

Let Your Light Shine Before Men: Godliness for a Godless Age

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A German proverb states, “Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm.” Roughly translated the proverb says, “A wind-fallen apple will always land close to the tree that produced it.” The point of the proverb is: fruit will correspond to the tree that bore it. It lies in the nature of the case that the fruit produced must reflect that which bore it.

In everyday life the proverb may most often find its application in the observation that a son’s traits and characteristics closely resemble those of his father—for better or for worse.

It is surely an observable phenomenon that children are a reflection of their parents. That, however, is true not only in the physical and biological sense, but it has its counterpart also in the spiritual realm. Children of God are, or at least ought to be, godlike and godly. They will reflect their origin, their spiritual genes. But just what is godliness? What actually is holiness or piety? How does it manifest itself?

We have trouble with abstract terms. Our Savior, good teacher that he is, knows that and hence he helps us with a picture to illustrate the proper relationship which should exist between us and our God. He uses the common, ordinary, everyday picture of light when he urges us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

The function and activity of light is a picture of how sons and daughters of God are to reflect their relationship to the Father in heaven. Let us, in the opportunity afforded to us by this convention, explore that relationship under five headings: 1. the source of the light, 2. the transfer of the light, 3. the purpose of the light, 4. the effect of the light, and 5. ways of reflecting and projecting the light more brightly.

1. The Source of the Light

“Let your light shine,” the Savior exhorts his hearers and readers. You will all have recognized those words of encouragement and exhortation as a part of our Savior’s well-known Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). It is significant, yes, absolutely essential, to keep in mind that the Sermon on the Mount is not a general exhortation given to all men. Although it contains the “golden rule” of doing to others as we would have them do to us, it is not a broad platform of social improvement in the world at large. It is not a suggested course of action for bringing unregenerate people into the Kingdom. No, rather, it is spoken to those who are in the Kingdom, to those who already know the true God, to those who have been made disciples. Note the opening words of Matthew’s fifth chapter which give us the setting for the Sermon. The evangelist tells us, “Now when he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he went up on the mountainside and sat down. His *disciples* came to him, and he began to teach *them*, saying, ‘Blessed are the poor...’”

To be sure, the crowds are very much in evidence, and they no doubt were permitted to “overhear” much of what was said to the disciples, but it is important to realize that the directive, “Let your light shine before men,” is spoken to people who themselves have learned to know the true God. It must perforce be that way, because God himself is the source of all “light.”

As “light” is here used, it serves as a picture word; it stands for something. It refers to qualities and characteristics of God which may in a manner of speaking be compared to some of the characteristics of light. The various ways in which God is like light are perhaps nowhere summed up more concisely and clearly than in the firm directive which the Apostle Paul gave to young Timothy. In the sixth chapter of his first epistle to Timothy the Apostle directs his young understudy: “In the sight of God, who gives life to everything...I charge you to keep this commandment without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is

immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever” (1 Timothy 6:13-16).

Note what great and glorious things Paul says about God, the sum total of which adds up to “light unapproachable.” The Apostle credits him with being the creator, the God “who gives life to everything.” But he not only brought everything into being, he also controls all things, so that he must now be honored as the “blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords.” He is furthermore the preserver of all that he has created, keeping it in his hand until “the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time.”

He is a God of perfect holiness and complete righteousness, for Timothy is charged to keep the commandment “without spot or blame” until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is good reason for Timothy to be concerned about proper conduct, because a day of reckoning is coming and there is a dreadful verdict in store for all those who have offended, for the judge is God “who alone is immortal.” The wages of sin is death. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. God alone is immortal. Such an awesome, holy, transcendent God, Paul says, “lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.”

In a similar situation, confronted by deity, Isaiah exclaimed, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5).

The same is true for all men. For us sinners a holy and righteous God is like a brilliant, blazing, blinding light that we cannot bear to approach: In his epistle John states tersely, “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). No one can see God and live.

The solution is to be found only in a perfectly holy and righteous God who at the same time is also a gracious and merciful God. And that is the kind of God we have for, marvel of marvels, what we could not do for ourselves, that God has done for us—in and through Christ. Again it is John, this time in his Gospel, who says, “No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18). God not only *is* light, but in and through Christ he also *gives* light. Let us look briefly then at the transfer of this light.

2. The Transfer of the Light

A basic question that demands an answer of us is: Is a transfer of “light” really necessary? Or is it just possible that men, perhaps in varying degrees of intensity or brightness, actually do have some inherent illumination they can draw on? Is there some native “light” man can use to find his way, perhaps even to please and satisfy God? Scripture leaves absolutely no doubt as to the utter darkness of sinful man. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. Natural man is lost, benighted, totally separate from God’s light. Of the many passages that might be chosen, let us hear just one sample each from the Apostles Paul and Peter.

To the Ephesians Paul writes: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. That it is why it is said, ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you’” (Ephesians 5:8-14).

Peter is just as frank in asserting the sin-darkened background of his readers. He states, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9).

Two great truths emerge from Peter and Paul’s clear statements. First of all, man needs to receive “light” from the outside if he is to stand in God’s presence. Secondly, such light is available to him. But how does he receive it?

As we have already stated, only in and through Christ does that blessing of “light” come to sinful and benighted men. Again, Scripture abounds in examples setting forth that truth.

The evangelist Matthew points out to us that Jesus’ birth was in fulfillment of what Isaiah had foretold, namely that “the people living in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned” (Matthew 5:16; Isaiah 9:2).

Luke records for us Simeon’s evaluation of the Christ Child as “a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel” (Luke 2:32).

Speaking about John the Baptist’s testimony, the Fourth Gospel states: “In him (Christ) was life, and that life was the light of men...There came a man who was sent from God; His name was John (the Baptist)...He came as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world” (John 1:4-9).

Christ himself attests to the correctness of this testimony, for he too on numerous occasions speaks of himself as “light.” For example, to the people of Jerusalem Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8: 12). Similar examples and quotations could be multiplied, showing unmistakably Scripture’s teaching that God’s light comes to men in and through Christ.

But as already noted, “light” is a picture word. It illustrates and elucidates an abstract concept. It attempts to convey to our weak and feeble minds the indescribably great and wonderful good news that a just and holy God, by taking of his own righteousness (“light”) and by giving it to us benighted sinners, has “enlightened,” us and totally turned our lives around.

What this picture of transferring light illustrates Scripture also states in literal albeit abstract terms when it uses such language as redemption, atonement, reconciliation, and justification. Let us look at just a few of the major passages where Scripture speaks in literal terms about this transfer of light.

Basic to any such discussion would be a consideration of 2 Corinthians, where Paul speaks of his ministry of reconciliation. That there is a major change involved in God’s transfer of light to sin-darkened man is evident from the effect that Paul claims for his preaching. He says, “We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:5,6).

How complete and thorough going a change that is becomes evident from Paul’s evaluation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

But how did all this come about? Who or what worked the big change? Again we let Paul speak. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

The key word is “reconciled.” It implies that, before the reconciliation took place, there was hostility, enmity, fighting and rebellion. This is the literal counterpart to the figurative language that we have been hearing. Where John in his Gospel says, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19), Paul says literally and flat out: Man was fighting against God and needed to be reconciled.

There was nothing man was inclined to do to patch up things between himself and his God. The sinner was on campaign against God. Any hope of mending the situation had to come from God. And that he did! Outlining and describing God’s peace-making role was the burden of Paul’s preaching, and it forms also the heart and core of the message of his second letter to the Corinthians when he says, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

God was reconciling the world; man did nothing. In fact, man in his rebellious state was neither interested in nor aware of what great things God was doing for him. More will be said later, but note in passing the scope of God’s work. It is the “world,” all men, who have been reconciled.

Of special interest to us at the moment is *how* the reconciling was done. It was done “in Christ.” In his great love for fallen mankind God sent his only Son into the world to be the substitute for sinners. He fulfilled

what God's holy law demanded of men. By his innocent death he paid the penalty that a sinful world had earned by its breaking of that holy law.

Because of what Christ did in man's stead, God can now look at fallen mankind as not guilty, as free from all sin. Note that the sinner has not become better, i.e., sinless and for that reason acceptable to God. God has not lowered his standards and allowed sin to slip by. Justice has been served "in Christ," for "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Sin is indeed counted—but not against the sinner. It was charged to Christ. By his innocent death sin has been paid, covered, removed as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). Hence God no longer counts sin against men. Reconciliation, and its closely related term *justification*, is, in one way of looking at it, essentially a negative concept. It's the non-imputation of sin. God no longer charges sin against people, which is nothing other than to say that in Christ God has forgiven all sin.

Our emphasis in this second section of the essay is: How is God's light transferred to men? If being reconciled to God is accomplished through the non-imputation of sin or the forgiveness of sin, then we might say that, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul is describing the transfer process in its negative aspect, i.e., the taking away of darkness. The positive side, the bringing of "light" or the imputing of righteousness is indeed alluded to. Paul says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for-us, *so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" For a fuller discussion of the "righteousness of God" we do better to turn to *Romans*.

Of the numerous passages in *Romans* that speak of justification and beg for our attention, let us restrict ourselves primarily to the fifth chapter. There Paul asserts, "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners; so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19).

Two points require our attention. Note first of all that "to justify" is courtroom language, a legal term. It refers to a juridical decision, a verdict handed down by a judge. In 2 Corinthians Paul told us that God reconciled the world to himself. He declared the enmity to be over. He could do so because all sins have been paid for by Christ; hence they are no longer counted or charged against the sinner.

Here in *Romans* Paul tells us that God has declared something even more astonishing. Not only don't we any longer have our sins charged against us but Paul, tells us that God has declared us just. He has put assets on the credit side of our ledger. Instead of charging men with sin, God credits them with the merits earned by Christ. In Christ God looks at men as if they were just and righteous.

A second factor that requires our attention is the extent, or the scope, of those who are included among those whom God sees as righteous. Note that there are not two separate groups spoken of in the fifth chapter of *Romans*, but the same people are included on both sides of Paul's comparison. Actually, Paul introduces his comparison already in verse twelve, but there is a digression which keeps him from finishing it at that point. After saying, "Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all"—after saying that, we would have expected Paul to continue: so also through one man (Christ) life came to all men. But a digression postpones that thought until verse eighteen, where Paul "gets back on track." There he says, "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness (*dikaionatos*) was justification that brings life for all men."

Note the amazing truth which Paul here teaches. The number of people "justified" is exactly the same as those who were under condemnation as the result of one trespass. In short, all men are justified. Recall that God "was reconciling *the world* to himself." John the Baptist points to the Lamb of God who "Takes away the sin of *the world.*" Here in *Romans* Paul speaks of a justification "that brings life *for all men.*" Scripture teaches a universal and objective justification.

From letters and phone calls received, also from men in this district, I know that there is interest in and concern about the four "Kokomo Statements." Let me say immediately, and in doing so concur with the evaluation reached by the committee appointed to review the Kokomo case, that without context and standing by themselves the Four Statements are an inadequate presentation of the doctrine of justification. I would go a step farther and say that it would have been vastly preferable for the congregation involved and the dissidents

within that congregation if the issue had been confined to a discussion of Scripture passages and not the Four Statements. The Four Statements are not the form into which one would be inclined to cast theses if he were trying to defend the doctrine of objective justification. Compare *This We Believe*. It is well to note that the Four Statements were advanced and made the center of controversy by opponents of objective justification, not by the congregation seeking to defend that doctrine!

But for all of the Statements' weaknesses and ambiguities, the central truth which they convey, namely that God really has forgiven all people, even Judas, is a truth that we dare not lightly dismiss or abandon. It involves the very heart of the gospel and the source of our most precious comfort and assurance.

But if we accept a "universal justification," does that make us universalists, as the opponents charge? Not if we maintain our balance by holding also to the other aspect of justification which Scripture teaches; namely the personal, the individual, the *subjective* component of justification where by faith the individual lays hold of and appropriates for himself the forgiveness of sins that is universally and objectively there for all people.

Again, Paul's letter to the Romans will serve nicely to safeguard that teaching: In the opening chapter, as early as where Paul presents the theme of his letter, he states, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:16-17).

Let us note two things in Paul's description of the gospel—a gospel in which he can place supreme confidence. In the gospel there is an objective righteousness, separate from man, and that righteousness becomes man's own by faith in Christ. The two go together.

We live in an age of convenience items. Many a package bears the simple direction, "Just add water." Goal's plan of salvation is NOT like that. The message of the gospel is not: Christ has done this much for you. Just add faith, and you will be justified. No, the righteousness of Christ is a finished product. It's an objective reality. Note that it has an independent existence, for it can be "revealed" in the gospel.

And it can also be appropriated by faith. It not only can but it must be appropriated by faith. There is no other way. "He that believeth not shall be damned" is still true, objective justification notwithstanding. Judas is justly in hell. The Scripture teaches no universalism, and we dare not either. Faith, i.e., trust and confidence in the perfect and complete merits of Christ, is absolutely essential. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6).

But even that faith is impossible for us. Faith is not and can not be a self-generated thing. It is a gift from the Holy Spirit, worked through the means of grace. It would be presumptuous on my part to try and improve on Luther's masterful exposition of that truth as stated in his explanation to the Third Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel and enlightened me with his gifts."

The Holy Ghost has enlightened me; he has given me light. Here then is the answer to our question posed at the beginning of this section. If God lives in unapproachable light, in fact, himself *is* light, how can that be transferred to weak and sinful mortals? Answer: By justifying faith worked by the Holy Spirit as he through the means of grace puts into our possession the perfect righteousness of Christ. Then God's light shines into our life and dispels our native darkness. But not only do we ourselves receive God's gracious light and live comfortably in it, but we begin also to reflect it in the world around us. That brings us to the purpose of light.

3. The Purpose of the Light

It was not to a general audience, i.e., a mixed group that included mere curiosity seekers and cautious skeptics, but to his disciples that Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount said, "You are the light of the world."

The disciples were "light" by virtue of justifying faith. They had received and benefited from the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit. Hence there is no command or encouragement to *become* light." Jesus

does not say, “You ought to be light,” or “Strive to become light.” Rather there is the simple declaration, “You are the light of the world.” Justifying faith had made them such.

An appreciation of that truth serves to reinforce a thought touched on previously, namely, that a believer’s justification is a completed thing. The merits of Christ are all-sufficient, and faith in Christ gives us everything that we need. In Christ we have forgiveness of all our sins. Our total debt has been paid. We have peace with God and a good conscience. The assurance of an eternity of bliss with God in heaven is ours. Nothing more is needed. That is why one looks in vain in the Scriptures for any encouragement to grow in grace or in faith so as to become more completely justified or more fully saved. In Christ all that is complete.

On the other hand, Scripture abounds in the encouragement to let the effects of saving faith show themselves evermore fully in a life of sanctification. It is so also here in our Savior’s Sermon on the Mount. After assuring the disciples that they are indeed “light,” Christ gives them strong encouragement, appealing to God’s divine purpose for making them “light.” He says, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). This is nothing other than a call for godliness in a godless age! Why does our Savior urge it?

Let us begin by noting one thing that is not a reason for Christ’s calling for true piety and godliness from every individual disciple and believer. The believer does not need it for himself. He is not thereby hoping to improve his status before God, or to score points, or in any way to serve or benefit himself. The twin metaphors of the city and the lamp make that unmistakably clear.

The city set on a hill is not described to us as bright and well-lighted so as to be safe and comfortable for its inhabitants. No, its salient feature is that its illumination reaches out into the countryside and attracts the traveler and bypasser.

The same is true of the lamp. “People do not light a lamp and put it under a bowl.” If a lamp existed for its own sake, it could just as well burn in isolation. It might as well be under a bowl. But it lies in the nature of the case that that is not what people do. “Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”

And now comes the point of comparison, the application of the truth illustrated by Christ’s metaphors. “In the same way,” he says, “let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds.” Good deeds are done to be seen. We don’t often think of it in that way. In fact, it may even strike us as wrong, or at the very least risky, to live our life “that men may see our good deeds.”

Doesn’t our Savior have something more to say about that subject? Indeed he does—and in this very Sermon on the Mount. To be sure, there are some stern warnings, but the warnings are against ostentation and “showing off” with bogus “deeds of righteousness.” Although the doers want to pass them off as deeds done for others, they really are doing them for themselves; that is what makes them the hypocrisy which Christ openly scores.

In the very next chapter, after urging his disciples to let their light shine before men, Jesus continues, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:1-4).

Or: “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full” (Matthew 6:5,6).

What Jesus is here describing is in an entirely different league from the good deeds that he enjoins on his disciples. This is not godliness for a godless age, but the godless feigning godliness: These are deeds done for self, not for others. They are “darkness,” not the “light” which Christ looks for in his disciples and believers. Of disciples it may be said, as Paul does of the Ephesians, “You were once darkness, but now you are light in

the Lord. Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth” (Ephesians 5:8). “In the Lord” they can now truly live for others.

Note also how people-oriented the fruits of the Spirit are. Paul tells the Galatians, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22,23). And in a classic understatement Paul adds, “Against such there is no law.” Not only is there no law against them, they are precisely the “light,” the good deeds, that Christ looks for from all of his disciples and followers.

But why does Christ look for good deeds from us? It is not that we need them for ourselves or for our salvation. God’s grace in Christ has provided all that we need for time and eternity. Our mission in life is rather to honor him who has saved us and to glorify his holy name. It is that for which he has called us. To readers of all time Peter says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Imagine! We, who once were not a people, have now become the people of God. We, who once were in darkness, have seen the light—yes, have become “light.” Although we are still plagued by many a sin and shortcoming, by many a weakness and wayward thought or deed, yet by faith in Christ our new man is able in faltering fashion to do things that genuinely please our God and bring honor to his name. There can be no more satisfying activity nor any higher motive for letting our light shine than to know that it brings honor and praise to our Savior God.

But in his infinite grace and goodness God gives us yet a second incentive. He allows us to be his agents in bringing others to praise his name. It is that encouragement especially which is in evidence when Christ urges us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Recall that Christ called his disciples “the light of *the world*.” Outsiders and worldlings are to see them, like a city set on a hill, and are to be drawn and attracted to what they have to offer. This is true godliness for a godless age. There is a mission consideration involved in letting our light shine. We perhaps don’t often think of it in that way, but Jesus is virtually saying, “Good deeds are an outreach tool.” They are to be instrumental in building the church. But we might well ask, “Has it worked out that way?”

4. The Effect of the Light

We can hardly imagine what it must have felt like to be one of a group of disciples, soon to become “apostles,” and to hear the Lord of the church say, “You are the light of *the world*. The world is depending on you for light.” That would have been a staggering and crushing burden if the disciples had not received also the corollary truth that really they were not bulbs independently producing light, but that they were rather mirrors reflecting the light of their Lord Jesus Christ. They were to share what they had been given. Also here it was true what was said in connection with the figure of the branches and the Vine, “Without me you can do nothing.”

Granted that Christ is the source of light and the Word and sacraments are the means to channel his light and grace to men, yet there remains always the human element, the weak and fragile light bearers. How well did they fare? How well did the Savior’s plan of having frail men be light to others work?

From the very beginning, commencing with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Savior’s program proceeded on plan. Quiet and unassuming, yet also patient and persistent, the disciples by word and deed faithfully reflected their Savior. When beaten, imprisoned, and forbidden to preach and to let their light shine, they doggedly declared, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Confounded and confused, their enemies had no answer for this phenomenon until, as Luke tells us, “They took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). There was the source of the light which they could not quench.

The good work of the Twelve was supplemented and augmented by the light cast by Paul and his co-workers. Eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of their light bearing is the frantic charge made against Paul’s party by the unbelieving opponents in Thessalonica. They complained to the city fathers, “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here” (Acts 17:6).

The reflected light of the Savior is a powerful force. Paul realized that, and to spread its mighty beams he enlisted the help of others. For example, he urges the Philippians to live their faith to the full so that, “you may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:14).

Their work, and that of many others, was not without effect. Throughout the ages dedicated light bearers, have reflected their Savior and thereby have led countless thousands to praise our gracious Father in heaven. From generation to generation there has been true godliness for each godless age.

But is it still continuing in our age? Is the mustard plant still growing and flourishing? On balance we would surely have to say that we in the WELS have been singularly blessed. Among the host of blessings that come to mind, we would certainly have to include the singular blessing that although we are a confessional church and preach what is often an unpalatable message, the Word has attracted and won a very considerable number of people into our fellowship. The Statistical Report for the year 1985 lists our total membership (baptized souls) at 416,624. The “shocker” is that that is 33 souls fewer than the year before!

How did it happen? The three basic types of growth, infant baptisms, adult confirmations and affirmations of faith were all greater in 1985 than in 1984. Internal growth (9,035 infant baptisms) and external growth (3,647 adult confirmations and 3,893 affirmations of faith) greatly surpassed the losses through death (3,992).

If one totals that up, that yields a net increase of 12,583 souls, and yet there is a total decline in membership of 33 souls. What has happened to 12,616 souls? A “News and Comment” article in the upcoming *Quarterly* (Summer issue 1986) observes, “It seems apparent that the basic source of numerical loss is losses ‘out the back door’ through church discipline or removal from membership of those who have joined other churches or simply disappeared.”

“Joined other churches,” “simply disappeared,”—those are sobering words. How could it have been prevented? Is it possible—just possible—that the light of the rest of us was too dim to show these brothers the way, or our godliness too little in evidence to hold them in our midst?

I know that the Spirit works when and where he wills. I know about the four kinds of soil, three of which are disconcertingly unproductive. I know Scriptures refer to the church as a “little flock” and that here on earth it will always remain the “church militant” and not the “church triumphant.” But the knowledge that some 12,000 brothers would seem no longer to be walking with us leads one to pluck up the courage to ask: Are we perhaps not letting our light shine as we ought? And, if so, what might be done about it?

5. Ways of Reflecting and Projecting the Light More Brightly

In all of this it is absolutely essential always to remember that we are not independent producers of the light needed by the world. Christ is the light source; we are merely reflectors of, *his* light.

But when we see problems in the church (and membership loss is a problem; perhaps the ultimate church problem), then it is proper to ask ourselves: Are we in our lives and actions reflecting the full brightness of Christ? Or have our mirrors perhaps become tarnished and our lenses smudged to the point that men no longer see our “light”? Do they see only paltry and shabby works that encourage no one to praise our Father in heaven? If we are honest with ourselves, we will all have to confess that we daily fall far short of our potential. But what to do about it? There really is only one answer, and that is with renewed commitment to get back to and to use with greater diligence the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments.

It would be easy to think of the Sunday service and to let it go at that. That would be simple, and perhaps simplistic. If we are to be truly godly in a godless age, then we need to spend time with God. We need to be closer to him than one hour per week in church. We need to spend time with him in his Word, individually and/or in group study, with the former perhaps being more likely to be practical and consistent.

At the risk of being called a “methodist,” I will still, however, suggest a method of regularly meeting God. It’s as simple as a *scheduled* Bible reading program. I will not be making suggestions what the schedule

should be, what books should be read first, how much time should be spent at it. I am merely suggesting that it be done, regularly, daily and at the same time of day.

Speaking for myself, I can read devotionally at the end of the day, but the intense reading, the serious grappling with the text, is in my case better done early in the day. One of the firm rules of successful financial planning is, "Pay yourself first." Before you do any impulse buying, before you buy even the necessities, before you pay the creditors, put something aside for yourself. I am suggesting the same in the spiritual realm with your use of time.

"Not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect." I don't always follow my advice. I get lured into thinking that other things just need to be done during the time set aside for Bible study. But when I neglect the Scriptures, I am the poorer for it, and I fear those who have a claim on me that day are the less well served. Give God a fair share of quality time.

The next two encouragements stand together: pray and work. Prayer is not a means of grace. It is the response of him who has benefited from the means of grace. If we have been with God in his Word, then instinctively we will also be going to him in prayer with the cares and problems, the trials and vexations that confront us the moment we leave the comfortable confines of his Word and address ourselves to the rigors of our daily routine. There are a host of practical concerns and things we will be praying for.

But when our thoughts center on the church and our role in it as light bearers, then there are two petitions that might well come to the foreground. The first is the prayer that the Lord would help us overcome our willfulness and self-centeredness. There is a strong temptation to build the church exactly as we would like it. To be sure, there are some things that are not negotiable. Doctrine is one of them. But there are a host of things that are simply preference or custom. A love for souls will require that the light bearer remain flexible on what may be yielded. Were at least some of the 12,000 who left our fellowship in 1985 perhaps "turned off" by things that did not need to be issues?

A second petition that must constantly be on the lips of the light bearer is the prayer that the Lord would help curb our pride. There is the strong temptation to think: I have to do this; only then will it be done right. There is a great deal to be said for dedication and devotion to duty, for the determination to see a task through. But there is also a place for the realization that others too have received gifts and talents from their Maker. Trying to do it all ourselves is likely to overwhelm and inundate us to the point where the work will be done poorly or not at all. And to make matters worse, we have deprived others of the joy and satisfaction of sharing in Kingdom work. It would seem safe to assume that a great number of those in the 12,000 who "simply disappeared" last year did so with the feeling that they were not needed and would not be missed. Lord, help us with our pride and our self-centeredness.

As noted above, prayer and work go together. The Lord does not drop tailor-made solutions into our lap as we speak the Amen to our petitions. *Ora et labora*, the Latin says. "Pray and work."

Again, there are a host of areas to work at, but in the matter of being light bearers seeking to win people for the church and to keep them there, let us direct our attention to that relatively difficult and endless task of simply getting to know our people, both within the church and outside of it.

As someone presently not serving as the pastor of a congregation, I will confess that I am constantly frustrated at seeing people in church whom I don't know. There is nothing immoral, of course, in going up to a person and addressing him as a total stranger of whom I have to ask whether he's a member or not. But notice what signal I'm giving out. Not only don't I know him, but I'm admitting that I really don't know the "regular members" very well either. What impression will he take as to the warmth and closeness within that congregation?

Again, at the risk of sounding like "methodist," I'll suggest what has been of considerable help to me. I'm referring to a pictorial directory of the membership of the congregation. I'm entirely aware that enterprising companies make a living at that sort of thing, and that there may be some "encouragement" to each member to buy a package of pictures if the congregation goes in on such a program. But even if there is some cost, I would submit that it is well worth it in Kingdom gains. And a counterpart to the "picture book" is a bulletin board

featuring the pictures of new members. No matter if the quality of the photos is marginal and less than esthetic. If they help us to know “our people,” they’re serving an important purpose.

Even with such helps people may still, like me, find themselves regularly asking the pastor or other members, “Who is that couple?” But the point is, we need to work at it. We need to know people with their strengths and their weaknesses. Only then can we make appropriate suggestions as to what groups within the congregation they might be inclined to join or on what committees they might best serve. Let’s involve them, preferably at the start with short-term assignments and light responsibilities, but by all means, let’s bring them into the group. We will not involve people whom we do not know, and we won’t get to know them unless we work at it.

Something similar might be urged in regard to our community. While we are not *of* the world, we are very much *in* it. Otherwise we could not be what our Savior calls us, the light of *the world*. Let us not hesitate to be active citizens in the many areas that do not compromise our faith and scriptural principles. After all, if they do not come to church, the only place where people of the world will see our light is on their own turf. It is still true, the lives of Christians are the only Bible that many people will ever read. Light for their darkness must come from those whom the Holy Spirit by faith in Christ has made the light of the world.

I do not flatter myself into thinking that I have told you new things that you have never heard before. The point is rather: we need to get over our inertia; we need to do what we know needs doing; we need to get on with the work! We have great and compelling reasons for doing so. Our Savior, who has done all for us, bids us to be the light of the world. The world, lost and condemned and lying in darkness, needs our light. Our gracious God will be honored by it. And what is more, the night is coming when no man can work. Let us then, in whatever calling or station the Lord has placed us, heed his encouragement to let our light shine before men, that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. May his Holy Spirit give us the godliness that is needed for our godless age.