

## A New Community: “Having Favor with All the People”

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Searcy, Arkansas  
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### Scripture Reading

*“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47 ESV).*

I love the church of Christ. The church was God’s idea. We are the redeemed people of God, his adopted children, and the bride of Christ. And how does He see us? He presents the church “to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—holy and without (a single) blemish” (Eph 5:25-28).

Americans spend, on average, \$3,000-\$3800 on beauty products and services per person per year. Worldwide, the beauty industry rakes in over \$100 billion per year, and spend \$7.5 billion dollars on advertising. That means that if we were to find someone without a spot, or wrinkle or anything of the kind—without a single blemish—we’d have a \$100 billion dollar find, and everybody on earth would take notice.<sup>1</sup>

So, what does the world see when they look at us?

I remember the first time I heard this one: “why would I want to come to church? I already feel bad enough about myself.”

How about this one? Ever heard this one? “You’re the people who think you’re the only ones going to heaven?” I haven’t heard that one in years...thankfully.

How about this one that I heard from a fellow Christian—an elder’s daughter—married to a believer, and both of them are tremendously influential in helping hurting people. Here’s the line she told me: “Christians are the worst.”

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<sup>1</sup> Josh Howard, “The Ultimate List of Beauty Industry Stats (2023), March 23, 2023. <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/beauty-industry-stats>. See, for example, <https://www.statista.com/topics/3137/cosmetics-industry/#dossierKeyfigures>

All of this negativity is important to hear. I didn't make those lines up. They've been said by actual people. And they are borne out of experience with other Christians. This is the impression, in their minds, that we have left behind.

If you talk with them, you'll hear stories about door knocking lessons where they were introduced to a brutal and vindictive God. They will tell you about church leaders who abused them or covered up the abuse done to them. They will tell you about preachers who deceived them into thinking that if they gave enough money to the church, God would cure their child of cancer. They will tell you about Christians in their neighborhood who advertise everything they are against but have no idea what they are for. They will tell you about people who are quick with a verse to condemn the whole world, but when they get into financial trouble, get sick, or find out about their own pregnant teen, grace goes out the same window as does their convictions.<sup>2</sup>

Oh the quick and easy response is just that—quick and easy! Not all Christians are like that. Don't judge us by the small percentage of us you have known, there's lots more of us and most are really good. Or don't judge us at all by our actions, it's our master Jesus you should be focusing on. Yes—but Jesus made it abundantly clear that we are His body. We are his hands and feet. And your life may be the only Bible some people ever read. So let's not be too quick and easy in our response.

A number of years ago, Pew Research came out with the results of a poll that says good news: most Americans rate Christians warmly.<sup>3</sup> With a 0 being “absolute cold” and 100 being “red hot”, the results put us around 60 or higher, which means Americans think of Christians warmly. But I'd like to pour some cold water on that for just a minute.

To start, this was in 2014. A lot can happen in 10 years, don't you think? For another thing, who's taking this poll? You know that the number of Americans who self-describe themselves as Christian is a pretty high percentage, right? Well, Pew Research admits that groups tend to be rated most positively by their own members. So you take out Christians rating other Christians, and what do you find? The answer is discouraging: Jews rate evangelical Christians at a 34; atheists at a 28. The latest poll I could find of “young” outsiders—the non-Christian youth of America—rated Christians of any kind at 16, and Christians like us at a 3.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rubel Shelly & John York, *The Jesus Community: A Theology of Relational Faith* (Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> “How Americans Feel About Religious Groups,” Pew Research Center Report (July 16, 2014). <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>

<sup>4</sup> “Us” = Evangelicals. Cited in David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), pp. 24-25.

And then there's how some Christians really view other Christians when the pollsters aren't asking, sometimes with fear, sometimes with suspicion. When you put it all together, "thinking well of Christians" doesn't seem to be a very popular thing in the country with the highest total number of self-described Christians in the world. The numbers are inevitably even worse were you to poll the rest of the world.

Why do you think that is? The answer is obvious, isn't it? For many, Christianity—and the Christians they've experienced—are offensive.

## OFFENSE

Folks, the gospel itself can be offensive; in fact it is offensive. It was no less than the Apostle Paul himself who spoke of the "offense of the cross" (Gal 5:11), and he says the offense of the cross has not and should not be removed or abolished. The cross challenges everything about me, and everything about you. If "offense" means to hold resentment for a perceived insult or disregard for one's own standards or set of principles, then the gospel, by definition, offends. It says your heart has become wicked and vile, you are lost in your sin, and you are not and cannot be your own God, ruler, or king. That is an offensive message.

Isaiah 8:14 is quoted twice in the New Testament—the one that says "he will become a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling." When Peter quotes it, he says God laid that stumbling block of offense, and they—the offended people—they stumble "because they disobey the word" (1 Peter 2:8; see also Rom 9:33). This is seen so clearly in Acts 4 and in Acts 5 where the priests, including the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees are greatly annoyed and filled with rage by the teaching of the gospel (Acts 4:1ff; 5:17ff). Peter tells his readers not to be surprised at the fiery trial that is coming, as if something strange were happening to you. In fact, "if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God" for it (1 Pet 4:12, 16). If you are insulted for the name of Christ, says Peter, you are blessed (1 Pet 4:14). Jesus predicted this in language echoed by Matthew and Mark and Luke: they will persecute you, despise you, arrest you, and kill you; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake (see Matt 5:11-12; 10:22; 24:9; Mk 13:13; Lk 21:17). When you go out in the name of Christ with the gospel of Christ announcing good news to captives, it will be heard as bad news by captors. When you go out in the name of Christ with the gospel of Christ announcing good news to the hurting outsiders in need of healing, it will be heard as bad news to prideful insiders who think they have nothing to cure.

Yes. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross of Jesus Christ, is an offensive thing. Of course it is. It does more than insult my view of myself. If accepted, it leads to suffering and death.

But outside the necessary offense of the cross, Christians are different from the rest of the world in this: we are called to offer no additional offense.

We are called to this for practical reasons. When people are offended, they become both hard to work with and impossible to win over. How does the writer in Proverbs put it? “A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city” (Prov. 18:19).

But our calling can be found at a much deeper level. We follow the example of our Lord. When Jesus was in Capernaum, he was questioned about the two-drachma temple tax being levied at that time. Jesus makes it clear that he has problems with the way the temple system was being used (to rob the poor rather than to serve them) and what he says there deserves much study and attention at a later sermon. But after he shares his thoughts on the issue—and his conviction that such a tax should not be levied on him or his followers, Jesus tells them to go catch a fish which will miraculously have a shekel in its mouth to cover the tax for them all. And he said, Do this, so as “not to give offense to them” (Matt 17:27).

This non-offensive mindset, seen first in the lifestyle of our Lord and Master, Jesus, became codified into a New Testament command given by Paul to the Christians at Corinth. He said, “do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do... (so) that they may be saved” (1 Cor. 10:31-33).

There were no “atheists” in the first century—everybody believed in some god. So when you say “Jews, and Greeks, and the church”, you means “everybody”! Everybody! Give no offense to those Jews or atheists who rate you at a 28-34 on the favorability scale.

Paul doesn’t offer a command without doing all he can to live it out himself first. So in Acts 25, Paul says to Festus, the Roman governor of Judea, that his life, his actions, and his preaching gave no offense against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar (Acts 25:8).

That’s not what we do, says Paul. That’s not who we are.

## **FAVOR**

In fact, just the opposite is what God deeply desires from his people. Christians, say our author, Luke, are to be at the top of everyone's favorability rating.

Men and women are singled out and highlighted for finding favor with God. We see it in Luke chapter 1 where Mary is told by the angel she is highly favored—she has found favor with God (Luke 1:30). We see it in Acts 7, where Stephen tells us King David found favor in the sight of God (Acts 7:46). But the most memorable text we all learned when we were just little children is Luke 2:52. “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God...and with people (Lk 2:52).

And this model—Jesus himself—become the model in almost the exact parallel text to the number in Luke's second volume. With Luke 2:52 on his mind and heart, Luke writes Acts 2:47 and says the body of Christ known as the early church did everything “with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.”

You have to try real hard not to see the parallel. Luke is copying and pasting the story of Jesus onto the life of the church. He does it again in Stephen's speech in Acts 7 where, yes, King David “found favor with God,” but also Joseph was granted “favor and wisdom before Pharaoh” (Acts 7:10 & 46). Wisdom and favor with God and with people. This was always the story. This was always our calling.

And when Jesus walks into the synagogue to preach his first sermon, he reads from the scroll of Isaiah which says “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim (this to be) the year of the Lord's favor” (Lk 4:19). When he sat down, he looked at everyone in the room and said “that's today.”

Do you remember how that story ends? The people are really excited, until Jesus explains that when God shows up to announce his favor, it comes not to those we think of as insiders, but to those we would think of as outsiders. The year of the Lord's favor is the year of God favoring and being favored by the very people who couldn't have thought less of the Jewish people, and the Jewish people couldn't have thought less of: the Gentiles, the Samaritans, the tax-collectors, the prostitutes, people made in the image of God and being pursued by the love of God.

Luke has to remember writing that story when he writes Acts 2:47. The text says the early church was having favor with all “the people.” Who is he talking about? When I read through the gospel of Luke, I notice that “the people” tends to mean “the people of God” in a religious sense. Is that what he means here? That the church got along with everybody else in the church? If that is all he means, it would still be challenging to us, wouldn't it? It would still put us to shame, given the jokes, the one-liners, the put-

downs, the fear or ridicule we often hear or (God forbid) use when describing other churches or preachers who are different from us in any way. That alone would be a word from the Lord to us, wouldn't it? But Luke borrows that language from the Old Testament. "The people", even in a religious sense, means the covenant people—Israel. Let me say that again. Most of the time, when Luke uses the phrase "the people," he means it in the religious sense of "the covenant people of God, Israel." So let's expand that circle just a bit more. What if the early church, following the model of Jesus Christ, had favor not only with each other, but with all their fellow Jews—the ones just 50 days prior they stood next to, hurling rocks and insults at Jesus on the cross? The same ones who just a few chapters later will try to arrest, beat, and even kill Christians. The modern group that rates evangelical Christians on a scale of 1 to 100 at a 34. But I want to draw the circle even wider. The religious sense of "the covenant people of God" goes all the way back to a sentiment given to Abraham in Genesis. That through a certain group of people, he would bless the whole world, and one day graft in all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus, opening the flood gates to Gentiles as well. When Paul says "give no offense to Jews, Gentiles, or the church" he means to include everybody! And in Acts 2:39, Peter says that the gospel call includes everybody! And in Acts 5, the Apostles are doing signs and wonders, and people took notice. Look at verse 13: "None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem" (Acts 5:13).

It just stands to reason, that Luke wants us to imagine the early church, in the mold of Jesus Christ, praising God, and having favor with all whom the Lord our God is trying to call. Who do you think that would exclude?

### **Living Witness**

I have long been interested in what is called "Christian apologetics"—that is giving a reason or a defense for what we believe. Did you know that some early Christians wrote some books on apologetics? They gave a defense for Christianity. And the Christian apologetics of the first three centuries is strikingly different from the kind of apologetics I was taught growing up. For them, Christian apologetics starts with the Christian life as a living witness.

For example, when the gospel is preached, it will offend. So when you get called before governors or put on the witness stand, those who speak against you must have to make up stories—false accusations—because there is nothing about your life that would offend.

Paul tells Festus that Christians are not a threat to their system; in fact, Christians make the best citizens. And why wouldn't we? Not only are Christians not offensive, we also are not easily offended! In fact, to go further, Christians are called not to be offended!

Christians are called to overlook an offense and let it go (Prov 17:9; 19:11); for “hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses” (Prov 10:12).

Listen to a letter written by a Christian in the second century giving a defense of the Christian way of life:

*“The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is ... [this]: Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh; their days are passed on earth, but their citizenship is above in the heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives they transcend the laws. They show love to all men—and all men persecute them. They are misunderstood, and condemned; yet by suffering death they are quickened into life. They are poor, yet making many rich; lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance ... They repay [curses] with blessings, and abuse with courtesy.”<sup>5</sup>*

It was J. W. McGarvey, in his commentary on Acts, who said “That they had ‘favor with all the people,’ was a natural consequence of the admirable lives which they led.”<sup>6</sup> Or, as another commentator puts it, “their presence and their witness were infectious.”<sup>7</sup>

I’m so tired of our response to people who don’t like Christians being any attempt to draw the attention away from us. That’s not what we are called to do. Instead, we are called to live lives so full of glad and generous hearts, so like the Master, that people can’t help but be attracted to the beauty of Christ by what is seen in me. Especially toward outsiders.

We can be so quick to turn to Jesus’ warnings, his diatribes, his overturning the tables and calling people a brood of vipers and never stop to realize that the audience for those messages were almost never the outsiders—the lost Gentiles who never knew our God; they were the self-described insiders: the ones who thought they were safe in the arms of God.

In his book *Lifestyle Evangelism*, Joseph C. Aldrich says this:

*“Christ’s bride is the church—people in relationship to one another. God has designed your relationships with other Christians as the primary contest [sic] in which His nature surfaces and becomes an observable, tangible phenomenon. Not many nonbelievers are reading the*

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<sup>5</sup> Athenagoras, *Epistle to Diognetus*, in *Early Christian Writings* (London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 244-45.

<sup>6</sup> J. W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of the Apostles* (repr. Gospel Light Publishing Co, 1950), p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 163.

*revelation of God revealed in your life and relationships. Like it or not, Scripture calls us living epistles, read (as a book) by all men. We are literally 'Bible translators' for lost people.'*<sup>8</sup>

In other words, you may be the only Bible our neighbors ever read. You know and I know “there is no way to love Christ and not love his church.”<sup>9</sup> But they don't know that. We want people to love Christ. What Christ are they seeing in you and me? Christians are called to live “a life that needs God's love to explain itself.”<sup>10</sup>

So be winsome to win some.

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<sup>8</sup> Joe Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1981), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 408.

<sup>10</sup> “The greatest proof of God's love is a life that needs his love to explain it.” – Anonymous. Quoted in Shelly & York, p.18.