

Be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you! (1 Peter 3:15).



New York State flag

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Dear brethren in Christ,

Greetings from central New York State! The weather here is unseasonably warm for March. Usually we have more snow through this period of time, but all the snow is melted and it feels like we're getting an early Spring! It's really nice to be able to go outside without a coat and play warm-weather games with the children.

The church here at Canastota continues to advertise in the local community. We have continual ads running in most of the area papers, inviting people to a home Bible study, to take the correspondence course, or to simply submit their Bible questions to me over email. What we're doing in addition (starting next week) is running classified ads in the main Syracuse paper. Hopefully we can get more responses by advertising in a wider area and seeing what we can get from Syracuse and Onondaga County. Our church budget is above what it was last year due to the addition of the Holmes family and most of the members increasing their weekly contribution. Therefore, we are in a better position to do more to reach the lost. Please pray that we'll get more Bible studies in addition to the ones we're already having. Our next door neighbor continues to come to our midweek Bible class, and she has brought a friend with her to study with us. We're beginning the book of Acts next Wednesday for her benefit so she can see more clearly the plan of salvation and the pattern for the New Testament church. We're hoping she will continue to bring her friend. Our average attendance has been 19 on Sundays.

In previous letters I've written about methods of fishing "for men" and the essential attributes of spiritual fishermen. These are all points I've stressed to the brethren here in central NY. This time I'd like to share with you what **actions** are required of Christians who want to do some serious fishing:

(1) **Go where the people are.** Stephen's work was one of the reasons for the early church's success in spreading the word in Jerusalem. He "*did great wonders and signs among the people.*" (Acts 6:8). It was in imitation of the apostles, who had likewise gone "*among the people.*" (Acts 4:12). Though we don't have the miraculous ability today that they did, we do have the completed word of God confirmed by those early miracles. We need to imitate Stephen and the apostles and go among the people. We won't influence anyone new if we refuse to talk to people outside our comfortable circle of friends. It's easy to be with brethren all the time, but we have to go where other folks are and give the gospel some exposure beyond the walls of the church building. The apostle Paul went to the marketplace, to Mars Hill, to the synagogues, and to a school -- places people typically gathered to talk. Jesus went to a well where people drew water. Ask yourself: How and where can I meet my neighbor and my townspeople? Where are the people at? Then go, and have the courage to begin talking about the Bible. Go beyond talking about the weather, family, and politics. Prod the discussion with small questions like, "Do you go to church anywhere?" or "Have you done any reading lately?" You can get many a conversation onto a spiritual level. Sometimes they might even beat to you to it! You will see very quickly if a person is interested or not. At least, if they don't seem interested at first, they will know you are a spiritual person and a source for encouragement. Having trouble starting the conversation? Pray for boldness. (Acts 4:29). My wife Sonia looks for opportunities to gently prod her co-workers into a spiritual discussion. Over time, some of these people have opened up more to her to talk about their problems, etc. People need Christ. And Christ needs you to go "among the people."

(2) **As an individual, always be the proper example.** This world is full of religious hypocrites. As soon as you become one of them, you lose any ability to influence anyone to come to Christ. After all, you yourself are not walking with the Lord. Hypocrisy turns people's stomachs quicker than anything. On the other hand, people are won to the Lord through the power of a righteous life. The simple fact of Saul's conversion caused many in Judea to glorify God. (Galatians 1:21-24). People need to see genuine change in us. They cannot see Christ in us if He is not really there. The joy and singleness of heart of the early Christians and their honorable conduct "*among all the people*" directly led to successful evangelism: "*..they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor among all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*" (Acts 2:46b-47). God quickly let it be known what He thought of hypocrisy among Christians in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). He didn't tolerate it because He's in the business of winning souls, as we should be.

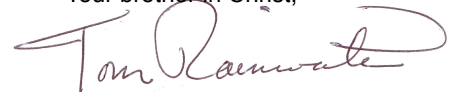
(3) **As a congregation, be of one heart and soul.** Each local church has its own “personality.” Whenever I think of any local congregation I’ve visited or been a part of, I have an impression in my mind what that group is like. You can relate to this. Sometimes the impression is very good -- sometimes, not so good. The impression is never based on physical things, such as the state of the building or the skin color of the brethren, etc. But it is based on spiritual things like friendliness, hospitality, faithfulness to God and His word, hunger for truth, diligence, zeal, love for song and worship, etc. The Lord certainly had a clear impression of the seven churches of Asia. (Revelation 2,3). As we read about the early church in Jerusalem, we have a very favorable impression of it. Considering that it grew from 3,000 people (Acts 2:41) to 5,000+ people (Acts 4:4) in a very short time, we should want to imitate these brethren in every possible way. They continued in the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42) and were “of one heart and one soul.” (Acts 4:32). Their unity (in doctrine and attitude) was shown in their generosity toward one another. They valued each other over their own possessions. (Acts 4:32-35). Who wouldn’t want to be a part of a group like that? On the other hand, when brethren argue and mistreat one another, they become unattractive to anyone of a spiritual mind. Such a group will never grow. Remember: How the members of a congregation conduct themselves together is directly proportional to their ability to evangelize the lost.

(4) **Know the Word, and present it as coming from God.** How can we teach what we don’t know? Diligence of study is required of those workers who “rightly divide the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15). That doesn’t mean you must first learn *everything* before you can teach. But it does mean that you’re always trying to learn more and working on honing your teaching skills. Many times you’ll be asked a Bible question to which you don’t immediately know the answer. When that happens, humbly say, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you.” The important thing is knowing that spiritual answers are found only in the Bible. The more you talk to people, the more you’ll anticipate common questions and, by experience, know where in the Bible to turn. Also, make sure you answer their questions by showing them in their own Bible and having them read the verses out loud. That way, they’ll see that the answer is from God and not from you. If they reject it, they are rejecting what is in their own Bible.

1 Peter 3:15-16a sums up everything well: *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience...”* As Christians, we are expected to answer people’s inquiries into our faith. Are we ready?

Again, thanks for your support of the work here in New York. I appreciate it deeply, and I know the brethren are very grateful that you are assisting me in preaching the gospel. I hope that my letters are, in turn, encouraging to you. Please pray that by our efforts we will soon find honest souls who will receive the word of truth and be converted to our Lord Jesus Christ. May the mercy and grace of God be with you!

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tom Rainwater". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Tom Rainwater