

“What Matters: A New Creation”

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Galatians 6:11–18 (ESV)

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. ¹² It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴ But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

¹⁷ From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

For the past three months, we’ve been looking carefully at a letter written almost 1,970 years ago to a place about a quarter of the way around the world. This letter is the book of Galatians, found in the New Testament and written by the apostle Paul. He was writing to a group of Christians in a province in the Roman Empire, in what is now Turkey, because he had an urgent message for them. And this message is still urgent today. That’s because human nature remains the same two thousand years later, and the essence of Paul’s message remains the same today. His message was about the true gospel, which means “good news.” This good news is about how we can have a relationship with God. How can we be acceptable to God? Where can we find hope? How can we be God’s children? How can we inherit all the blessings that God can give us, such as forgiveness and eternal life in a perfect world? These are the things that Paul wrote about in Galatians.

Today, we’re going to look at the very last part of the letter. As we do that, I want to recap some of what we’ve seen earlier in the letter. Then we’ll look at the final passage, Galatians 6:11-18. Paul brings his point home at the end of this letter, and I want to bring the point home, too.

So, let’s begin by going back to the beginning of this letter. Let’s take a brief look at Galatians 1:1-5:

¹ Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul wanted to make it very clear that his message was not something he invented. It wasn't a message that he got from other people. He got it straight from God. And that's why he reminds the Galatians that he was called to be an apostle, a commissioned and sent delegate of Jesus, by the will of God. He became a representative of God through Jesus, who died on the cross to bear the curse of our sin (Gal. 3:13) and who rose from the dead. It is Jesus who gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us from this present evil age. That's heart of the gospel: we live in an evil age, which is to say there's evil outside of us. But we also have sin: there's an evil inside of us. We don't desire the thing for which we were made: to bring glory to God forever and ever. We don't orient our lives around him. Instead, we act as if the universe revolved around us. Our problem starts with our desires, which lead to acts that are against God's will and against his design for the way life should go. We need rescuing. This isn't something we can do for ourselves, no more than a drowning person can save himself or herself. We need someone to come into the water and get us out.

After Paul opens with this statement, he expresses his concern about the Galatians. He was the first one to come to them with this message about Jesus. He taught them the true gospel message; they believed. But Paul left them, and after he left, some false teachers came in and taught a different message. From what we can glean from the rest of the letter, the false teachers told them that they could be in the right with God if they obeyed the law of the Old Testament *and* believed in Jesus. People in Galatia would be predominantly Gentile, not Jewish. This meant that the false teachers were saying, in essence: To become a Christian, you have to first become a Jew. The men would have to be circumcised, and everyone would have to obey the dietary laws found in Leviticus, for example.

We can tell that Paul is concerned because of his strong words in chapter 1, verses 6-10:

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

There are three large points that Paul makes in that passage. The first is that there is only one true gospel message. There's no "You have your truth and I have mine" relativism here. Truth matters. The second is that the Galatians were deserting the true gospel by buying into the message the false teachers were teaching. The third is that Paul's goal wasn't to please other people. His ultimate goal, his motive, was to serve Jesus.

Paul then talks about his own conversion experience. He used to persecute the church when he "was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people" (Gal. 1:14). When he encountered the risen Jesus Christ, his life was changed radically and he began to serve Jesus as an apostle.

In chapter 2, Paul says that the gospel that Jesus revealed to him was the same message that the apostles in Jerusalem—people like Peter, James, and John—were preaching. But he also recalls a time when Peter wasn't acting in line with the gospel. Peter was afraid to be seen eating with Gentiles because he was afraid of appearances. He was afraid of how it would look to other Jews.

Then Paul makes a long argument about the Old Testament law. No one can be right in God's eyes by obeying the law (Gal. 2:16). Why? Because no one obeys the law perfectly, and that's what the law requires (Gal. 3:10-11). The law reveals how sinful we are. The law points us to Christ. He was the only one who obeyed the law perfectly, yet he died so that he could redeem "us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13).

Paul also points out that the great model of faith in the Old Testament, and the father of all Israel, Abraham, was declared righteous, or innocent, by God because he had faith. Before God gave the Jews the law, Abraham trusted God's promises, and that trust, or faith, was credited to him as righteousness (Gal. 3:6-9). Everyone who trusts in Jesus, just as Abraham trusted in God, is a son of Abraham (Gal. 3:7, 29).

All who trust in Jesus are also children of God (Gal. 3:26). In Christ, there are no distinctions between race and ethnicity, gender and social standing (Gal. 3:28). Everyone who is a Christian has the same status. Everyone who is a Christian is regarded by God as though they

were Jesus: perfect in every way and the heir of God's blessings. Christians have been adopted by God. God gave them the Spirit, who turns us into new creations. The Spirit causes us to cry out to God and call him "Father" (Gal. 4:6).

Paul also spends a bit of time talking about how trying to earn salvation through obeying a system of laws is slavery, while Christianity brings freedom. He also says that those who become Christians walk with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. If you are a Christian, the Spirit is at work within you, causing you to bear good fruit. That means we should expect that Christians fight against sin, and we need each other's help to do that.

And that brings us to today's passage. I spent time recapping the whole book because a number of these themes reemerge in this passage. So let's begin. First, let's look at verse 11: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." This may seem odd, but Paul probably didn't actually write most of this book. It was common for a people to write letters using an amanuensis, or a secretary. Paul wrote Romans through a man named Tertius (Rom. 16:22). So Paul probably dictated the whole letter up to this point. Why did he pick up the pen at this point? To drive his point home.¹ It's like saying, "This last bit is so important I have to tell you myself."

What does Paul write? Let's look at verses 12 and 13:

¹²It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

"Those who want to make a good showing" are the false teachers, the ones who said the Galatian men had to become circumcised if they wanted to become Christians. Paul has already said the false teachers were wrong. They were wrong to insist on the law because now that Jesus has come, the law is no longer in operation. And speaking of operations, now people don't need to be circumcised. Physical circumcision in the Old Testament anticipated a day when God's people would have their hearts changed through the power of the Holy Spirit. Now that the Spirit has been poured out by Jesus, there's no need for circumcision. But now Paul deals with the motives

¹ He used "large letters" probably because he had an eye problem, though we can't be sure. In Gal. 4:13-15, he may hint at a serious eye problem that kept him in Galatia. If that were so, it would be understandable why he would use an amanuensis, why his own handwriting had to be large, and why the Galatians would recognize that such large letters belonged to Paul (because they knew of his eye problems). In 2 Thess. 3:17 and Phil. 19, he calls attention to his own writing while making no mention of large letters.

of these false teachers. Why did they insist on circumcision? “[T]o make a good showing in the flesh” and “in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”

What does this mean? I think Paul may be making a bit of a pun here. The word “flesh” can mean different things. Sometimes it just refers to the body. Sometimes it refers to human effort apart from God. Sometimes it refers to the sinful nature that we have before we come to Jesus. So the false teachers who insisted on circumcision were proud that they could get their converts to alter their flesh—to undergo circumcision. But in doing so, they were showing off their sinful nature. They were showing off their pride. They wanted to look good.

And there was another reason why they insisted on circumcision: to avoid persecution. There is evidence of two types of persecution that came against Christians in the first century. One was from Jews themselves. Jews who rejected Jesus didn’t think he was the promised Messiah. When Christians like Paul preached that message, they (the Jews) became angry. We see this several times in Acts (9:23; 13:45, 50; 14:5; 17:5, 13; 21:27ff; 23:12). There were times when they even wanted to kill Paul because of his message. The other type of persecution came from Gentiles. In the Roman Empire, the Jewish religion was a legal, protected religion. They more or less left Jews alone. But Christians weren’t quite Jews, and they certainly weren’t pagan idol worshippers. They said there was a real Lord, and it wasn’t the emperor, the Caesar. The people who insisted on circumcision probably wouldn’t offend the Jews and they wouldn’t run afoul of the Roman Empire. The message of the cross of Christ, however, tends to rub all kinds of people the wrong way. It told the Jews the law couldn’t save them. Their obedience was never enough. And it told the Romans that their gods were false, and that the true God became flesh, rose on the third day, and ascended to heaven, where he reigns on his throne.

Paul also points out their hypocrisy: even though they insist on circumcision, they don’t keep the whole law. So they really don’t care about the law. What they want to do is boast in the flesh of their disciples. Some false Christian teachers today boast about their followers. They say they’ve had so many conversions, and so many people in their churches, and so much money coming in. These false teachers boasted in something else. To use another theologian’s words:

the false teachers “want to display the foreskins of the Galatians as trophies of their own triumphant persuasive power.”²

These false teachers may have been a bit like today’s false preachers. The false gospels today are different from those in Paul’s day, but the world will always have false teachers. The other day, I saw a picture on Facebook. There were little thumbnail images of four TV preachers inset next to aerial photos of their mansions. Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland, and Creflo Dollar were pictured alongside their massive estates.³ One could also add Benny Hinn and many others who are on TBN.⁴ These people make millions of dollars off the backs of people who believe their health and wealth message. But they don’t teach the true gospel. They teach that God wants to bless you and if you’re faithful, God will give you money. Of course, you show your faith by giving them your money first, and then God will bless you later.

There are many other false gospels today. Here are but a few.

One is very similar to Paul’s day. You must perform certain rites and go through certain rituals in order to get into, or stay in, God’s good graces. This would include going to a priest to confess your sins, praying a certain prayer, giving a certain amount of money, or all other manner of “religious” activity.

More popular today is the repentance free gospel. This message says you don’t have to give up sin in order to become a Christian. You don’t even have to view sin as sin.⁵ But the message of Christianity says that we must turn from our sin in order to turn to Jesus. We don’t take out all the sin in our lives in order to be acceptable to God. We don’t have to clean ourselves up in order to get to him. But turning to God involves change. I like what C. S. Lewis says about repentance: “Remember, this repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could

² Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” Vol. 1 in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. L. E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 200), 343, quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 395.

³ Osteen: <https://planetzion.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/joel-osteen-house.jpg>; Meyer: http://www.discerningtheworld.com/images/wpi/joyce-meyers-kingdom_thumb.jpg; Copeland: <https://planetzion.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/copeland12.png>; Dollar: http://static3.bornrichimages.com/cdn2/683/384/91/c/wp-content/uploads/s3/2013/07/ce_ptty6.jpg.

⁴ Hinn: http://www.discerningtheworld.com/images/wpi/benny-hinn-mansion_thumb.jpg.

⁵ Last week, a video was put out on the Internet called “I’m Christian, But I’m Not” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bWHSpmXEJs>). In the video, young people insisted they were Christians but weren’t judgmental. They said they Christians, but not conservative. A few of them were gay. Not one of them talked about Jesus, faith, doctrine, theology, sin, the cross, or repentance.

let you off if He chose: it is simply a description of what going back to Him is like.”⁶ Repentance is a description of turning to God.

There’s an evangelical combination of these false gospels. Sometimes it’s called “easy believe-ism” or “cheap grace”—just repeat the Sinner’s Prayer, walk the aisle at the altar call, and get baptized and you’re a Christian. The problem is there is no “Sinner’s Prayer” in the Bible, there is no mention of an altar call (and the only altar is the cross), and doesn’t save anyone if there’s no real faith involved. Yet a number of people insist that their children or even they themselves are Christians because they jumped through these hoops. Then they go and live like everyone else around them. There’s no change. This isn’t Christianity.

Paul was unlike the false teachers. He didn’t boast in his own work. He didn’t brag about how many followers he had or how many churches he started. He only boasted in Jesus. We see this in verse 14: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Paul knew all his worth came from Jesus. And the way of Jesus is the cross: it’s a self-denial. It’s coming to the end of one’s self. That’s what Paul said in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Paul gave up his old life. He used to be an influential Jewish leader in Jerusalem. He was a Pharisee. He was “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5-6). He probably came from a fairly wealthy background and he was well educated. He had a comfortable life. But in the book of Philippians, he says,

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:7-11).

Paul left behind his old life to follow Christ. In many ways, his life as a Christian was harder. He used to persecute as a Jewish leader; as a Christian, he was persecuted. Who would exchange

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 57.

that old life for a false message? That would be like giving up a career as a doctor or lawyer in order to start a farm.

That's why Paul could say the world was crucified to him, and he to the world. The world, with its godless agenda, was dead to him. It had no pull on him. "The world" is the "present evil age" that Paul mentions at the beginning of the letter (Gal. 1:4). Paul was looking forward to the new creation, when God would remake the world. I think that's part of what he means in the next verse (15): "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Circumcision no longer matters. It's not necessary in order to have a relationship with God. People who are circumcised shouldn't boast about it, Paul was saying. But people who are not circumcised shouldn't boast about that, either. None of it matters, what matters is a new creation. Earlier, in 5:6, Paul wrote, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." In 1 Corinthians 7:19, Paul writes, "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God." So, if we take all those verses together, we can say this: you can't have faith and love God, and you can't keep his commandments, if you haven't become a new creation. You need to be a new kind of person in order to do those things. You need to be transformed by God.

That means that religious people can't boast about their good works. And people who aren't very religious can't boast about how very unreligious they are. I've talked about legalists before, people who think we must be good in order to get to God. They can be very proud about their moral performance. But some Christians can be very proud of how very non-legalistic they can be. In one of Jesus' parables, a self-righteous Pharisee prayed to God and thanked him that he (the Pharisee) wasn't like sinners (Luke 18:9-14). We can look at the Pharisee and say, "I can't believe anyone would be like that," all the while thanking God that we're not Pharisees! So the legalist and the non-legalist have nothing to boast in. What matters is being transformed by God.

And Paul has a special blessing for everyone who follows his teaching. In verse 16, he writes, "And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." Paul says that peace and mercy are upon those who "walk by this rule." In chapter 5, he told them to "walk by the Spirit" (v. 16) and to "keep in step with the Spirit" (v. 25). Those who have the Holy Spirit in them, guiding them, are following this "rule." In the Old Testament, the

pouring out of the Holy Spirit is often associated with the new creation, when God would restore the world to a state of paradise. Those who receive the Spirit are being renewed internally. They are the ones who have received God’s mercy and are at peace with God.

What does “the Israel of God” mean? There are two things to deal with here. One is how this is translated. The ESV says “*and* upon the Israel of God.” The Greek word translated as “and” is καὶ. This conjunction can be translated in different ways. It can mean “and,” “also,” “even, and “namely.” So “the Israel of God” could refer to a separate group of people from those who have the Spirit, or it could refer to the same group.⁷ The NIV translates this verse with this latter meaning: the Israel of God is the church.⁸ So, grammatically speaking, the “Israel of God” could be the church or another group.

The second thing we need to see is that Paul calls this group “the Israel *of God*.” He doesn’t just say “Israel.” In 1 Corinthians 10:18, he refers to ethnic Israel as “Israel according to the flesh.”⁹ That implies there’s an “Israel according to the Spirit.” Israel can refer to a group of people who can trace their biological ancestry back to Abraham. But it can also refer to a group of people who can trace their spiritual ancestry back to Abraham. That’s why Paul can say, in Romans 9:6-7, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.” Only people of faith in Jesus are true Israel. Paul makes this very clear in Galatians 3. When I spoke about that, I said that Jesus is true Israel, because he’s the true offspring of Abraham. Everyone who is united to faith in Jesus is part of the Israel of God.

So I think that’s what Paul means. If anyone wants to receive God’s mercy, his forgiveness, and if anyone wants to be at peace with him, they need to put their faith in Jesus. They need to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. Nothing else will do. No amount of good deeds, no repeating a rote prayer, no walking an aisle, no baptism—nothing else! Only faith/repentance and the Spirit can bring someone into the people of God.

⁷ The exegetical (“namely” or “even”—a further explanation) use of καὶ is found in Acts 5:21, where the council (the Sanhedrin) is further explained as “all the senate of the people of Israel.” There is a καὶ between “council” and “all the senate.” By reading the ESV or NIV, one couldn’t see this, but it appears in the New American Standard Bible: “Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel.”

⁸ The latest iteration of the NIV, published in 2011, makes this a bit clearer: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.”

⁹ See footnote on 1 Cor. 10:18 in the ESV.

Let's now look at verse 17: "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." This is Paul's last word regarding false teaching. Remember, the false teachers thought that circumcision—a mark on one's body—identified a man as being part of God's people. Paul says, in essence, "You want to see proof that I'm part of the Israel of God. Don't look at circumcision. Look at this: my body bears the marks of Jesus." And what are those marks? Literally, the word is *στίγματα* (*stigmata*). Some Catholic mystics claim they had "stigmata" on their bodies. These were wounds that resemble Jesus' wounds to his wrists, feet, and side. St. Francis of Assisi was allegedly the first person to have these marks, in 1224. However, I doubt Paul means that. He's probably referring to the many times when he was beaten or whipped for the cause of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 11:22-27, Paul is talking about another group of false teachers. He compares himself with them. This is what he writes:

²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Paul's point in 2 Corinthians and in Galatians is that false teachers don't get beaten, whipped, and have stones thrown at them. False teachers generally don't die for their cause. The scars on Paul's body proved that his message was true. If the false teachers were into mutilating the flesh, they should consider preaching a message that caused people to want to kill them. That word, *στίγματα*, can also refer to a brand that masters would put on their slaves as a mark of ownership. Paul says that these marks prove that he is a slave of Christ.

This past week I happened to look at a magazine put out by The Voice of the Martyrs. This was the August 2015 edition. On the cover is a picture of a 13-year-old Nigerian boy, Danjuma Shakaru, who was attacked in his village on January 28. At the bottom of the picture it says, "BEARING THE MARKS OF CHRIST." A large group of Islamic insurgents attacked his Christian village. They cut out his right eye, leaving very large scars from the left side of his

head, near his left eye, right across to his right eye. They hacked at his left arm with a machete. They cut off his genitals. And here he is, still alive. He says, “There is no problem. I have allowed God to handle everything.” But he asks for prayer, that God would strengthen his broken heart.¹⁰

In the same issue, there’s a story of a young man, Solomon Samaila, also from Nigeria, who was attacked in 2013 by his Muslim neighbors. They said to him. “You have only one choice left: Follow Islam.” Then they killed the man’s father. They told Solomon that they would not harm him if he became a Muslim. Solomon said he could not deny Christ and they then doused him with gasoline and burned him. There’s a picture of his back, which is all scar tissue and raw flesh. Today, he says, “The persecution has strengthened my relationship with God because I know, based on what happened to me, it is a miracle that I survived.”¹¹ Yet he has suffered much, and his fiancée left him. He asks that we would pray God would bring him another woman to marry.

The reason I bring this up is that the message of Christianity often offends people. But notice that Joel Osteen doesn’t bear any marks of persecution, either literal or figurative. He doesn’t talk about sin and the cross. Those who preach a repentance-free gospel aren’t being called names in the media and on the Internet. People who say that Christianity is just one of many valid religions aren’t attacked. But those who preach the message of Christ crucified for our sins have been persecuted. This message is offensive to people because it attacks our pride. It says that humans can’t create a utopia here on Earth. It says that we are so bad, we need God to become man and die for our us. (Of course, it also says we’re so loved that God would do that.) We could never earn our way to God. It doesn’t give any credit to people; it gives all credit to God.

As I end, let me ask us if we are “walking by this rule.” Have we been transformed by God? Have we been changed? Does anything in our lives point to the work that God has done to rescue us from this present evil age?

Here are some more questions: Do you know this gospel message? Will you cling to it even when it offends others? Are you willing to bear the marks of Jesus for it? Will we be like

¹⁰ “The Joy Comes from the Lord,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*, August 2015:5.

¹¹ “Prepared to Suffer for Salvation,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*, August 2015:9.

our brothers in Nigeria or like the health-and-wealth preachers? These are serious questions that we all must wrestle with.

Now let me end with verse 18: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”