

Strong Tower Fellowship

A Place For All People

Position Mission And Vision

“...there was a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the lamb.”

~Revelations 7:9

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WELCOME

Thank you so much for your desire to be a part of Strong Tower Fellowship. During this New Member's Class, you will cover the nature, values, and mission of the church. As you go through the information covered in the class, I hope you will take to heart the following quote, "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things charity." We affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the atoning work of Christ on the cross, salvation by grace through faith, the inspiration of the scriptures, and the literal Second Coming of Jesus Christ makeup the essential, distinctive nature of Christianity. In regards to these essential doctrines there can be no conflicting opinions of those who call themselves true followers of Christ.

However, we do acknowledge that there are peripheral or non-essential doctrines, that are important, but not critical to the follower of Christ as it relates to our salvation. Some of these doctrines include the specific functions of women in ministry, the exact timing and nature of the Second Coming of Jesus, extent and use of certain spiritual gifts, the relationship between election and free-will in salvation, the mode of baptism, etc. While our church will be diligent to establish positions as it relates to these non-essentials we will not allow these peripheral doctrines to cause division within the church. We will accept into our body those who have differing views on the non-essential doctrines, but will not allow those of a different opinion to fracture the church. While we celebrate diversity along all lines (racial and theological), we will ultimately pursue the unity of the church.

Upon This Rock I Will Build My Church (Matthew 16:18) Section One

I. What Strong Tower Fellowship Believes

A. The Bible is Completely Accurate and Trustworthy

Jesus' scripture was the Old Testament. Jesus said, "The scripture cannot be broken" (that is, it cannot be emptied of its force by being proven false; John 10:35) for Jesus, whatever scripture says, God says (Matthew 15:4). And what God says is truth (John 17:17). Jesus was not simply saying nice things about the scriptures; He lived under their authority. He repelled Satan's temptations because He remained obedient to God's word. Three times He opposed Satan with "it is written" (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). For Strong Tower Fellowship to be faithful to Christ, as a body of believers, we must have a "high" view of the Bible. Christ calls us to Believe and obey what it says - even when it is not to our liking. Unfortunately, many churches have abandoned a belief in the complete trustworthiness of the Bible. When this happens, the churches foundations crumble. If we pick and choose what we accept or reject from the Bible, then we become the authority rather than holding the Bible as our authority. Then we have placed ourselves over God's word rather than under it (Romans 12:1-2; II Corinthians 10:5).

B. Sinners are Fully Sinful

By this, I do not mean no one ever does anything decent, or just, or moral, or kind. I do not mean every person is absolutely as evil in every way as he or she can possibly be. But I mean, every person is a sinner at the core of his or her being and that a part from Christ, sin rules his perspectives, motives, desires, and purposes. One might think Jesus would think more positively. But He said in teaching His disciples, "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children..." (Matthew 7:11). And that is all the more powerful because Jesus was not directly teaching about our nature there in this passage. He was teaching about another topic and He merely makes this aside; He reveals the assumption He makes about human nature, as though He takes it for granted and above argument: "If you then, being evil..."

Maybe you prefer something more direct. Another time Jesus taught: "for from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean" (Mark 7:21-23). If we take Jesus seriously, the ruck and muck that we feel, think, and do will never surprise us. If we have a high view of the Bible, we should have a low view of ourselves as sinners apart from God's grace. Many hold the view that "I sin therefore I am a sinner." That is, my act of sinning makes me a sinner. But that is not what Jesus says in Mark 7, "from within, out of men's hearts...." It is our corrupt nature that gives rise to the whole array of sinful acts. In short, "I am a sinner, therefore I sin." I am perverse at the core of my being and that gives rise to all kinds of evil.

C. God is Surely Big

We believe God is really big. This really big God is one God who reveals Himself as triune, that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is each fully and eternally God. When I say God is really big, I mean He is “sovereign,” that all things are under His sway - even falling sparrows (Matthew 10:29). But more, we believe God is so big that we would never come to Jesus in faith unless He brought us and made us able to come. You would think we were helpless, huh? True, says Jesus, for “no one is able to come to me unless the father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). It is those whom the Father gives to Jesus who will come to Jesus (John 6:37).

People do not come to Jesus because they think it is a good idea. If any of us ever trusts in Jesus it is only because the Father gives us to Jesus and brings us to Jesus. This is why salvation is a “gift” not a “reward” (Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 1:29). Some people love sweet tea and do not put ice in it because ice dilutes the tea. Such people will often put their tea in the refrigerator so it will emit full-body flavor. In this way it can be said they drink their ice tea straight.

When it comes to grace, one has to drink it straight. One cannot add anything to it. We are saved by grace and we cannot add anything to it. It is grace plus nothing - not grace plus my achievement, merits, works, or credentials; it is grace plus nothing. Grace must be sweet the way John Newton expressed it in his tradition: “Amazing grace how sweet the sound.” Our salvation must reflect the Alpha and Omega of a grace grip.

D. The Cross is Without Question, the Main Thing

Here we are at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus said His death was the reason He came: “for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). We are held as captives of sin, and Jesus’ death was the ransom price that brought our release from that bondage.

The devil kidnapped the human race and held it hostage. Psalm 85:10 states, “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” In eternity, God decided that the way to pay the ransom was not for God not to send someone, but for God to send Himself. That is what the incarnation is all about. God came from God; “the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory; the glory of the only begotten Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God had made a promise in Genesis 3:15, the first promise of redemption through Jesus Christ, the seed of a woman. A promissory note was presented once a year during the Day of Atonement; a lamb was slain as a sign of God’s forgiveness of the sins of the Israelites for the whole year and a foreshadowing of the lamb of God who would come to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). On Friday, the God who came in the flesh in the incarnation died on the cross as the “crucified God.” The veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom; God was tearing up the ransom note.

You have a picture of what Jesus' death should mean for every Christian in Matthew 27:15-26 (it has been called the Barabbas Theory of the Atonement.) Barabbas was the one who should have died, raunchy villain and vicious criminal that he was; yet Barabbas is released and Jesus is crucified. If Barabbas ever heard of that, he should have realized that Jesus took his place, that Jesus died for him. That is what every Christian says about His Savior. I should have died; but Jesus took my place. Jesus died for me (Zechariah 3:1-3; Exodus 12:3-11).

E. Grace is Totally Awesome

Ask a Christian why God would send Christ to die for him, why God would draw him to believe in Jesus who died for him, why God would care a wink about someone who is evil at the core of his being, not to mention his overt acts - ask a Christian that, and if he's got his head screwed on straight, he'll simply smile and exclaim, "I do not have a clue why! It doesn't make sense, does it?" That a holy God would give a moment's thought to sleazy sinners is beyond belief.

But God is not conventional. Grace is his biggest surprise. Why would anyone care about a woman of the streets having forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:36-50)? What father in his just and holy mind would wrap his arms around a stinking prodigal (Luke 15)? Who would dare teach that a cheating tax collector stood uncondemned before heaven (Luke 18:9-14)? Who would assure a condemned criminal within a grasp of his death that he would be in paradise that day (Luke 23:39-43). There is no explanation, except that's the way God is, that's the way Jesus delights to be. I hope Strong Tower Fellowship will be a church made up of people who are repeatedly flabbergasted at the grace of God.

F. Followers of Christ are Always Safe

We believe that once God brings a sinner to Jesus, and Jesus will keep him to the end. This does not mean that the disciple will never sin or that he will never have temptations or endure hard afflictions or that he will never doubt his faith. It does mean "all that the father gives will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but to do the will of Him who sent me. And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day (John 6:37-39)". To put it in sheep language: "my sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). Jesus wants His people to know that they are secure in the grip of the strong Son of God. And we believe that.

G. Life is Totally Holy

Once when Jesus had cast demons out of a man and made him completely whole, that man wanted to go with Jesus. But Jesus had other plans for him: "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how He has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). It may have been more glorious to accompany Jesus, probably more comforting, and doubtless it would have seemed, more "holy."

But Jesus knew there was something this fellow could do for Him among His own family. And that matters to Jesus too, even to us it may seem routine and ordinary. But that is good news for the child of God. Christ's sway engulfs the routine and ordinary, the home front. Jesus rules and cares about all of life; everywhere we are on sacred ground. God rules over all of life; nothing is outside his dominion - whether business and politics, economics and education, conscience and sex, history and harvest, art and affliction, music and marriage, plumbing and preaching. All of life is holy and must be submitted to His reign. All the activity of life then is holy turf. And we do not believe we have to be "successful" to be "in God's will." When you play with your children, clean the house, work on your call, go to work or to school, you are doing holy work, namely, the will of Christ. We believe that, at least in our heads.

Now if these are particular beliefs and if it would be peculiar to believe such peculiar beliefs, then, we suppose, we are a peculiar people. But at least you know it ahead of time. You can not say no one told you. These are the kind of things you will hear in the preaching and teaching at Strong Tower Fellowship.

II. The Purpose of Strong Tower Fellowship

The desire of Strong Tower Fellowship is to be a Bible-believing, Christ-centered Church committed to living out the reality and diversity of the Kingdom of God in Macon. We believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ reconciles people to God and to one another. This means a Gospel driven church that reconciles people to God must by necessity reconcile people to people, regardless of race or economic status or position. Our passion and prayer is to be a Church were all people are accepted and loved. Therefore, we embrace in Christ all who believe in Him regardless of ethnicity or social status. We desire to be a visible picture of the Heavenly vision found in Revelation 7:9: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."

III. The Goal of Strong Tower Fellowship

The goal of Strong Tower Fellowship is to love people, win souls, and see lives transformed by the power of the gospel.

IV. The Mission of Strong Tower Fellowship

To touch a hurting community and city with the love of Jesus Christ by welcoming and encouraging people from all walks of life: the weak, the wounded, the without and the well.

V. Ten Core Beliefs of Strong Tower Fellowship

1. The Providence of God

"And we know that God works in everything for good." Romans 8:28

2. The Majesty and Omnipotence of God

“Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” Revelation 19:6

3. The Infallible Word of God

“All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” II Timothy 3:16

4. The Great Commission

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20

5. The Grace of God

“For by grace we are saved {and accepted} through faith.” Ephesians 2:8

6. The Holy Spirit

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” II Corinthians 13:14

7. The Justice of God

“For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” Galatians 6:7

8. The Equality of Persons

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

9. The Family of God and Humanity

“Have we not all one father?” Malachi 2:10

10. The Love of God

“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him.” I John 4:16

What is the Church?

Section Two

I. What Kind of Church is Strong Tower Fellowship

Jesus promised, “I will build my church, and the power of death shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). That sounds pretty certain and definite. But just what sort of church did Jesus build? What sort of animal is the church? What is the church according to the Bible?

A. A Church that Believes the Bible

Paul tells us the church is a building (I Corinthians 3:1-17). Not a bricks-and-mortar type of building but a flesh-and-blood building. Paul says of Christians: “You are...God’s building” (verse 9), of which Jesus Christ is the foundation (verse 11) and that building is a temple (verses 16-17). God’s people are God’s temple. The big characteristic of a temple is that it is “sacred.” So when Paul describes the church as a temple, he is saying it is fearfully sacred - so sacred that any one who dares to destroy God’s people temple is readied for deep trouble (verses 16-17).

But the church is “she,” for the church is a bride (Ephesians 5:22-23). Everyone should know what a bride is for, and if they do not, they have no business having one. “Husbands,” Paul ordered, “love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25). If the church is a bride it means that she is dearly loved. Many griping Christians are to follow Jesus’ attitude toward the church. But the church, Paul teaches, is also a body (I Corinthians 12:12-26), so that, as with the human body, there is both unity and diversity, and all the various parts are interdependent. Every part of the body needs every other part, no matter how important or insignificant each seems to be. Now if God’s people are like that, it means that no one should ever say, “I do not matter” (verses 15-17, the attitude of despair). Nor should anyone say, “I don’t need anyone” (verse 21 ff, the attitude of pride). A muscular leg might tend to be arrogant until it realizes it is useless without an efficiently working hip. If the church is a body, then Christians are mutually responsible to and for each other’s welfare, so that the church is (should be) one place in the world where there is nurture, care, and sympathy for one another.

All the above is very brief, but it should give us some idea of what the Bible has in mind when it speaks of God’s people as the “church,” the house that Jesus built. And it should be kept before us a measuring stick by which to judge our own congregation, which brings us to the local church. We’ll take some time to explain what this is and how it functions.

B. A Local Church

We will approach this by picking apart the name of Strong Tower Fellowship.

1. An Individual Church

What makes a church a church? When is a church really a church rather than a non-church? Must it have a certain number of people attending? Have so much money in the bank? Have a resident pastor or at least three stained glass windows? What are the marks of a true church?

Usually we say there are three marks of the church. The first mark is the preaching of the word. That is the first item noted about the early believers in Jerusalem - "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching" (Acts 2:42). The church is the arena in which God's truth is to be on display (I Timothy 3:15). A church can only remain a true church so long as it receives God's truth in the Scriptures. That is why it is so crucial what a particular church thinks about the Bible. The second mark is the provision of the sacraments, administered and received in the proper manner (Matthew 28:18-20; I Corinthians 11:23-26), and done because Christ commanded it. The third mark is the practice of discipline (Hebrew 13:17, Matthew 18:15-20), discipline which the elders are charged to exercise in a vigilant, loving, and careful manner, in order to direct the lives of God's people in godliness. Discipline is not simply negative or a matter of correcting faults or flagrant sins; it is also positive. As one of my friends said, "Whenever the word of God is preached, God's people are under discipline, for they are being called to shape their thoughts and lives to God's requirements."

2. Say What? A Presbyterian Church

Now there's a corker. What does Presbyterian mean? Most people just know it is a word that's hard to spell correctly. What is a Presbyterian Church? The term refers to how a church is governed; that is, ruled by presbyters or elders. There are two offices in the local church (I Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17-20). The deacons have a serving office intended to display humility before God's people (the deacon's service points to the serving activity all God's people should show); this is needed because God's people are prone to pride. The elders hold a ruling office intended to exercise control over God's people; this is necessary because God's people are prone to wondering (I Peter 5:14; Hebrew 13:17).

So a Presbyterian Church is one in which there is rule by presbyters or elders. Elders are elected by the people. There are teaching elders (pastors) and ruling elders (I Timothy 5:17). They rule with equal authority. Elders of the local church constitute the Session. Elders from churches in a region form a Presbytery. Elders from churches throughout the nation, and beyond, form the General Assembly.

C. What You Will Find at Strong Tower Fellowship

Here is where the rubber meets the pew! The church that meets at 2193 Vineville Avenue is called Strong Tower Fellowship. At this particular church, you will probably find:

1. People who frustrate you and sometimes make you mad

No rosy or even peachy perfection here. It is like being on the quest for the perfect cup of coffee. Not many are on that quest, but some are looking for the perfect church and always coming up disappointed. The church is precisely where sinners need to be, but it can make life pretty trying at times.

2. People who fight against sin and who bear terrible trails.

Any number of the people at Strong Tower Fellowship have been through a lot of heavy weather - and the winds are still blowing. That means we may not always be smiling, upbeat people with that “victorious air about us” (though we trust there is deep gospel joy in us). We may not be what we should be, but neither are what we once were.

3. People that strive to worship fully, responsively, thoughtfully and joyfully.

In this process, we are guided by the “Regulative Principle of Worship.” This means that what we do in worship must be according to the word of God. In this context, we believe we are to be courageous to use all of ourselves in worship, so we follow the teachings of Psalms to use our bodies in such things as clapping, raising our hands, bowing, kneeling, and saying Amen. The Psalms also teach us to use instruments and to call on everything that has breath to praise the Lord. We are to worship God with our whole being, mind and emotion, with joy and thanksgiving in the spirit and in truth.

4. People committed to the “Means of Grace”

The means of grace refers to the means God usually uses to cause Christians to grow and mature in Christ. We hold that there are three Means of Grace: the word, the sacraments, and prayer.

a.) The Word

You may hear the word publicly or privately. Sometimes you may hear the word taught or preached. But you must also hear the word through your personal reading of the scriptures. Notice Luke 10:38-42. You should always be careful about opening your home to Jesus because you never know what He will do there. Ask Martha; “Martha opened her home to him” (verse 38). And the trouble started. Seems

Martha had a sister. Mary, “who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what He said” (verse 39).

Now it only takes one casserole to boil over to get hot yourself - especially if you see your sister quietly sitting (of all things) and listening to your dinner guest. Exasperated, Martha blurts out at Jesus: “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me” (verse 40)! Now when Martha raised all this flack about Mary helping her with salads and casseroles and....., Jesus had an answer: “Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her” (verse 42).

Now what do we make of all that? Did Martha think Mary should never listen to Jesus’ teachings? Did she want Jesus to refrain from teaching in her house? No and No. She simply believed that there were times when listening to the word of God must take second place to the pressing needs of the moment and Jesus. Jesus believed that listening to the word of God must simply become a priority through deliberate neglect if need be (verse 42). “Mary has chosen what is better” – and He said that before even tasting Martha’s meal. Hearing the word of God is more important than having a regular meal. At least Jesus is not a hypocrite - He had skipped meals before (Luke 4:1-4).

(1) How much time should I spend in the Bible?

Let’s make some suggestions about daily Bible reading. To begin with, I would not spend more than ten to fifteen minutes in reading and thinking over a portion of scripture. That may disappoint you. You may have expected me to say that you really need to get into the word, and to suggest some astronomical time frame so that you could feel appropriately guilty and think it utterly impossible. No, I do not think this is the way. I am more satisfied to see Christians with consistent hunger than periodic gluttony. When should this time be? Whenever it is best for you. Some people are more alert in the mornings, some in the evenings. Some may find time and solitude over lunch hour. Just one thing: more often than not you will have to make time. You must make the time. Do whatever it takes to make the time. It seldom comes naturally. Ask Martha.

(2) Where should we begin reading the Bible?

When first starting out I would not suggest reading straight through the Bible. Start with the Gospel of Mark. After that you could try I John, then Genesis, Luke, and then go back to Exodus 1-20. That will give you a good start.

(3) What do I do when I read the Bible?

What should I look for? Look for something in the Bible passage which you can use for that day. Maybe it shows you something about God or Christ that leads you to worship or praise. Maybe it provides correction you need for an attitude or habit. Maybe it brings assurance to you in some anxiety or fear. Notice a few examples. Say you are reading Mark 1:1-13. Now you come to verse 11 and you read that when Jesus was baptized, the voice from heaven said, “You are my son, whom I love; with

you I am well pleased.” Then What? Then the spirit sends Jesus out into the desert “and he was in the desert forty days being tempted by Satan” (verse 13).

Now maybe you notice that Jesus receives this wonderful assurance in verse 11, then He is plunged into temptations in verse 13. The two are side-by-side. As you ponder that, doesn't a point hit you? The fact that you are being sorely tempted (or tried) does not mean that God is displeased with you. That may sound little. But it's worth meditating on, for when you are in the throes of temptation it is almost automatic to think that God is surely displeased with you. Here, if you will think about it, is wonderful assurance for dark times.

Pretend you are reading Mark 1:14-28. And you happen on those words that the unclean spirit shrieked at Jesus in verse 24, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-the Holy one of God!” Think about that. A demon has correct knowledge about Jesus. “You are the Holy One of God.” Since it is a demon that speaks, we know that this knowledge he has is not a saving knowledge or a loving knowledge. But he knows truth about Jesus. Should this not bring us up short and make us examine ourselves? It should make us say, “Why, even demons have a certain kind of faith.” Is that all my faith is - knowing or confessing facts about Jesus? Does my faith go beyond a demonic “faith”? And so you turn this scripture on your own insides and scrutinize yourself; you examine yourself.

Then the next day you are reading Mark 1:29-39 (sure, it takes a while to go through a chapter this way, but what's the hurry?). And you read about Jesus and company going to Simon and Andrew's home after a synagogue service. Now Simon (that is Peter's mother-in-law) “lay sick with fever, and immediately they told him of her” (verse 30). That is very simple. But so what? Doesn't that provide you with some instruction? What can you do better in face of trouble or sickness, whenever it comes, then to tell Jesus about it? What is your first resort in trouble? Do you tell Him? Where have you been taking your troubles recently? Do you see how simply turning the Bible in on yourself can lead you to see your own failures and your true comfort?

The next day, you are finishing Mark Chapter 1, reading verses 40-45. Here is the man with leprosy standing in front of Jesus. And Jesus shocks you, for “He stretched out his hand and touched him” (verse 41). Now lepers were “unclean” and therefore cut off from society. That man had probably not felt a human touch in years. A leper. Jesus touched him. Does that tell you anything about the kind of Savior you have? Without drawing out the implications any more, can you see how - if you continued to ponder those words and in that sense how you would be forced to fall at Jesus' feet in wonder, love, and praise, and worship such a Lord who does not flinch from touching filthy people like us?

b) The Sacraments

What are the sacraments? Baptism and the Lord's Supper. All right, but what makes a sacrament a sacrament? A sacrament is a sacrament when it is an action (1) instituted by Christ (Matthew 28:18-20 for Baptism and I Corinthians 11:23-26 on the Lord's supper), (2) which He intended to be observed repeatedly, (3) among all God's people. Number three is why we do not regard such things as marriage as a sacrament - it does not apply to all God's people.

But what, really, is a sacrament? A sacrament is an outward and physical picture of an inward and spiritual reality whereby God seals in our consciences and promises to fulfill what is pictured, and thus sustain the weakness of our faith. In doing this, the sacraments do not make God's promises more sure, but rather make us more sure of God's promises. So how does this all work? Suppose you are a Christian and overcome with nagging doubts about whether the Lord really has cleansed your sins away. Ever have doubts, gnawing doubts? You think back on your Baptism. You should then begin to think like this: Just as the water used in Baptism cleanses the body, so just as surely God has cleansed me of every spot. Or suppose a Christian comes to the Lord's Supper and he or she is going through a grievous affliction at the time, and with it - as often happens - begins to wonder if the Lord has cast him off or has forsaken him. When such struggling Christians receive the bread and wine, it is as if Jesus said to them: "You see, if I went through this for you and your sins, do you think I will cast you off in your trails?" (Romans 8:32)

But how does that assurance come with the sacrament? By faith. Sounds like a cop-out, doesn't it? After all, it seems strange that common items like wine and bread could ever assure anyone. How can such things assure us of God's faithfulness? Let's look at it this way...When you shop for groceries, you may have green beans on the list. Maybe three cans. How do you know when you reach for a particular can that you have the green beans? Ah, you say, I see the label with this picture of green beans on it (admit it: you trust the label). Now, if all the cans on the shelves were stripped of their labels and appeared in all their tinny glory there was you a grocery clerk stationed on the isle to tell you - when you asked - which were the green beans, well, that should work. But don't we feel more sure of getting beans when you see the can in its usual dress, wearing its green and blue and red label? In one way, there's no sense to it, but somehow you feel more sure of what you are getting if the can carries the label than if a clerk merely points out which bare cans have green beans in them. Somehow, the label "brings home" to you the conviction that you really have green beans. That is the way the sacraments work. There is something about seeing Christ's pictures that assures us of His love. So the sacraments press into our souls the conviction that God's goodness and mercy really will follow us all the days of our life -and more besides.

(1) The meaning of Baptism

Baptism signifies/pictures union with Christ. It signifies our being one with Him, seals our participation in His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Baptism represents all the blessings that come from our union with Christ. This refers to three things: first, the remission of sins. The water points to the washing away of guilt, reminding us that in Christ we are clean (Romans 8:1; Titus 3:4-7). Secondly, the renewal of our nature. In this respect, Baptism is “the lever of regeneration” (Titus 3:5), not because it transforms us but because it represents seals and furthers our spiritual renewal. Thirdly, Baptism attests our Baptism by the Holy Spirit. At Jesus’ own Baptism this was reinforced by the advent of the dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. The dove did not represent the spirit’s initial descent on Christ. Christ had the spirit before His Baptism. But the Baptism and the dove were attestations to the Lord of what had already taken place. Similarly, in our Baptism there is an attestation of the fact that we have already been baptized in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A last point. Baptism is our public acceptance of Christ as our Lord and Savior, and our public affirmation of ourselves as His servants. It is our confession that we are His! His property. His slaves. His pupils.

(2) The mode of Baptism

One of the most noticeable differences in churches is in the way they observe the sacrament of baptism. Some churches immerse the recipient under water while others only sprinkle or pour water on the head. At STF, we recognize that Christians have different understandings of what the Bible teaches about this issue. Because of this, we accept as a true baptism any baptism - sprinkling or by immersion - done under the authority of any Christian church where water is used in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We do not believe that this is an issue that should prevent Christians from enjoying one another’s fellowship. While baptism is an essential issue, the mode is not. Consequently, as pastor, I will sprinkle or immerse all who have a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

While the Bible is not explicit in regard to the mode, leading to many arguments and divisions in the church, there are reasons for sprinkling and pouring as a mode of baptism. In that most people are more familiar with immersion this paper will deal primarily with sprinkling as a mode of baptism.

(3) The meaning of the word “Baptism”:

Many point to the root meaning the Greek word for baptism (baptizw - *baptizo* to dip) as proof positive that baptism must only be done by immersion. However, a word’s meaning must not be determined by only its root meaning, but by its historical development and its usage at the time of the writing in question. All of that is to say that in order to understand what *baptizo* means, one must look at how it has been used historically up to its occurrence in the New Testament as well as how it was used in the New Testament itself.

Hebrews 9:10 speaks of "various ceremonial washings." The word translated "ceremonial washings" is a word for baptism (*baptismos*). The ceremonial washings, or baptisms, that follow are rites of purification in the Old Testament (cf. Heb. 9:13-21). In all of these ceremonial washings, the method of application was sprinkling. In fact all Old Testament purifications or washings were by sprinkling (Numbers 8:7; 19:19; Leviticus 14:7, Exodus 31:16-21). Clearly then, in at least Hebrews, baptism can mean sprinkling.

(4) The Use of Sprinkling in the Bible:

The word "sprinkle" or some form of it occurs 84 times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New. Of the New Testament occurrences, six are in Hebrews and one in 1 Peter. Most of the Old Testament examples are connected with ceremonial rites (sprinkling the altar, sprinkling the mercy seat, the sprinkling bowls, or cleansing by sprinkling).

Many people argue that immersion is a better symbol of baptism because it symbolizes cleansing in a way that sprinkling cannot. While that may be true in our cultural context, it ignores the context of the Scripture where all ceremonial cleansings were either by pouring or sprinkling.

Below are a few of the instances of sprinkling in the Bible

(a) Old Testament

- **Exodus 24:6-8, ff** B Moses sprinkles covenant and purifying them before God.
- **Exodus 29:21** B The blood is sprinkled on Aaron and his sons, consecrating them as priests.
- **Leviticus 8:11f** - Oil is sprinkled on the altar, and then poured on Aaron, to consecrate him.
- **Leviticus 8:30** B Blood and oil are sprinkled on Aaron and his sons to consecrate them.
- **Leviticus 14:7** B Someone is to be sprinkled to be cleansed from an infectious disease.
- **Leviticus 14:51** B Blood and water are sprinkled on a house for its purification.
- **Numbers 8:7** B The Levites are made ceremonially clean by the sprinkling of water.
- **Numbers 19:13** B Speaks of the importance of the water of cleansing being sprinkled on someone before they enter the Tabernacle.
- **Isaiah 52:15** B The Messiah sprinkles many nations.
- **Ezekiel 36:24ff** B In a discussion of the New Covenant, we read that God will sprinkle Israel with clean water and they will be clean.

(b) New Testament

- **Hebrews 9:13-14** B Christians are cleansed because they have been sprinkled clean with the blood of Christ.
- **Hebrews 9:19, 21, and others** B Sprinkling clean with blood.

- **Hebrews 10:22B** We can draw near because our hearts have been sprinkled clean.
- **1 Peter 1:2 B** We are sanctified by the sprinkling of Christ=s blood.

(5) Baptism in the New Testament:

Often times, people say that they want to be baptized the way they were in the New Testament. Because so many pictures and movies depict the baptism of Jesus and other baptisms as immersions, people often assume that this is the way that it was done. However, in every case of baptism in the New Testament, nowhere is it required to believe that the baptism had to be immersion. Yet, in several of the cases, baptism could not have been by immersion. It had to have been sprinkling or pouring.

When John the Baptist was baptizing, the Pharisees thought that his baptism was a sign that he was the Messiah (see John 1:25). Why did they expect the Messiah to baptize? Because Isaiah 52:15 and Ezekiel 36:25 led them to believe that the Messiah would sprinkle the people. If John had been immersing people, then this would not have made sense.

Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in a desert (Acts 8:36). If there had been a river nearby, it would not have been a desert. It must have been a small oasis with a spring.

Paul's baptism in Acts 9:18 seems to indicate that he stood up and was baptized on the spot. If so, he could not have been immersed since he was inside a house. Apparently, Cornelius was baptized indoors (Acts 10:48). The Philippian Jailer was baptized indoors at night (Acts 16:33). Remember, this was a time before swimming pools and Jacuzzi tubs. The only water a family would have had in a house would have been in jars and pots.

Besides water baptism, two other types are mentioned in Scripture. Man baptizes with water, but God baptizes with fire and with the Spirit. When God baptized with fire, the fire sat upon their heads (Acts 2:3). When God baptized with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit "fell upon" (acts 10:44, 11:15-16) or "descended upon" (Luke 3:22; John 1:32), or was poured out upon (Acts 2:17; 10:45-46), or came upon (Acts 19:6). Baptism by sprinkling or pouring fits all of these descriptions.

Conclusion:

Christians have disagreed about baptism for centuries and this debate will probably continue until the end of time. While this certainly is not a fundamental issue of the faith, nor is it an issue over which Christians should break fellowship, hopefully, you have seen that there are many sound reasons why STF both sprinkles and immerses in baptizing members.

(6) Who ought to be Baptized?

Tip-toeing through this topic can be difficult because the arguments for and against it can become quite theologically deep. There are different opinions held by different Christian denominations, each claiming to have the clear teaching of scripture. But there are basically only two responses to whether or not it is alright to baptize infants: yes and no. Let's briefly look at both.

Baptizing infants has been practiced for a very long time in Christianity. Within the scope of this practice are denominations that insist that the baptism itself brings the infant into a salvation relationship with God. On this, Strong Tower strongly disagrees. Baptism does not save anyone. Baptism is a sign, a covenant sign, of identification with the Christian gospel. On the other hand, there are some that baptize infants not for the purpose of saving them, but for covenantal relationship. The logic used by these groups is basically as follows:

- Infants were circumcised and entered into covenant relationship with God in the Old Testament (Gen. 12-17);
- Circumcision did not save the child;
- The Abrahamic covenant under which the infants were circumcised is still valid since the Abrahamic Covenant is called the gospel in Galatians 3:8,
- The Abrahamic covenant, which is still valid and which is the gospel, included infants, and therefore infants should still be included in the same covenant;
- We see evidence of whole households being baptized in Acts (Acts 16:15).

Therefore, at least some of these households had to include infants, and a good Jewish convert to Christianity would not exclude his infant children from covenantal relationship with God.

In contradiction to this, those who are opposed to infant baptism usually mention the fact that there are no explicit instances of infants being baptized in the New Testament. If anything, we are told to believe and be baptized (Acts 8:13; 18:8). They ask how can an infant believe so he/she can then be baptized? These questions are a worthy concern.

Both sides have good arguments for their position, answering the other's objections, and presenting their case. Nevertheless, one's presuppositions will govern how he/she sees the argument. But, one thing needs mentioning: since there are good arguments on both sides and since there are good and godly Christians on both sides of the argument, we need to be gracious to those who differ in this issue. Notice what it says in Rom. 14:1-5,

"Now accept the one who is not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.
² One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.
³ Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him.
⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.
⁵ One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind."

Notice how Paul allows us to have differences of opinions on various issues? His goal was to have unity in the body of Christ and at the same time to allow for differences on debatable issues.

Finally, the position of Strong Tower infants if one or both parents of the infant are believers in Christ (cf. I Cor. 7:14), who honestly see infant baptism as a covenantally faithful act -- not that it saves the child. On the other hand, if the parents do not believe it is proper to baptize their child, then it is not okay for them to do it.

(7) The Meaning of the Lord's Supper

The best way to approach the nature of the Lord's supper is to look at some of the words that have been used to describe it. The first of these words is "eucharist." Its use in connection with the Lord's Supper goes back to the fact that on the night of His betrayal, Jesus "took the bread and giving thanks (eucharistesas), broke it" (I Corinthians 11:24). In this sense the Supper becomes an occasion for saying, "thank you, Lord, for Jesus. Thank you for the broken body, for the incarnation and for the death of Christ on the cross of Calvary." However, it is also important to enlarge the scope of thanksgiving to embrace not only the unique gift of Christ, but all of God's benefits. The bread symbolizes the daily bread God gives us and, within that, all those ways in which God supplies our needs.

The second word used for the Lord's Supper is a "proclamation." "You proclaim the Lord's death until he come" (I Corinthians 11:26). Each time we participate in the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the bread in Christ's body (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19), broken for us (I Corinthians 11:24); and the juice is Christ's blood, poured out for us (Matthew 26:28)." This language points to the sacrifice of Jesus, and when He says, "Take, eat, this is my body" (Mark 14:22), what He is saying to us is, "The body is broken. It's there! The crucified Christ is there for you, but you get no benefit unless you take it and eat!" The sacrament is saying both that Christ has given Himself for us and that we must take Him for ourselves. God is standing at the table saying to us very directly, "Take, eat."

Thirdly, the Lord's Supper is also a "commemoration." "Do this in remembrance of me" (I Corinthians 11:24). This takes us back to the foundation - events of redemption. God's Son, came into this world of material bread. He came into space-time history. He was there, that night, doing these things and saying these things; and the following day, on the cross, in that material world of time and space, He literally gave Himself for us. The Lord's Supper is there to make sure we never forget.

Again, the supper is a "communion" (I Corinthians 10:16). It is a communion in the body and the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word literally means "having things in common" or simply "sharing." At the communion, we share the bread, the cup, and Christ. We have all these in common.

Lastly, the Lord's Supper is a "supper." This is its primary purpose. People come to a supper to be fed. They come to the feed upon the benefits of Jesus Christ. That is, they come because they hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The Lord's Supper is a spiritual feast. We come to the Lord's Table to feed our souls. What then is the qualification for coming to the Lord's Table? Spiritual hunger and appetite! You want the things on the table! If you ask, "Am I qualified for the Lord's Table?" You are really asking, "Do I want what's provided in this feast? Do I want the blessings and benefits of Christ?"

c) Prayer

If you are a Christian, you will pray or at least Jesus thought so. When Jesus taught on prayer He began, "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites" (Matthew 6:5). Did you note that? "When you pray..." Jesus takes it for granted that His disciples will pray. You could turn that around. You could say that if someone does not pray, he or she is not a disciple.

Now Jesus also teaches his disciples how to pray. That's what Matthew 6:5-15 is all about, particularly the Lord's Prayer in verses 9-13. Remember how it begins? "Our Father..." That means prayer is not for every body only for Jesus' disciples, only for those who have come to God through Jesus (John 1:12; 14:6). But those two words also tell us that prayer is intimate. We come to God as children to a Father (Note: when Jesus refers to God as Father, He means "father" in the best sense of that word, of all that a father should be; see Matthew 7:9-11).

In the Lord's Prayer you will notice a certain pattern: God's name, God's kingdom, God's will, and then our food, our forgiveness, our security. God's interests before our needs. Not that our needs do not count. But we should be more concerned about God's worship and will than our needs and desires. That is one way you "seek first His kingdom" (Matthew 6:33). We do have needs and Jesus teaches us to pray about them. We have anxiety so we pray for pardon (forgive sins). We have weakness so we pray for protection (from the evil one).

Why don't you step back and look over the whole Lord's Prayer? What about how short it is? Prayer does not have to be long, drawn out, and at least half-hour. What about how simple it is? These requests are not expressed in some special prayer language, complete with "thou couldst" or "shouldst" – nor or there seven syllable words. So you do not have to make a B plus in English before you can talk to your Father. I suggest that you keep your prayers like this - short, simple, and let's add secret (Matthew 6:6). Not that you should never pray in public, but spend some time in secret with your Heavenly Father each day in some place where you won't normally be interrupted. Speak to Him simply. You do not need to impress your Father with your extensive vocabulary or your fine turn of a phrase. And keep it pretty short, after all, you can speak to your Father all through the day, so you do not need to bring up everything at once. After all, to call God "Our Father" means that prayer is the expression of relationship. And if we have a close relationship with someone, we surely want to talk with that person frequently, all through the day.

d) Conclusion

Growth comes from God (I Corinthians 3:6-7). But God has "means of grace" through which He usually brings growth, established channels by which His strength comes to us.

The grace is God's, but we are to use the means. We are to use the means. We are to be "on the grow" or to put it better, "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18).

5. Committed to seeing salvation from God's point of view.

The Bible was written to be understood backward: that God had the end in mind even before the beginning. Revelation 22 before Genesis 1. This enables us to see scriptures from God's point of view and to understand that God never reacts to anything within the creative realm; He always pre-acts. That is, God always acts before there is anything to act upon! Isaiah envisioned this reality when he declared that God knew the end before the beginning began (Isaiah 46:10). This is the reason believers should trust in the foreknowledge of God, why we pray, for God answers before we call (Isaiah 65:24), and God knows what we are going to ask before we ask (Matthew 6:8). The arrest of Jesus, the Son of God, was not a surprise to the Father, for Luke reports that He was handed over to the Jewish leaders by God's set purpose and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23-24). Even the death of Jesus was foreknown in the counsel of preexistent eternity. John draws back the curtain of divine mystery and in doing so permits us to see a divine disclosure of Jesus, the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world (Revelations 13:8; II Timothy 1:9; Ephesians 1:4). In the mind of God, the Father, Jesus the Son of God, was slain at Mount Calvary before Abraham killed the ram, a substitute for his son, on Mount Moriah. Calvary proceeded creation, which indicates in God's mind Calvary was not plan B, an after thought. In eternity past Jesus, the second Adam, died before the first Adam was created. The tree of Golgotha was planted in the soil of preexistent eternity before the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was planted in the Garden of Eden. The bottom line in this, salvation comes from the eternal will and mind of God.

God's plan for saving man in Christ was not an after thought, but for thought. God did not plan our salvation as He went along. God planned our salvation from all eternity (Ephesian 3:1-11 cf. Ephesians 1:4). God's eternal plan of salvation, what a profound thought and consideration!

6. Committed to Biblical Doctrine

The word "doctrine" simply means teaching. Bible doctrine, therefore, refers to the teaching of the Bible. Unfortunately, there is a great exodus in the church from Biblical doctrine. In Acts 2:41 we learn that three thousand souls were added to the church, and God continued to add to the church daily who were being saved. Verse 42 states, "and they continued steadfastly in the 'Apostles doctrine.'" God's people must be biblically literate. Many people in the church do not know what they believe. Some know what they believe, but do not know why they believe what they believe.

A generation needs to be raised up that says, "I know what and why I believe and then I know whom I believe: (I Timothy 4:13,16; II Timothy 1:12-12; Ephesians 4:14; Romans 16:17; Titus 1:9;2:1; Jude 3; I Peter 1:22).

Supporting God's Work

Section Three

God came into history as the Man, Jesus Christ. He left the riches and glory of heaven for poverty and humility. Financially, even though He was poor, Jesus paid His taxes and generously gave to those in need. On the cross, He became the most generous giver the world has ever known. There He took our sin and gave us His righteousness. He took our death and gave us His salvation. He took our death and gave us His life. Following His resurrection, Jesus has continued to be generous; He gave us the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts for ministry and service and is preparing us for a kingdom in which we will enjoy His generosity together with Him forever. The early church was marked by generous stewardship because they followed the example of Jesus. The Jerusalem converts to Christianity sold their possessions to give to the poor (Acts 2:45; 4:32-35). And the Ephesian occultists proved their conversion was authentic by burning their magic books, which in today's market would be worth millions of dollars.

I. What is a steward?

Generally speaking, there are two ways to see life and possessions. One is through the perspective of ownership, where by I and my possessions belong to me alone. The other is through the perspective of stewardship, whereby I and my life and possessions belong to God and are to be invested for His purposes. In Titus 1:7, Paul speaks of pastors serving as "God's Steward" of the church. Similarly, I Peter 4:10 commands every Christian to be good stewards of God's varied grace. Randy Alcorn describes his own learning about being a steward: "If God was the owner, I was the manager. I needed to adopt a steward's mentality toward the assets he has entrusted – not given- to me. A steward manages assets fro the owner's benefit. The steward carries no sense of entitlement to the assets he manages. It is his job to find out what the owner wants done with his assets, then carry out his will. "

Three facts distinguish a steward. 1) A steward gladly acknowledges that he or she belongs to the Lord. This is exactly what Paul says in Romans 1:6 when he reminds Christians that they "Belong to Jesus Christ." This means stewards understand that everything they have and are logically belongs to the Lord. In I Corinthians 4:7, Paul says this should result in deep humility: "for who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you receive it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" 2) A steward recognizes that everything ultimately belongs to the Lord. The Bible recognizes private property ownership, which explains why it forbids stealing. Above all, however, the Bible teaches that God alone is the ultimate owner of everything, because it comes form Him and is ruled over by Him (Haggai 2:8; Psalms 50:10; Deuteronomy 8:17-18; James 1:16-17). Simply put, everything we have and enjoy belongs to God and is gifted to us for enjoyment and service. Practically this means the air we breathe, the food we eat, and everything else is a gracious gift from our loving God. 3) Stewards seek to faithfully oversee all that God has entrusted to their oversight. Because they see that they and all that has been entrusted to their care belong to God alone, they aspire to manage everything in their life in a God glorifying way.

Additionally, they do not want to be guilty of robbing God by failing to manage His resources according to His wishes. Malachi 3:8 rebukes such unfaithful stewards, saying, “Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me.” Practically, stewards have a distinct mentality. Rather than wondering how they should spend their time, talent, and treasure, they ask how they should invest God’s time, talent, and treasure. This means, as an example, rather than asking why they should give their money to God, or wondering how much of their money they should give to God, they instead prayerfully consider how much of God’s money He wants them to keep; as well as what He wants done with that portion not used for bills or such.

II. Should Christians Tithe?

Tithe literally means “tenth.” In the Old Testament, the tithe referred to God’s people giving ten percent of their income (also called first fruits) to God to fund the Levites ministry (Numbers 18:21-29; 27-30). In addition to that there were other tithes and offerings required of God’s people:

- 10% for festivals (Deuteronomy 12:10-11; 17-18; 14:22-27)
- 3.3% to help the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29)
- Crop gleaning collected for the poor and aliens (Leviticus 19:9-10)
- Other tithes above and beyond regular giving (Nehemiah 10:32-33)

Therefore, the total mandatory tithe in the Old Testament resulted in over 25% of a family’s income.

In the New Testament, financial giving among God’s people focuses on grace, generosity, and the heart; and not actual percentages of one’s income. The word tithe is rarely used in the New Testament, and when it is, it is usually mentioned negatively in rebuking religious types such as Pharisees who give their money to God but not their hearts and lives.

It cannot be overstated that when we give to God, we are not deciding how much of our wealth to give, rather, we are determining how much of God’s wealth we are keeping for our own uses. In I Chronicles 29:14 David articulates precisely this fact, saying, “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? Thus all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”

The most thorough teaching in all the New Testament on giving is found in II Corinthians 8-9, where we discover eight principles regarding generous giving. 1) Generous giving is sacrificial (II Corinthians 8:1-6: 10-12). For example, Paul says that the Macedonian Christians were experiencing severe affliction and extreme poverty but responded with abundant joy and overflowing generosity. 2) Generous giving is something that only some people are spiritually gifted for (II Corinthians 8:7). For those who have the spiritual gift of giving, righteous stewardship and generous giving seem like obvious aspects of Christian life, but since the majority of people do not have the gift of giving, they must be taught Biblically stewardship and discipline themselves to live obediently and labor to live out of the Bible’s teaching on stewardship.

Therefore, those with the gift of giving and church leaders must not cowardly avoid the subject of stewardship but rather teach and model it with love as with all other aspects of Christian discipleship. 3) Generous giving is a gospel issue (II Corinthians 8:8-9). Just as Jesus left the riches and glory of heaven for the poverty and humility of earth, so to Christians are to enjoy being generous givers because doing so is a response to, and reflection of, Jesus' gift of salvation to them. 4) Generous giving encourages churches to share with other churches and ministries (II Corinthians 8:13-15). Practically, this means that all the most destitute churches should both live within their means and help support righteous poor churches, such as those in the impoverished nations, new church plants, and churches filled with new converts and college students. 5) Generous giving is motivated by friendly competition (II Corinthians 9:1-5). Paul challenges the wealthier Corinthian churches, for example, to match the financial giving of the impoverished Macedonian church. Likewise, churches need to be aware of what other churches in their area are receiving so as to know how their people are doing and to help encourage them to be more generous. 6) Generous giving is about sowing and reaping (II Corinthians 9:6-12). Unlike prosperity theology, which encourages people to give to God so that they might get more money, generosity theology aims to sow, or invest, in ministries that will reap a gospel reward of converts to Jesus and mature disciples. Therefore, the sowing and reaping that the Bible speaks of is not necessarily personal as much as it is missional. Those who love the gospel know that while many of the spending and investing decisions they make do not reap a fruitful reward, monies given to faithful ministries always have a wonderfully satisfying return on investment, because lives are changed by Jesus. There is no more powerful evidence of the power of the gospel than radical generosity. The more Christians give to God and others, the more people will believe in and experience the living reality of Jesus Christ. This is the case if you give to a ministry winning people to Jesus and or to help the poor. Giving changes lives .7) Generous giving is one of many evidences that someone is truly a Christian (II Corinthians 9:13-14). Paul's point is that if someone has truly received the generous grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he or she will be generous. Conversely, if someone is not generous, it may be because he or she does not understand grace and has not received the gospel of our generous Lord Jesus Christ. 8) Generous giving promotes the worship of Jesus as God. That is among the ultimate goals of generous giving – seeing as many people as possible enjoy the generosity of God's grace and respond in worshipful joy. Paul says this repeatedly at the close of his lengthy teaching on generous giving:

- You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way which through us will produce Thanksgiving to God (II Corinthians 9:11).
- For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in giving Thanksgiving to God (II Corinthians 9:12).
- By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and generosity of your contribution for them and all other (II Corinthians 9:13).
- Thanks be to God for His in expressible gift! (II Corinthians 9:15)

Therefore, Christians should consider the tithe as the minimum standard for giving, and should always be looking to go beyond the tithe. It's a great privilege to invest the Master's money in His causes! We should always be looking to invest as much as possible. In other words, the tithe is not a rigid rule, but a guideline and something of a "floor".

In summary, stewardship and the tithe create an interesting tension. On the one hand, there are people making very little money who live close to the edge. In order to simply put food on the table and a roof over their head, they cannot tithe. Yet, in such circumstances, giving 2-5% of income is very sacrificial. It usually means going without things most of us would consider very basic. I have seen poor families give very sacrificially though they do not tithe. On the other hand, a person making a lot of money would have to give away far more money than a tithe before it would begin to cut into the way they live, where they eat, how much they travel, and where they live.

CONCLUSION:

In II Corinthians 8-9, Paul does not put pressure upon the will to give. Paul does not command us to give. Neither does he pressure our emotions. He does not say, "You have so much and the poor have so little. You must give!" Instead Paul goes to our hearts with the Gospel. He does this by teaching, if we do not give, we really do not understand.

Sermon On Giving

Anyone, Anyone, Yes Anyone, Can Give, No Excuses! Luke 21:1-4 vs. 2 He also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins...

The widow was poor, she was without a husband, she was without any significant social standing in the society in which she lived. All of which could have served as a legitimate excuse for her not to give something in the offering. But she refused to use those difficult situations as an excuse for not doing what was right. She still made it to church and still gave in the offering what little she had. Looking at her life, maybe she might have been angry at God, might not have understood why all these things had to happen to her, and she might even have felt that the compilation of catastrophes on her life were excuse enough why she didn't have to give something in the offering. But she still went to temple and still gave in the offering. She had needs, bills to be paid, food to purchase, medical bills piling up, and no government assistance to help out with any of that, no 401K, no pension, no interest earning retirement account, no investments, no portfolio, no nothing.

Nobody would have blamed her if she had chosen to keep her little mite in her pocket. But she still went to church and gave in the offering. And it wasn't like the amount she was giving was going to make much of a dent in the treasury of the temple, wouldn't even pay for a window pane, or a Sunday School chair or a lunch for a senior or anything at all maybe. If she had decided to keep her mite, no one really would have been hurt by it, so she had that as an excuse for not giving. But still, she went to the temple, in the presence of rich people putting their gifts in the treasury, in the presence of priests who were living luxurious lifestyles, in the presence of the splendor of the second temple, and she put her little, financially meaningless mite into the treasury. For this poor widow that Jesus observed, there were no excuses; she was going to give to the Lord. The Bible does not tell us her mind set, only her actions and her situation in life. But from that action and from that situation in life, it might not be that far a stretch to suggest that in all her suffering, in her poverty, in her not understanding why, perhaps she still understood there to be something beneficial, something good, something right about giving to the Lord anyway.

It might not be as much as some people in the temple, might not make as much of a difference as some people's portions, but there was something good about giving, and she went to the temple and gave anyway. It might not make a dent in the treasury, but it sure could have an impact on her own spirituality to be obedient to the word of God, to be generous even out of her poverty because that was just who she was, she's just a generous person like God called her to be. It didn't seem to matter if she was poor, if she was a widow, if she was from the wrong part of town, made no difference to her, because there were no excuses for failing to do what was right. She could have had the support of the community, nobody would have blamed her, it would have been politically correct for her not to give because of her poverty, but she refused to use anything as an excuse for not doing what was pleasing in God's sight.

She refused to use her obstacles, her difficulties, her personal tragedies, her struggles as an excuse for not giving. For her, there were to be no excuses.

I'm often asked the question about poor people and should they give to the lord, should they sacrificially give, should they be generous, should they be asked to give just like everyone else. I heard a story once about a person who said that he was so poor he couldn't afford to give to the Lord. But when he got rich, he then said that giving the tithe would be too expensive. There's always an excuse for not giving to the Lord. Everyone of us here has bills to pay. All of us are living in the same economy. Some of us are doing a little better than some others, and some of us are doing a little worse than some others. But as the financial events of the past few weeks in this country have proven, anybody could be put in a position where their financial security could be jeopardized. There is always an excuse for not giving money away.

And let me clarify the meaning of that word, "excuse," hopefully to legitimize its understanding. For an excuse, according to Merriam Websters online dictionary, involves the removal of blame, the forgiveness of a responsibility, to justify one's actions. Simply put, an excuse is a phony tale or made up story to try to cover one's backside. "Oh you're just making excuses," we say. There also is a difference between a reason for a misdeed and an excuse for a misdeed. Sometimes, we offer reasons for why our homework did not get done, like my dog ate my homework, or nowadays my computer ate my homework. And that's the "reason" why our homework didn't get turned in. But a reason is not necessarily an excuse, to excuse meaning to pardon or to condone, or to not impute a penalty. So a teacher may say that they understand the reason why you didn't turn in your homework, but that does not necessarily excuse it. One is excused from homework when the reason is sufficient to pardon the infraction. And some of us are in situations financially where most of us would excuse your not giving ten percent, or not giving to this fund or that fund because of various reasons that serve as a legitimate excuse. You just lost your job, you're going through a messy divorce, you're being sued for thousands of dollars, or you're just living on barely-get-along street on a fixed income and you're not sure if it's financially correct to give away money when you're so poor. But here is a widow, a poor widow, with a good excuse, with a legitimate excuse, whom Jesus observed putting her contribution into the offering, making no excuses, not accepting the easy way out, overcoming obstacles, doing whatever she has to so she can give to the Lord and further the ministry. No excuses.

And here is where I believe the Lord has a word for us in more areas of our lives than just giving and stewardship. Because a whole lot of folks have been dealt some tough blows in their lives that would serve as excuses for not doing what is right, for not going to church, for not being faithful to our spouses, for not helping out with a missions project, for not volunteering to teach Sunday School classes, for not coming out to prayer meetings. "We work long hours, we hardly have time for each other, we need our beauty sleep..." Legitimate excuses, am I right about it? "Sunday is my only day to sleep in so I can't make it to Sunday School. Saturdays are my day off so I can't afford to volunteer to serve on a board or a committee that meets on a Saturday." Legitimate excuses. Right? I've heard them from some of you, and I've made some of them myself.

And yet, I've also seen folks with the same excuses, the same busy lives, the same crazy schedules making time to serve, do this or that for the Lord, make it to Bible Study and Prayer meeting, and still offer to me to do more to help in whatever way the church needs

them. These are people who refuse to take the excuse right before them so they can continue to be blessed in serving the Lord with joy and gladness.

I think some of you have more of an understanding of this concept of not taking the excuses offered to us for not succeeding, for not going to college because you came from poor neighborhoods and poor schools and no one expected anything of you. Young people today are using the excuse that this is a racist society, this is a have vs. the have nots world. They blame the government, they blame the president, they blame slavery, they blame white folks, they blame black folks, they blame their parents, they blame their poor school system, they blame their upbringing, they blame their neighborhood. And truth be told, there's a whole lot of truth in some of those reason. We still have a huge disparity between rich and poor. We still have a huge disparity in the funding of inner city schools compared to suburban schools. There are some reasons why young men hang out on street corners where they're accepted and they're respected and where they're appreciated, as opposed to applying for jobs in a society where they wind up not being accepted, not being respected, not being appreciated. Images of minorities in the media are only recently starting to change, after decades and centuries of what Carter G. Woodson called the *Miseducation of the Negro*, in which our histories and our cultures and our people have long been disparaged and/or ignored by mainstream society. And it's no wonder kids feel they have no role models, no wonder they have no aspiration, no wonder they have little to no hope of ever getting out of the mess they were born into. I recently heard a sociologist say statistics show the socio-economic situation that a person is born into is most likely the socio-economic situation they will die in. Change and hope and belief that things will get better in this society are not supported by the data, and our young people feel this, they breathe this, and they accept this as their excuse for why they don't do their homework, why they don't try hard in school, why they don't show up to school, why they drop out and hang out and wind up locked up. They are using all of these reasons as an excuse for giving up, as an excuse for acting out, as an excuse for rebellious and violent behavior.

And that's where this widow's mite speaks to us so powerfully, because here is a person who had a legitimate excuse for acting poor because she was poor. Yet, there she is in the 21st chapter of Luke's gospel still giving, still worshipping, still serving, still doing what's right, still acting like a saint of God ought to act. Somebody told me that I may be from the hood, but I refuse to live like the hood. Just because society is all messed up doesn't mean we have to be all messed up. It may be a legitimate excuse, there may be all kinds of logical reasons for giving up on yourself and on your family, and if you're okay for settling for what this world has predestined for you, than go ahead and drop out of school, go ahead and quit on your family, go ahead and give into the temptations of drugs and alcohol. Many in this society would say that you're just a victim of an unjust society and they didn't expect anything better from you anyway. But this widow, this woman of God, this strong, generous, virtuous, refuse-to-lose woman, she sets an example that we don't have to let our situation serve as an excuse for our giving up.

We don't have to let this unjust society be our excuse for why we don't live right, why we don't graduate college, why we don't stay our prison, why we don't go to church, why we don't serve God and each other. Maybe society would excuse us if we didn't, but let me tell you that we don't have to settle for what society predestines for us. The

childhood saying rings true in this sense: *They're not the boss of me*. They don't get to call the shots of how I'm going to act. They don't get to discourage me into quitting on life. God is the boss of me, and God's Word says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

God is the boss of me, and God's word says, "If you say to this mountain, be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it shall be done for you." Hear me church! Don't allow your obstacles to be an excuse for why you don't become and do all that God has for you.

I remember watching a football game where the team I was rooting for was behind late in the fourth quarter, the star running back injured his knee and couldn't play, the referees were making all kinds of bad calls against my team, and it just looked like we just weren't going to get it done. But the team rallied behind the backup players, found a way to score and won the game in thrilling fashion. And when they asked the coach about how they did it with all those penalties and all those injuries. And the coach said, "I told them we could either sit here and feel sorry for ourselves and tell all our friends the excuses we have for why we didn't win, or we can go out and overcome every obstacle out there including the refs and win this game. I told them that it's a lot more fun to overcome obstacles and win than to use them as an excuse and lose. If we have to play a freshman at running back to win, than that's what we're going to do. If we have to beat the lousy refs and the other team, then that's what we're going to do. "Saints, I come to tell you, the devil will lay out every excuse in the book for you not to succeed in life, for you not to be a blessing to others, for you not to be a faithful church member, for you not to have a loving home, for you not to go to college and grad school and get a good job and be a success. He'll make you think that no one expects you to overcome those obstacles. No one expects you to work out the problems in your marriage. No one expects your children to stay out of trouble living in the neighborhood they live in. But this widow who gave her best anyway, even though she was poor, even though she had no husband, even though no one expected anything out of her, if she can do it, so can we. I come to tell you that we got folks in here who grew up in Jim Crow time, grew up with separate but equal facilities, Black only drinking faucets and bathrooms. Couldn't buy a meal at a restaurant on a road trip. And they still went to college, still got good jobs, still have happy homes, still give to the church, still serve the Lord with joy and gladness. They could have used it as an excuse, because lord knows it wasn't easy. But they were determined to get through, determined to do what's right, determined to make something of themselves. And no devil or no racism or no insensitive government or no incompetent politician was going to keep them from being who God called them to be.

Saints, if you have to overcome obstacles on your way to success, then so be it, but don't let obstacles become an excuse for not doing your best. If you've come from a broken home, you don't have to build another broken home. If you come from the wrong neighborhood, you can still do the right thing.

If you weren't raised in the church, you can still rise up through the church. If you never knew Christ Jesus as your lord, you can still make him your lord. Because one of these days, we all have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and when we do, we aren't

going to be able to say, "well, I always intended to, or I thought I'd sleep in on Sundays, or it wasn't the cool thing to do when I was living." No, there will be no excuses.

Church Vows Section Four

Our salvation: Yours, mine and ours?

- A. What happens at the cross? (II Corinthians 5:21)
- B. Do you believe it? Has it changed your life? (Romans 6:5-6)
- C. This is the most important thing about our ministry.
- D. So, what is required for membership in the church? Why?

Consider membership vow #1: *Do you believe the Bible both the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its teaching of salvation to be the perfect and only true teaching of salvation?*

Our faith: Why are we so sure about what we know?

- A. The Scriptures
 - 1. What are we claiming when we say that the Bible is The Word of God?
 - 2. Why do we believe it to be so?
 - 3. Why are there so many different interpretations?
- B. Biblical doctrine: What do we believe?
 - 1. Why are there other doctrinal positions?
 - 2. What is Reformed Doctrine?
 - 3. What we preach at Strong Tower Fellowship: The Doctrines of Grace.
 - 4. Outward pictures of our salvation: Baptism and The Lord's Supper (Ephesians 3:8-9)

Consider membership vow #2: *Do you confess that you need God's mercy, and that you do not trust in yourself, but only in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation?*

- C. Biblical government
 - 1. Born again to be connected (Ephesians 4:7-16)
 - 2. What are the three types of church government?

3. Strong Tower Fellowship is a Presbyterian Church: Uh Oh!
4. The “D” word: What is church discipline?

Consider membership vow #4: Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of the church, that is to your brothers and sisters, and to the elders they have chosen, and in case your life should be found to be gone astray either teaching or living, to obey their discipline?

Our Purpose: Why does the church exist?

- A. Worship: (Psalm 150; Acts 2:42-47)
- B. Fellowship: (Ephesians 4:1-16; I Corinthians 12; Acts 2:12-47)
- C. Outreach: (Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 28:18-20 Acts (A cross-cultural strategy.))
- D. Service: (Ephesians 2:10; Acts 2:42-27)

IV. Our Vision: What do we intend to practice?

Strong Tower is to be:

- A. A multi-cultural church— whom are we trying to reach and why?
- B. Encouraging vital worship:
Joyful worship before our God with a whole heart, mind and emotions.
- C. Innovative word-deed ministries
- D. Discipleship of urban people:
Discipleship/Leadership development
- E. Committed to send and plant like ministries:
Evangelism/Ministries: God’s cross cultural strategy: GO!

Consider membership vow #5: Do you promise by God's grace to love the brothers and sisters, in deed and action, as well as in heart: do you promise to them your time, your exhortation, your goods, and your life, as the Lord may call upon you to use them, in the unity and love of the Spirit of God?

V. Our Membership Commitment: What is it?

- A. The steps to proceed to my membership commitment. An interview with the Elders: what should I expect?
- B. Taking the public vows of membership during a worship service.

Consider membership vow #3: Do you now declare that Jesus Christ is your Master and Lord, and do you promise to live for and serve him, by God's help with everything that is in you, and to leave behind the world and to die to your sinful desires, and to live a godly life?

Testimony: Writing Your Story

Because each Christian's ability to communicate how they entered into a relationship with Christ is vitally important, we require everyone who wishes to pursue membership at Strong Tower Fellowship to write out their personal testimony.

Your testimony is the story of how you came into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Each person's story is special and, like a snowflakes, no two are the exact same.

While you have the freedom to write your testimony in any form that you deem appropriate, many have found it easier to write their story of grace by breaking down their testimony into the following three stages:

1. Before you accepted Christ: Describe your value system, motivations and life-style prior to your conversion. Identify the events and circumstances that caused you to consider Jesus Christ as the solution to your spiritual need and ultimately led to your decision to accept Him as Savior. In some cases this process may have taken place over a long period of time.
2. Circumstances surrounding your inviting Christ into your life: Please include the specific steps that you took to become a Christian and why you believe that you have eternal life. As much as possible, try to avoid religious terminology or church clichés (born again, asked Jesus into my heart, washed in the blood, etc.), as this will prepare you to communicate your story more clearly and authentically to your friends.
3. How your life has changed as a result of being a new creature in Christ: Describe the difference that Christ has made in your thinking, motivation, values, and actions. For some this may be a dramatic change from the "before" description. For others who accepted Christ at an early age, this step will allow you to think through and describe how your life is different than what it could have been and to describe the transformation that is continuing to take place in your life. In either case, please state what assurances that you have of forgiveness and eternal life.

We understand that this may be the first time you have ever written out your testimony. It can be a challenging task. If you need help, please feel free to contact Tom Anderson.

We look forward to reading your story and also hope that you will take the time to share it with someone else who may not know the truth of the Gospel.