in Ephesus were told to “. . . *be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might*” (Ephesians 6:10).

While some 1st-century congregations struggled, other “*churches were strengthened in the faith . . .*” (Acts 16:5). That statement both excites and challenges us. How great that God's people were growing stronger. It shows us that it *can* be done. It did not happen by accident then, and it will not take place by accident in our generation, either.

Being a strong local church begins with having the proper mindset. In the verses quoted above, we have seen that those who are truly strong are described as (1) strong “in the Lord” and (2) strong “in the faith.” That is talking about *spiritual* strength, brethren. Such strength is not based on a congregation's material facilities, attendance, contribution, or the number of activities available to the members. Yes, it is true that strong children of God will be faithful in attendance, give sacrificially, and be active in the work of the church. However, we must always recognize the truth that a church might have multitudes attend its services and give lots of money, yet still be a weak congregation in God's sight. Please, please, spare me and do not sing the praises of big groups that do not respect the authority of the Bible! King Jeroboam brought in big crowds with his golden calf worship (1 Kings 12), but his actions did not please the Lord. Let us not miss this truth: numbers for attendance, giving, and activities do not guarantee spiritual strength.

The strength of a local church comes from individual members. As individual members of the body grow, the body grows. Strong churches give emphasis to individuals growing through Bible study and prayer (1 Peter 2:2; Philippians 4:6,7).

Strong local churches give emphasis to making diligent effort. Being satisfied with mediocrity is not an option in our service to the Master. Only those that *really want* to be strong will be strong, and only those that *sincerely desire* to grow will do so. 2 Peter 1:5-11 records the Lord's plan for individual spiritual growth and strength. It begins and ends with “diligence” (1:5,10). The Christians in

Laodicea were not strong and were not growing because they did not really care (Revelation 3:16,17).

Strong churches keep the Bible in the forefront. Strong congregations are Bible-emphasizing, Bible-studying, Bible-teaching, Bible-respecting, and Bible-defending. In short, strong local churches are people of the Book. They preach the word (2 Timothy 4:2). They do so in a kind fashion, but they make no apologies for God's truth. Their “Bible classes” are times of intense Bible study and not endless ramblings about self-helps or personal experiences that are of no benefit to the soul.

Every strong congregation emphasizes holy living. Keeping ourselves “*unspotted from the world*” is a key component of faithful living (James 1:27). Strong churches understand that, so they steadfastly teach on purity, moral issues, and not being worldly-minded (James 4:4; Romans 12:1,2).

Strong churches have the trait of keeping their focus on the mission of the church. Our Lord came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). His spiritual body, the church, needs to have as its major objective the saving of souls: reaching out with the gospel to the lost (Mark 16:15,16) and then building up those that are in the Christ to get them ready to go to heaven. Strong churches do not lose sight of the purpose of their existence: God is to be glorified in His church (Ephesians 3:21). Brethren, I can do without instruction about how to feel good about myself; show me how to overcome temptation and deal with sin! I do not need special sessions on how to paint; teach me how to live like Jesus! Don't arrange classes to show me how to play a game; train me to communicate the gospel to lost people!

Strong churches have strong leadership. In the Old Testament, we see the general principle that, as went the leaders, so went God's people. The same is true in the church. The apostle Paul exhorted elders from Ephesus to be watchful and diligent in carrying out their duty to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28-32). No congregation can reach its potential unless it has righteous men out in front, leading the way by their faith and commitment to doing things the way that the Lord wants them done.

Let us all trust in God with our whole hearts (Proverbs 3:5) and strive to strengthen the local church of which we are members.

-- Roger D. Campbell

LESSONS FROM THE VICTORY OF THE ISRAELITES AT JERICHO

After the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered into the land of Canaan, the first city that they attacked and conquered was Jericho. The history of their great victory at Jericho is recorded in Joshua chapters six and seven. Since this is recorded in the Bible "*for our learning*" (Romans 15:4), it is worth our time and effort to seek out some lessons.

Jericho was a gift from God. According to the Lord's own words to His servant Joshua (Joshua 1:2,3,6), He gave the Israelites the land of Canaan. He gave them vineyards, fields, and houses that did not belong to them – all of these were a gift from the Lord.

Concerning the city of Jericho specifically, God also told Joshua, "*See! I have given Jericho into your hand, its king, and the mighty men of valour*" (Joshua 6:2). If God gave them this city, then it was a gift from Him. But, to say that it was a gift does not mean that there were no conditions which had to be met in order for the children of Israel to receive it. The Israelites must obey the Lord's commands. Then, and only then, would He give them the city of Jericho.

Today, we can say that the salvation which we receive through Jesus is also a gift, just as Jericho was a gift to the Israelites. "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Romans 6:23). It is also written, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God*" (Ephesians 2:8). So, we are saved by God's wonderful grace and the salvation that we receive is a gift from the Almighty. But, this great gift is conditional. We receive it only when do the Father's will, that is, we are saved by His grace only when we act according to the conditions that He has set forth in the Bible. "*And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him*" (Hebrews 5:9). This passage plainly shows that Jesus saves those who obey Him. Conclusion: obedience to the Christ is necessary in order to receive God's gift of salvation.

God instructed Israel to use a "strange" method of attack. What was the plan? God commanded the Israelites to march around the city of Jericho for six days, one time each day. He then altered the plan for the 7th day. That day He wanted Israel to compass the city seven times, then the priests were to blow their trumpets. Following that, all of the people should shout with a great shout (Joshua 6:3-5). That was God's mode of attack. Has such a plan been used often in man's warfare throughout history? It has never been repeated after Jericho! It was unique, it was special, and to many it appears to be strange. But here is a lesson that we must never forget: yes, many times men consider God's instructions or actions as strange, but everything that God does and says is right, every time! (Psalm 33:4). Therefore, we must never doubt or question His ways. Again we read, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways my ways,*

says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are my ways higher than your ways, And my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9).

In Egypt, during the last plague that God brought on that country, the only firstborn children that He spared were those inside houses where there was blood on the doorpost (Exodus 12). God later used an artificial serpent to heal those who were bitten by snakes (Numbers 21). He also cleansed a man of his leprosy only after he had dipped seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5). God now saves men through the preaching of the cross of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:18-23). Many look at these truths, and because they are not able to see some logical connection between God's instructions and the blessings that He gives to those who obey Him, they reject God's way as foolishness.

God does not need our advice, our philosophies, our wisdom, or our logic. As our Creator and Savior, He shows us the good way – the right way, and the only way that leads to heaven. It is up to us to decide if we will accept His way and live by it. Are you and I prepared to accept the will of Jehovah and act by faith, just like the Israelites did at the city of Jericho?

By faith the Israelites marched around Jericho. Joshua told the children of Israel how God wanted them to attack Jericho. To their credit, in this case rather than respond by murmuring, they did exactly what God told them to do (Joshua 6:8-16,20). They demonstrated a great faith, as it is written, "*By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days*" (Hebrews 11:30). Just why did the Israelites compass Jericho a total of thirteen times during those seven days? Simply because that is what the Lord commanded them to do! What a strong faith. God caused the walls of Jericho to fall, just like He had promised. When did that occur? Only when the Israelites fully obeyed His commands. Again, we see that they received this gift (the city of Jericho) only when they believed and obeyed the will of God.

What kind of faith must you and I have in order to please the Lord? A living, active, obedient faith that works by love (Galatians 5:6). Just as the children of Israel conquered Jericho, and later all of Canaan, we, too, can be conquerors today through faith. ". . . *And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith*" (1 John 5:4). Jesus once asked His apostles, "*Where is your faith?*" (Luke 8:25). Let each of us be prepared at all times to answer that question by showing our faith in action (Mark 2:5).

Under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites attacked and defeated Jericho over 3000 years ago, long before any of us was born. Yet, there are some important, fundamental lessons that we can learn from the Bible's record of that historic event. May the Lord help us to see those lessons and to take them seriously.

-- Roger D. Campbell

WHY DON'T WE PLAN SPECIAL DAYS FOR BAPTISMS?

The church bulletin for Sunday 31 October included this announcement: "On Saturday 15 January, there will be a special event at the church building. On that day, please make plans to come join in the special celebration that has been planned. Mr. and Mrs. Lee, frequent visitors at our assemblies, have decided to be baptized together on that day. Please be present to support them."

What do you think about such an announcement? [Note: It is not a genuine quote from a bulletin. I am only using it as an illustration]. In some locations, one well-known denomination has the practice of designating two days per year as "baptism days." Ponder this question: What is there in the New Testament that convinces you that it is right for the church to arrange for baptisms to be carried out only on special days of the year?

When religious groups designate in advance certain days as "baptism days," what does that show about their attitude toward the necessity of water baptism? Listen. If I am the only one that witnesses a person badly injured in an accident on 1 December, but I tell that person that I will not call for medical assistance until March of the following year, you would not get the impression that I thought the person needed immediate medical attention, right? In the same manner, if a religious group tells a person that their next baptism day is scheduled for a time several months later, that sends a message loud and clear: there is no rush for you to be baptized. Any pre-planned baptisms like I have noted are clear, clear indicators that the group(s) practicing such do not believe that a person is lost before being baptized. They deny the Bible teaching that baptism is to be for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Their teaching and practice are both false.

Suppose we are not talking about a group baptism, but only one individual. Question: What if a prospect says he wants to obey the gospel and admits that he could do it today, but he has personal reasons for preferring to delay until ten days from now? What about setting an evening next week as the time to baptize him? Do you ever recall reading about such a practice in the Book of Acts? Me neither. What we *do* see in the Book of Acts is this: when lost people heard the gospel, believed it, and were ready to obey it, then they did not delay. No setting a date four months away. No waiting until a large group of people was ready to be immersed at the same time. No waiting until grandparents returned from a vacation. No waiting from Thursday until Sunday. And, no putting it off for 36 hours. Brethren, read the Book of Acts and you will see example after example of people being baptized without delay (I mean, of course, people who understood that they were lost and had already decided to obey the truth). Look at them: Acts 2 – about 3000 on "the same day" (Acts 2:38,41); Acts 8 – the eunuch did so without delay; Acts 16 – the jailer and family baptized after midnight; Acts 22:16 – Saul of Tarsus was urged not to delay.

The young man was nearly 15 years old at the time. I was so thrilled when he called to tell me that he had just been baptized into the Christ. I was over 11,000 kilometers away, but I was so happy for him. You see, it was our second son, Jacob. I was planning to be back with my family in a couple of weeks, so shouldn't he have waited on his dad to be present? No! I am so proud

of him for choosing to follow Jesus. I am equally proud that he did not delay in having his sins washed away.

"But do you think the Lord would let a person die if that person sincerely wanted to be baptized?" I know of at least two people in my lifetime who died while they were waiting to be baptized. It happens. Delay is foolish. On our part, setting a special future time to baptize someone is more than foolish. It is just not the Bible way.

I sometimes hear of members of the church making plans to go sometime in the future to take a family member hundreds of kilometers in order to be baptized in a certain place or by a certain person. Brethren, I do not understand such an approach. Why are we risking someone's soul by waiting for weeks?! Why are we risking someone's soul by traveling several hours when the baptism could be done quickly close to home? If it is my intent to baptize someone in a few weeks' time, then *I* must not think he is lost between now and then. And, if I can convince a person to wait for a few weeks, then *he* must not think that he is lost between now and then! Make no mistake about it: forgiveness of sins is in the Christ (Ephesians 1:7), and the only way to get into Him is via water baptism (Romans 6:3-5). Thus, a sinner who has not yet been baptized is lost. Why, then, would we circle dates on the calendar for future baptisms?

Here is a gentle reminder. Baptisms are not for the benefit and pleasure of those who are eye-witnesses to them. When only one person is baptized, it is not a "family activity" that requires the presence of all family members in order to have special significance and be valid. Baptisms are not staged events for those that watch and take photos. Sure, it is pleasant to have people present to support the one(s) being baptized, but let us keep the emphasis where it needs to be: baptism is a personal matter between the lost person and the Lord Who died for Him. Did the eunuch from Ethiopia wait until he returned home to be baptized in order that more people could be present? No. He was baptized when he learned the truth, understood that he was lost, and desired to obey the gospel (Acts 8:34-39).

If a person wants to delay or put off being baptized, then the bottom line is, he/she is not really ready to obey the gospel. Again, the Book of Acts shows us that water baptism is not something to be taken lightly or delayed once a person has made the decision to follow the Christ. We preach that Jesus could come at any moment (Mark 13:32-35). We teach that life is uncertain, like a vapor that comes and then vanishes out of sight (James 4:13,14). We preach that water baptism is a condition of salvation (Mark 16:16). But, does our practice support our teaching? In practice, we sometimes set days and times to baptize people. On Tuesday night we agree with a prospect to baptize him on Sunday morning. Why?! What happened to the message that people are *lost* until they are baptized? What happened to *the urgency*? What happened to the truth that Jesus could come at any moment? What happened to the truth that a person's life could end unexpectedly at any time? I personally refuse to arrange a time to baptize a lost person on some future day. Why? I do not believe it is a biblical practice.

-- Roger D. Campbell

1 Thessalonians 5:14 – FOUR EXHORTATIONS FOR ALL CHRISTIANS

“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). These are words of exhortation – they have the feel of Paul calling the saints to come to his side to hear his beseeching, begging, or entreating.

The fact that they are addressed in general to “brethren” clearly shows that these are teachings that are intended for every Christian. The message of this verse is not limited to elders, deacons, preachers, and Bible class teachers. Because it is for every single person in the Lord’s body, each of us needs to listen carefully to the message in order to understand it, then proceed to make the proper application in our lives.

In our text, there are four specific instructions. In each of these instructions, there are two parts: (1) the action that is to be taken, plus (2) the people with whom we are to take such action. Let us have a look.

Warn those that are unruly – The Greek word from which we get the word “warn” means “to admonish, warn, exhort” [Thayer, word 3560]; “to put in mind, to caution or reprove gently, admonish, warn” [Strong]. “Unruly” indicates “not keeping order . . . it was especially a military term, denoting not keeping rank, insubordinate” [Vine]. It simply means one that is out of step with God’s will.

It is an undeniable truth that some saints become disorderly. They are out of step with the Lord’s instructions, and thus acting as disobedient children. God calls on His church to take action – not just sit idly by and observe their path to destruction, and not just say, “Well, we all make mistakes. They will probably get things straightened out one of these days.” Our Lord says to get up and do something – go warn them! God did not ask us if we thought it is a good idea to warn unruly members of the church. He simply told us to do it. Modern psychologists may suggest that warning people about their mistakes will damage their psyche and hurt their self-image, but the God Who has unlimited knowledge and wisdom (Psalm 147:5) prescribes such warning as being spiritually beneficial. God is correct in calling for such action, is He not? In fact, if our efforts to exhort and warn the unruly go unheeded, God’s command is to take the step of refraining to keep company with them (2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15). If we love the souls of our brothers and sisters, we will follow God’s guidelines.

Comfort the fainthearted – “Comfort” means to speak to someone in such a way that we attempt to encourage, console, admonition, and calm them [Thayer, word 3888]. That is what God’s people are supposed to do with those among us who are fainthearted (“feble-minded,” KJV).

Why would a Christian ever become fainthearted?

Some may have grown weary while doing good (Galatians 6:9). Some may have faced what they consider to be major disappointments in their lives. Others have lost loved ones; in some cases, it may be their last parent, last sibling, or an only child. There are those who are having serious struggles casting aside sinful habits and so they are on the verge of giving up. Whatever the cause of a brother or sister becoming mentally weary and perhaps even ready to “throw in the towel,” we need to be ready to give them moral support, encouragement, and comfort.

Uphold the weak – In this instance, to “uphold” (“support,” KJV) carries the idea of holding firmly to a person, cleaving to and paying heed to him [Thayer, word 472]. It certainly does not mean to endorse or support a person’s sins. In addition, we are not to “baby” a member of the church that knows the truth but willfully and openly lives in rebellion against it. Rather, it is the concept of helping hold a person up who is struggling under the weight of a burden.

In some areas of life, only the so-called fittest are allowed to participate. Only the most skilled can represent their school or nation’s sports teams. Those who “don’t make the cut” are cast aside. Not so in the church, where “*if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it*” (1 Corinthians 12:26). In the Olympics, if other athletes fall or become injured during the course of competition, the mentality of some is, “Too bad for them. That gives me a better chance to win.” In the Christian race, however, we do not rejoice when other saints become weak or fall. We stop to pick them up and do what we can to help move them forward. Why? Because we are family and we want what is best for *all* of God’s children – that is called “agape.”

Be patient with all – Longsuffering, that is the idea here, putting up with what goes on without losing our cool. The Bible says that we should bear with one another and forgive one another (Colossians 3:13). We are to demonstrate that approach with all, not just our best friends. It is, perhaps, one of the most challenging charges in the New Testament. Controlling our spirit and dealing rationally with others is no easy task. Yet, that is exactly what our Lord expects of us. The church is made up of people from different cultural and racial backgrounds, having differing customs, different family traditions, and sundry lifestyles. It is not always easy to understand and accept those whose appearance and approach varies from ours. But we expect *them* to do that when they deal with *us*, right?

May God help us to approach the four instructions of 1 Thessalonians 5:14 with both zeal and humility.

-- Roger D. Campbell

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