

Crying Out to the God of Providence

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Scripture Reading: Acts 4

Text: Acts 4:23–37

Dear friends, for several decades, we have seen our nation pushing God, prayer, and righteousness out of the public square. Under the pretense of secularism and pluralism, powerful forces in our culture have made the Christian religion unwelcome in science, public schools, and the halls of government. We were told that it was all in the name of promoting tolerance. But the veneer is cracking, and underneath we discover a brutal intolerance for the things of God.

We now face the very real possibility that we will be forced to choose between obedience to our God and obedience to our government. We desire to give our obedience to the government and serve as its best citizens, for the governing powers are ordained by God (Rom. 13:1). But it may be that Christians will soon have to choose between remaining silent about the tragic perversion of homosexuality and going to jail. Christian preachers may have to choose between proclaiming that Christ is the only way to God and being charged with a hate crime. Christian organizations may have to choose between paying for abortions and services against their consciences and paying large fines. And when we face such choices, then we must say with the apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

We can act courageously because our God is in control. We have been studying the doctrine of providence recently. Our Belgic Confession teaches us that “God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God is neither the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed.”¹

In this message I want to consider the question of what our faith in providence calls us to do in times like this. What does the doctrine of providence teach us to do when we face the threat of opposition and suffering for our witness to Christ? What difference does it make for us to know that our God upholds and governs the heaven and the earth and all that is in them by His eternal counsel and providence?²

In the Book of Acts, we find an example of the apostolic church in just such a situation. The apostles were carrying out their commission to preach Christ and work miracles of healing in His name. When they healed a man born without the ability to walk, it opened a door for them to preach to thousands of people (Acts 3). The priests and rulers had them arrested and brought before them. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly told them that all this has been done in the name of Jesus Christ: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The council commanded them to stop preaching about the name of Christ and threatened them with dire consequences. They released them, and the apostles returned to the church.

What did the apostolic church do in the face of these threats? What should we do? In Acts 4:23–37 we find the answer to our question: *When the church faces opposition, we must lift up our prayers to the God of providence.* They prayed. Acts 4:24 says, “And when

1. Belgic Confession, Article 13.

2. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 26.

they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.” How did they pray? They prayed with urgency and emotion: “they lifted up their voice.”³ They also prayed with unity: “with one accord.” Calvin said that the apostles met with the church “that they might arm themselves with prayer against the furious threatenings of their enemies; and thus must the children of God do, one must prick forward another, and they must join hand in hand, that they may vanquish the common adversary fighting under Christ’s banner.”⁴

What did they pray? First, they lifted up prayers of praise. Second, they lifted up prayers for power, and we see how those prayers were answered by God. So let us study this text and learn how we must join together to lift up our prayers to the God of providence.

We Lift Up Prayers of Praise

One of the most fascinating things about their prayer was that they did not begin by asking God for anything. They knew that they faced the immediate danger of being imprisoned, beaten, robbed of their possessions, and even killed. If I were in this situation my mouth would probably be overflowing with cries for God to intervene. But they started with praise. They started by glorifying God for who He is and what He has done. In fact, over two-thirds of their prayer as Luke records it consisted of praise. They did not rush through a quick word of praise to get to what they really thought was important, asking God for help. They dwelt upon praising God. Surely this is one effect of faith in God’s providence. We do not need to panic as if God were asleep and cry

3. “Lift the voice” (*airō* [or *epairō*] *phōnēn*) appears several times with “and wept” (LXX Judg. 2:4; 21:2; Ruth 1:9, 14; 1 Sam. 24:16; 2 Sam. 3:32; 13:36). It can also describe the roaring of the seas (LXX Ps. 92[93]:3) and the cry of lepers to Jesus for healing (Luke 17:13).

4. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:181.

out, “Carest thou not that we perish?” (Mark 4:38). No, we may pray in the calm assurance that He is still in control.

As we look at their praises in Acts 4:24–28, we see that they lifted up praises of God’s supremacy, God’s Son, and God’s sovereignty.

Praise of God’s Supremacy

Verse 24 tells us that the first thing they prayed was, “Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is.” The term “Lord” is not the usual word used in Greek but a specific word meaning the master of a household who rules over servants and slaves, or a king who rules with absolute power.⁵ God’s kingdom is nothing less than “heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is,” for He “made” them and rules them with total authority. All things are His servants (Ps. 119:90–91).

Calvin said, “If we want our faith to be strong, we must consider God’s power when praying and mention the promises which we rely on.... We cannot have confidence in God as we ought unless we are firmly convinced that he disposes all things in accordance with his will so that all creatures are subject to him. That stems from the fact that he created all things.”⁶

When men begin to act like dictators and tyrants, threatening God’s people with penalties for their fidelity to their God, then we must begin by praising the One who is the only true Sovereign, and that over all creation. Even if we are beaten, thrown into prison, and locked up in stocks, let us, like Paul and Silas, learn to sing praises to God (Acts 16:25).

The early church constantly sang the Psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and it may be that they had Psalm 146 in mind when they prayed:

5. Greek *despotēs*. Cf. Luke 2:29; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 2 Tim. 2:21; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18.

6. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 1–7*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 163–64.

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God: which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is: which keepeth truth for ever: which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners (Ps. 146:3–7).

What comfort there is for us to remember that men are mere flesh, but God is the eternal spirit who created all things! What peace we can find in His providence! We can sing,

Heav'n and earth the Lord created,
 Seas and all that they contain;
 He delivers from oppression,
 Righteousness He will maintain.⁷

Let us therefore lift up our voices with the praise of God's supremacy.

Praise of God's Son

Acts 4:25–26 tells us that the church continued its praise by quoting Psalm 2, saying, “Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.” How good it is to pray the Bible! For the Bible is God's own Word, placed in the “mouth” of His servants who spoke it and wrote it. When we saturate our prayers with God's Word, our minds are lifted up to Christ and our prayers are according to God's will.

When the apostolic church faced opposition, they turned to Psalm 2 and found that God had long before announced that the nations would “rage” against Him. “Kings” and “rulers” fight against the Lord. We should not be surprised at this. On the

7. *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), #400, verse 4 [Ps. 146].

contrary, we should be profoundly grateful whenever any authority stands for what is true and good.

Though all the powers of mankind war against God, it is “vain,” empty, and futile. Psalm 2 tells us that God has established His Christ as the King of kings, and Christ will reign. The Father said to Christ in an unbreakable decree, “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps. 2:8–9).

God’s providence is entirely in the hands of the Mediator (John 17:2). Calvin said, “God will reign in the person of his Son alone.”⁸ Therefore we may rest assured that Christ will conquer and His church will not fail on the earth. Already, Jesus Christ has risen from the death, ascended into heaven, and sits at God’s right hand with all authority in heaven and on earth (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20–21). William Perkins said, “Christ, [as] God and man, after his ascension is advanced to such an estate in which he has fulness of glory, power, majesty, and authority in the presence of his Father and all the saints and holy angels.” His kingdom “spreadeth itself over heaven and earth.”⁹

When we pray for God’s kingdom to come, let us lift our eyes to Jesus Christ and see that God has promised to establish the throne of His Son over all the earth. When the church faces opposition from powerful enemies, let us take time to meditate on the promises and to lift our praises to God. Fixing our eyes upon Jesus and setting our affections upon Him, we will then be able to pray with faith and not out of the fear of man. We can pray, “Thy kingdom come” with the confidence that we are simply asking God to do what He promised—to give the nations to His Son as His inheritance.

8. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:185; cf. *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles*, 165.

9. William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (London: Iohn Legatt, 1595), 352.

Praise of God's Sovereignty

The third part of their praises appears in verses 27–28, “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” In the darkest hours of the church, God’s will is being done.

There was no darker hour in the history of God’s people than when Jesus died on the cross. It seemed that all of God’s purposes had failed. The very Messiah, the anointed of God, had perished at the hands of cruel and wicked men. They brought Him to trial, condemned Him as a criminal though they knew His innocence, beat Him with brutal violence, nailed Him to the cross, and then mocked Him while He slowly and agonizingly died. If ever there was a time for panic, it seemed that this was it. The apostles hid themselves in great fear that they would be next (John 20:19). Christians in America are also being tempted to hide themselves away in fear of what may be coming next in our country.

When Christ rose from the dead, however, He told His disciples that everything had happened according to God’s plan revealed in Scripture and Christ’s own words (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46). What appeared to be the darkest hour was in fact the most glorious moment in history. God accomplished the redemption of His people. God’s providence ruled over the sins of the authorities and caused them “to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” God predestined even the wicked acts of sinners (1 Peter 2:8). The vicious and ugly murder of God’s Son had been determined by God before time began (1 Peter 1:19).

The apostolic church grasped hold of this doctrine when they faced dark times and turned it into a prayer of praise. The crucified Christ was not a criminal. Though rejected by men, He was God’s “holy child” whom God had “anointed.” “Child” is the same Greek word used of David in verse 25 and may also

be translated “servant.”¹⁰ It is the very word used in the covenant with David, and also of the suffering servant in Isaiah.¹¹ His death was not a defeat, but the coming of the kingdom promised to David. His crucifixion was God’s will for our salvation (Isa. 53:10–11). Derek Thomas said, “The doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty is necessary if we are to understand what occurred at Calvary... God was the Author of the cross.”¹²

Can you praise the Lord at the foot of Christ’s cross? You certainly can if you trust that Christ suffered for our sins. But here is a different question. Can you praise the Lord as you take up your cross? You are able insofar as your faith grasps the doctrine of providence. Calvin wrote, “God doth so govern and guide all things by his secret counsel, that he doth bring to pass those things which he hath determined, even by the wicked.”¹³ If we believe that, then we can stand before wicked men, even wicked rulers, and sing God’s praises. The worst thing they can do to us is the best thing God has planned for our good (Rom. 8:28).

In Christ we are more than overcomers. Though rejected by men, we are not criminals. We are God’s children and God’s servants. Our suffering is not a defeat for the kingdom. It is the very means that God has ordained for His kingdom to advance and His eternal weight of glory to come into our lives.

What shall we do when the powers of this world threaten the church? Let us lift our voices in prayer. And let us begin with heart-warming and faith-forming praise. We serve the God of providence, and therefore we can adore Him for His supremacy and sovereignty in His Son. We can sing,

When the needy seek Him, He will mercy show;
Yea, the weak and helpless shall His pity know;

10. Greek *pais*.

11. LXX 1 Chron. 17:4, 17, 23–27; Isa. 41:8–9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1–2, 21, 26; 45:4; 49:6; 50:10; 52:13.

12. Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, Reformed Expositional Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011), 110.

13. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:187.

He will surely save them from oppression's might,
 For their lives are precious in His holy sight.
 Christ shall have dominion over land and sea,
 Earth's remotest regions shall His empire be.¹⁴

We Lift Up Prayers for Power

We have seen that the first response of the church to threats of oppression must be to lift up prayers of praise. We have great cause for praise in God's supremacy, God's Son, and God's sovereignty. We do not stop with praise, however. Acts 4:29 reminds us that we are God's "servants," literally His slaves,¹⁵ who live to do His will. We have commandments to keep and a mission to fulfill. We must not allow the cost of discipleship to deter us from fulfilling the work God gave us to do. The apostles told the ruling council, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Acts 4:19). We too must keep listening to God's Word and doing God's will as His servants in the world.

We cannot serve God by our own power. Nothing reveals how weak and fragile we are like the opposition of sinners. We must lift up our prayers for power. Let's look at the last part of the church's prayer in Acts 4, and learn how to pray for ourselves.

They opened their petitions with a brief request for protection. Acts 4:29 begins, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings." This is the only petition the church made for protection against persecution. "Behold" here has the sense of "look upon our painful situation and act out of Thy compassion and love."¹⁶ It is good and right for us to cry out to God for deliverance from those who harm us so that He may be glorified (Isa. 37:16–20). Let us not

14. *The Psalter*, #200, verse 2 [Ps. 72].

15. Greek *doulos*, a different word than that translated "servant" in v. 25.

16. The verb "look upon" (*ephoraō*) has a variety of applications, yet sometimes takes the special connotation of responding to trouble with mercy and compassion (LXX Gen. 16:13; Exod. 2:25; Ps. 30:8 [31:7]; 112[113]:6; 137[138]:6; Luke 1:25; cf. 2 Macc. 7:6; 8:2; 3 Macc. 6:3, 12).

romanticize persecution. It is ugly and evil. The Psalms are full of cries for deliverance from the power of the wicked. God's providence often spares us from suffering in answer to such prayers. Ultimately God will send His Son to deliver us from all evil.

We notice however that the church passed quickly from this concern to prayers for divine power. Verses 29b–30 say, “and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.” We see here that they prayed for power for the ministry of the Word and power for ministry to the body. In answer to their prayer, verse 31 tells us, “they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” They had given praise to the Father, grasped the promises about the Son, and now gained the power of the Spirit. Their prayer was truly Trinitarian.

The core of their request was for God to empower them by the Holy Spirit with enlarged spiritual gifts. We no longer live in the apostolic age. We are not apostles and do not have the same spiritual gifts as they did. But this text does call our church to ask God for enlarged power for spiritual gifts of speaking and spiritual gifts of serving. Let's consider each.

Power for Spiritual Gifts of Speaking

First, they prayed for God to grant them “that with all boldness they may speak thy word” (Acts 4:29). Dear congregation, remember that your ministers are flesh and blood. We may feel bold as a lion, but as Peter did we discover all too quickly how easily we can deny our Lord. You must pray for your ministers, that they will preach and witness for Christ boldly.

We carry God's treasures in earthen vessels, and often feel troubled, perplexed, and cast down, experiencing the dying of Jesus in our own bodies (2 Cor. 4:7–10). The Holy Spirit gives us courage to speak, for He is “the Spirit of faith” (2 Cor. 4:13). Luke highlights in verse 8 that the apostle who spoke so boldly to the council was not Peter the man of flesh, but Peter, “filled with the Holy Ghost.” In verse 31 we read that God answered their prayer,

“and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”

The word “boldness” refers to being confident, frank, open, and unashamed.¹⁷ We think of Paul, who said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” But did you know that even Paul needed people to pray for him when he faced opposition? He wrote in Ephesians 6:19–20, “And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Therefore if we would persevere in serving the Lord, we must also seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking. Pray for your preachers to be full of the Spirit.

Charles Spurgeon preached with such power from the Holy Spirit that several thousand people came out to hear him every Sunday for thirty-eight years, and millions have read his sermons with profit. The story is told of how Spurgeon met some enthusiastic visitors to his church and asked them if they wanted to see the church’s power plant. They were far more interested in the preaching, but they followed him anyway. So he took them to a large room where they discovered the prayer meeting of the church. I cannot verify if that story is true, but it is true that his church sought the power of God through united prayer.

Spurgeon recognized this was a notable characteristic of the church, saying,

When I came to New Park Street Chapel, it was a mere handful of people to whom I first preached, yet I could never forget how earnestly they prayed. Sometimes they seemed to plead as though they could really see the Angel of the Covenant [that is, Christ] present with them, and as if they

17. Greek *parrēsia*.

must have a blessing from him. More than once we were so awe-struck with the solemnity of the meeting that we sat silent for some moments while the Lord's Power appeared to overshadow us.¹⁸

O that God would grant us such prayer meetings! Your ministers long to see the prayer meetings full, full of people and full of God's Spirit, for we understand that our powerful preaching in the church begins with powerful praying by the church. It was after they prayed for boldness to speak that we read in Acts 4:33, "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all." God can give remarkable power to His preachers. Cotton Mather said that Thomas Hooker was a minister of such courage that "while doing his Master's work, [he] would put a king in his pocket."¹⁹ We must seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking, that our ministers may preach boldly when under fire.

Power for Spiritual Gifts of Serving

The church prayed in verse 30 that God would assist the preaching of the Word "by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." The apostles were commissioned by Christ Jesus to work miracles as they preached the kingdom of God.²⁰ Thus they were praying for God to empower their spiritual gifts in practical ministry as well, to heal the sick and handicapped from their miseries. They could not heal at will; even apostles had to depend on God's power to work a miracle (Acts 3:12). Miracles like this are called "signs and wonders" because God used them to publicly confirm that He sent the apostles (Acts 14:3; Heb. 2:3–4), just as God

18. Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 270–71.

19. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), book 3, 64.

20. Luke 9:1–2; Acts 5:12; 2 Cor. 12:12.

worked miracles through His servant Moses (Ex. 7:3, 9; Deut. 4:34). By healing the bodies of men, God gave visible signs that His redeeming love had come to heal our cursed world and save us from our sins (Isaiah 35; Luke 7:20–23).

God answered their prayer in an extraordinary manner. Verse 31 tells us that “the place was shaken where they were assembled together.” In the Bible, earthquakes are signs that God has come to bless His people with power.²¹ Luke reported that shortly afterwards the Lord struck dead some hypocrites in the church, amazing miracles of healing took place through the apostles, and an angel from God released the apostles from prison (Acts 5:1–20).

However, Acts 4 does not focus on miracles of healing immediately after this prayer.²² Instead, verses 32 to 37 dwell on the practical ministries of love and caring for the poor. This makes perfect sense. They had prayed for God to stretch out His hand and heal the hurting. God filled them with the Spirit, and the church stretched out its hands to care for the widows, orphans, foreigners, handicapped, and poor among them. The church became the hands of the God of providence. They established a fund for the church to serve the practical needs of people. This was not some form of communism imposed by a church authority

21. Earthquakes appear at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:18), the death and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27:54; 28:2), and at the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 38:19–20; Rev. 6:12; etc.).

22. The only possible reference to miracles in Acts 4:31–37 would be “power” in v. 33, “with great power gave the apostles witness.” It seems more likely that the singular “power” (*dunamis*) does not refer to miracles but to the “power” to convict, convert, and comfort souls through witness (Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:4–5; Eph. 1:19; Col. 1:28–29; 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 174. However, miracles are called “powers” (Acts 2:22; 6:8; 8:13; 19:11; Gal. 3:5) or works done by “power” (Acts 3:12; 4:7; 6:8; 8:10; 10:38; 2 Thess. 2:9). So Acts 4:33 could mean that the apostles ministered the Word of Christ accompanied by miracles. Nevertheless, this is not the emphasis of this section.

or political party. It was instead the voluntary sharing of their property as each one had a need.²³

This shows us how we are to pray today. We must pray for power to serve. We are not apostles, nor those on whom the apostles laid their hands. We do not have miraculous gifts. But many of us have practical gifts. If the church in America faces opposition from the powers that be, people will suffer. The church must develop a culture of caring for each other. In that way God's providence will turn persecution into an opportunity to glorify Christ.

Practical works of service are even greater signs to the world than raising the dead.²⁴ Christ said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The love and diaconal ministry of the church is the most effective method we have on a human level to prove that the gospel is true.

Dear congregation, the charge most frequently made against Christians is that we are arrogant and unloving. What better way to show the beauty of the gospel than to devote ourselves to humble and loving works of service?

We must pray for God's power. It actually takes more supernatural power to produce love and practical service to needy people than it does to work a miracle. Our Lord understood that only supernatural grace can make us love each other sacrificially, and so He prayed that we would be one with each other "that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me" (John 17:23).

Join your prayers to Christ's prayer, and lift up constant requests for power for spiritual gifts of service! Pray that God would cause our love to abound yet more and more (Phil. 1:9).

23. Contrast Qumran, where such community of goods was required. See Kistemaker, *Acts*, 173–74.

24. "Great grace" (v. 33) may mean "much favor," in the sense that the larger Jewish community looked upon the church with much favor because of their Spirit-empowered lives (Acts 2:47; 4:21; 5:13). Kistemaker, *Acts*, 174.

Ask the Lord to make us increase and abound in love toward one another and all men (1 Thess. 3:12). Cry out that the Lord would bless our church with rich and practical spiritual gifts for mercy and service. Pray for our deacons as they administer the funds of the church to care for those in need. In all this, pray for God to stretch out his loving hands through our ministries, and show the world that God has come to set sinful and miserable people free.

Conclusion

What does the doctrine of providence teach us about responding to threats from this world? *When the church faces opposition, we must lift up our prayers to the God of providence.* We must lift up prayers of praise. Praise glorifies God and strengthens our faith and joy. Praise enthrones the Lord as the true Sovereign even as the wicked try to overthrow the kingdom of Christ. We must also lift up prayers for power. The Holy Spirit can give your ministers amazing power to preach the Word even in the face of our enemies. The Holy Spirit can also mobilize the body to serve the poor even while the church is oppressed.

If we would enjoy the Spirit's blessings, we must pray. Do you believe that God reigns? Then show it in your prayers. God forbid that it be said of our congregation, "Ye have not, because ye ask not" (James 4:2). Rather, may our congregation be living proof of Christ's promise, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matt. 7:7).

