

What Draws Us to God?

Why do people start coming to church? Why did you? I suppose there are as many reasons as there are people. Some start associating with whatever church they picked because they decided that something in their lives needed to change. Others have always been there – that’s how they grew up. Others are looking for social interaction. Some really don’t know why they started – it just seemed like the right thing to do. Some heard about this God stuff and decided to check it out. I cannot say that one reason is better than another in terms of starting out. But I can say that some reasons may not work as well as others in the long run.

For example, if you started checking out church because you thought it would make your life run smoothly, you are likely to be disappointed. Certainly, church may help you stay away from some behaviors that land you in prison, but you are just as likely as anyone else to be hit by a drunk driver, lose everything in a fire, or get cancer. Some people give up on church because their major motive for going was to have a comfortable life. If that’s why they came, we need to fix that perception quickly and substitute something that works over time.

Many come to church because they admire this or that church leader. Then the leader messes up, big time – makes headline news, and not in a good way. So they quit. If that’s why they came, we need to fix that perception quickly and substitute something that works over time.

So, again, I’m not saying that any reason to latch onto the gospel is bad. If it got you here, I’m happy. But, there are some motivations you might consider that are in the New Testament that are guaranteed to not fall apart later.

What are the guaranteed attractions that will work over the long haul? Here’s my top five.

First, the goodness or, depending on the translation, the kindness of God. Romans 2:4, “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and patience, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”

God is a really good guy, to the extent that you are inclined to turn your life around to fit in, to associate. God wants to be known as the epitome of goodness, no negatives, completely consistent, no off days.

Unfortunately, through most of its history, the church has focused on the wrath of God, punishment, heaven-and-hell, so people didn’t see much goodness. Most people came to church because they didn’t want to go to hell. That is not how the Bible presents it. Every place where fear is used in connection with a faithful person, that fear is for the fate of the outsiders, never for themselves. Of course, many people became regular church-goers because of the message of the wrath of God. But, it doesn’t work over the long haul. People get tired of being afraid all the time. Constant negativity is just depressing. It is the goodness of God, not the wrath of God, that has the greater and longer-lasting impact.

Of course, goodness among people doesn’t always work out so well. Manipulative people, opportunistic people, self-centered people tend to try to take advantage of good people. Do those con artists really think that they are clever enough to take advantage of God? As Paul put it, “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and patience?”

God can afford to be just plain good – the nicest guy around: patient and gentle and understanding – somebody you would like to hang out with because it is peaceful and interesting and safe. He even went to the trouble of coming to earth – like John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus, God in the flesh. So, He demonstrated that He understands life on earth, and how disappointing it can be. On top of that, He paid off our debt to justice, to the right-and-wrong system. And, on top of that, He pushes aside our well-deserved

reputations as colossal flops and trusts us anyway. The goodness of God leads us to turning around, to waking up to the possibilities of a satisfying life.

And how can I get a good look at this goodness? That has been the rub for a very long time. Generally, church leaders recommend studying the Bible, which is good idea for those who enjoy that sort of thing. But even for avid readers, the Bible contains a lot of depressing history.

For the church-goers who would enjoy the study route (and you don't have to fit in that category to be successful at relating to God – I'll have suggestions for you in a minute.), for the studiers, the psalms are a good place to start. In a lot of them, the author starts out with a complaint, but by considering the goodness of God, the poem turns around. Or, use a concordance and look up all the passages that include words like goodness, or patience, or forbearance, or grace, or compassion, or mercy, or forgiveness. Or, just read through the Bible, stopping to consider how God has dealt with people. If you focus on how people have dealt with God, you will just get frustrated. So, look at it the other way. Despite thousands of years of the failures of mankind, God keeps hanging in there being patient and kind and gracious and forgiving.

For those not into reading, I suggest audio: get the Bible on CDs or just download an audio version onto your phone. Listen while you are on the road. You don't need to analyze it, you just need to be able to visualize the interactions; see the movie in your head.

Whether you get your base information through study or through listening to the stories, then start pondering what it would be like if you were God and you were taking a look at someone who has your history. Would you want to hang out with you? Would you trust you? God does. It takes a lot of patience, gentleness, understanding, and kindness to do that.

My second way that God draws us is His character and His mastery of living on this broken planet. That's what those two words, glory and virtue mean. The first one is His parade of godly character traits. The second is His mastery of living. From 2 Peter 1:3, "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him [Jesus] who called us by glory and virtue." By consistent character and mastering life.

As a small aside, three of my five attractions use the word, called. Lots of religious people have claimed that they have been called to do this or that – because they have been taught to interpret their own emotions as if God were telling them something. The New Testament never uses "called" in that way. If you look up all the passages (or the handout on our website under Word Studies, Called), Christians are called BY the gospel, by the grace, character and virtue of Jesus. Christians are called TO fellowship with Jesus, peace, liberty, His kingdom, His character, holiness, eternal life, suffering, light, a blessing, eternal glory, and the marriage supper of the Lamb. No specific tasks (like preaching or mission work) and no specific locations. But, back to how God attracts us, draws us.

The way that God played out His life on earth, the life of Jesus, gives us a realistic, down-to-earth picture of what God's character looks like when put into practice in this messed up world. Jesus was a real person who lived in a country under military occupation with no hope of advancement or justice or freedom. He wasn't some air-head who floated through life on philosophical nonsense. Jesus was kind and patient and understanding with those who needed that. He was pointed and harsh with the self-righteous. He even turned to violence twice that we know about (when He drove the animal sellers and money-changers out of the Temple with a whip on two different occasions). And, by the way, He was using that whip in full view of the

local police – and they decided it was time for a donut because they weren't going to mess with someone who was that obviously right.

And how do I gain that mental image of this guy, Jesus? Of course, there are the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Picture how it all happened. The gospels are an easy read, made for the common man. The speeches Jesus made are entertaining. Look for the humor. Jesus was by no means stiff or boring. I picture Him using lots of body language and arm motions and gestures to sort of act out the parables in a dramatic yet hilarious way. Again, reading or CDs will work. Your objective is to see the story being played out as if you were there. Several quality movies have been made. Whatever works for you is fine. Put yourself in the scenes, first as the observer, then as Jesus. What would you think about what Peter just said? Or the Pharisees. Or questions from the crowd. When you get the picture in your head, you can relate to God a whole lot better – because you know Him.

Over the centuries, church teachers have tended to focus on the letters of the New Testament, from Romans through Jude. That was a serious mistake. The gospels show how the character of God is played out in real life. We are supposed to be developing the character of Jesus during our time on earth. So, the gospels are pictures of what our success should look. The letters, on the other hand, are corrections for when we mess up the process. When the early Christians started dragging their cultures and preconceptions and baggage into the church with them, they messed stuff up. Christians have been doing that for nearly 2000 years. God expected it and planned for it. The problem is that the church has tended to focus on the failures instead of the successes. First we need to be able to visualize how to do it right. Then, when we get stuck and things aren't turning out so well, when we can't seem to make the kind of progress toward the character of Jesus that we would like, only then do we turn to the letters to see how to get unstuck. If we focus on the examples of success, we advance. If we focus on the multitude of ways we can mess up, we get stuck there.

So, know the stories in the gospels so well that you can see them being replayed right in front of you in everyday life. Then you will know how to move forward. That's how God wants to draw us into His family.

My third way that God draws us is through His promises. And these are not just theoretical, complicated doctrines about things I can't see. These promises are concrete.

I'll use as my example Acts 2. Peter and the other apostles were displaying some fantastic stuff, so the holiday crowd knew that these guys spoke for God. Peter started off reminding them of current events – about the execution of Jesus which everyone knew. Then he attested to Jesus' resurrection, which was also local big news. It had happened seven weeks prior, and two governments were expending every resource to find that body. Everyone knew that something big had happened, not to mention the three hours of darkness at mid-day witnessed by millions, the earthquake, and many formerly dead people seen walking through town. Peter reminded them of what the prophets had predicted and pretty much sealed the deal, proving that Jesus had been that long-awaited Messiah around which the whole Jewish religion had been built.

The people in the crowd were in a panic. They knew the history of their country, how God had reacted negatively to previous national embarrassments. Now they had messed up the biggest event in history. Any sensible person would conclude, "We're toast." So they holler out to Peter, "What should we do?"

Peter answered, "Repent." That meant, "Wake up," or "Turn around," or "Pick another path before you run off a cliff." Repent does not address your moral history. Rather, it is a call to a radical change in your ethical framework, in your rationale for making choices. Peter said,

“Repent, and let each of you be baptized.” He was saying, “Demonstrate that you agree with what I’m saying, that Jesus really was God in the flesh, on earth, that you buy into the promises that He made.” Peter said, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized into the remission of sins.” Jesus had already paid off everyone’s debt to justice some weeks previously. Being baptized said that you buy into that purchase, that you will let go of your own past and leave it behind. Most people hang on to their guilt and their mistakes as though those things defined them. Letting go of them is difficult. But, that’s what Peter said. Finally, Peter added, “And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

That’s the promise part. How are we going to fix ourselves after spending years messing ourselves up? Jesus promised that we would get help – called the Holy Spirit – whose major function was to fix what ails you, to repair the holes you have torn in your character, to give you purpose and importance in a world where you likely have neither. And, as the New Testament records, there are about 800 more such promises that end up with growing the character that God is looking for. If God is going to let people live with Him in heaven forever, they had better be the right sort, or they will shortly make heaven just like earth, only longer. That’s what those promises are for – promises that we can be reformatted into the right kind of folks.

So how do we come to know those promises? Again, read or listen to the New Testament. Listen specifically for promises. How will I recognize them? If the New Testament makes a statement of fact about how you should be, and you know that there is no way you can do that, that’s a promise. For example, in the first chapter of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, Paul told each group of Christians that he prayed for them daily. He included the specifics of his prayers, things like he wanted them to have wisdom, knowledge, understanding, hope, love, discernment, doing the right thing, patience, longsuffering, and joy. And, he included how it would be accomplished, through the Holy Spirit who has been given to every faithful person for that purpose.

If you want a jump start, look on our website under Topics, and click on the handout named Promises for This Life. Or, use the search function on the website and search for Promises. About 35 promises are listed, each of which is mentioned several times in the New Testament.

The promises of God are a major way people should be attracted to the gospel.

And that brings me to the fourth way God draws us – liberty. You might be justifiably skeptical about this new creation stuff. Maybe I don’t want to be the kind of person the Spirit is going to massage me into. Certainly, we want to let go of the parts that hold us back, that wreck our relationships, that make us misfits. But there are parts of me I sort of like and I’d like to keep them.

The New Testament repeats over and over, like in Galatians 5:13, “You have been called to liberty.” Or, 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” We can all be different. It is not that God just puts up with our quirks. He genuinely values and encourages them. He wants us to be different from each other – even to an extreme degree. He just wants everyone to agree on two fundamental axioms of divine geometry: trust God, love people. Trust God – when God says that He will remake the damaged parts of your personality, accept it as a sure thing and go with it. Love people – do what is best for others without regard to yourself. Beyond that, being a little weird is a good thing. It keeps us all on our toes. Can I love people who are different than I am? Very different? Can I trust God when He has not given me a clue how He is going to pull this off?

The founders of our country saw liberty as a really big deal. But what if you lived in some run-down, backwater, little junkyard of a country in the Third World that was run by some petty,

ruthless, truly evil dictator? Could I depend on God to get political liberty? Free speech? Free press? The right to have and bear arms? Not likely. But, no matter what, God promises, you have the right to be you. Even if the government kills you for it, God's got your back. Really, are you so in love with this place that you would not rather get rid of this hunk of flesh and hang out with those who really appreciate you for who you are? Of course, this liberty does not include doing bad stuff. Don't abuse the liberty of someone else; you don't get to do that. But, personal liberty is what the Good News is all about. That is a draw you can hang your hat on.

And, isn't that a draw you can use to attract others? You can tell others about the character of God, and some might be intrigued enough to listen further. But, the character of God is abstract, philosophical, so a lot of people won't have the attention span. You can tell people about the character of Jesus, but, He lived a long time ago in a far-away land. It takes some thought to appreciate the pictures in the gospels. However, some might be willing to discuss scenes from the gospels because that seems like a safe topic. The other person will be less likely to think it's a trap and that they will just be made to feel inadequate, again. The promises of God are really attractive to people, but until they develop a little confidence in God, they probably won't jump in with both feet. But liberty is a different story. You will interest people with the fact that God appreciates our diversity, even our strangeness, that being different is a good thing, not a bad thing.

And, finally, my fifth way that God draws people is peace. Colossians 3:15, "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, into which also you were called in one body, and be thankful." But what is this peace? Nearly all of the letters in the New Testament begin and end with the hope that the recipients will experience peace – and those people lived in some rough times.

In those letters, peace is the opposite of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). Peace is the desired normal state. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, contrasted peace with darkness and the shadow of death (Luke 1:79). The mind set on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6).

Peace is a gift from God (Romans 15:13) and mysteriously guards our hearts (Philippians 4:7). Yet it is something we pursue (2 Timothy 2:22, 1 Peter 3:11, 2 Peter 3:14). It is the peace of being reconciled to God.

Finally, this peace extends to the relationship between Christians, overcoming discord caused by issues which might seem important at the time, but, by comparison to brotherly love, are not (Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 7:15, Ephesians 4:3, James 3:18).

Unfortunately, peace has not characterized all congregations; people actually are driven away because they don't want to live in confusion, darkness, upset, and self-doubt. But the gospel promises peace, something highly to be prized. If the congregation is a place to relax, lower your defenses, and discard your stress, it's a pretty nice place compared to the craziness of life on this earth. So, it's a draw that, if we will just follow the prescriptions of trust and love in the New Testament, is a never-ending refuge that continuously draws us to God. That's something that will get people's attention. Come spend a Sunday morning and afternoon with us and dispose of your stress. It's a lot cheaper than medication or counseling.

The kindness of God, the character and mastery of living displayed by Jesus on earth, the promises, especially those about the Spirit that transforms us, liberty to be yourself, and peace are God's draw, God's carrot, God's call, that which keeps us in the family. The last two do require that the congregation buy into the plan and allow personal liberty and foster peace. If we don't, as John put it in Revelation 2, Jesus will take away the lampstand that represents us in heaven – we will just be a group of stressed-out people who come together in the same room and gain nothing. God's goodness is part of who He is. Jesus' mastery of living and character are

well recorded. The promises of help from the Spirit are well documented. All we need to do is let people be themselves and be peaceful. With those five things pulling us in, nothing on the outside will be able to pull us away.