



May/June 2008, Volume 5, Issue 3

Editor's Note

There's plenty of material out there on living the Christian life. But there's not so much, from what we can tell, on living together as a church.

To help with that deficit, 9Marks is using this issue to present pastors and churches with what we believe is a useful tool, a short class on living together as a local church. If you've never provided your congregation with an opportunity to meditate together on what it means to live together as a church, we hope you'll take a look at this material. Teach it yourself; let a young man you're discipling teach it; or let it prompt you to write your own class.

The thirteen classes below were originally taught in a Sunday School format, but feel free to change and adapt the material for whatever format best serves your purposes—small group, weekend retreat, maybe even a sermon series. All free.

Thanks from 9Marks goes to CHBC elders Jamie Dunlop and Papu Sandhu, as well as Third Avenue Baptist Church elder Greg Gilbert, for writing and re-writing this material.

—Jonathan Leeman

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CONVERSION

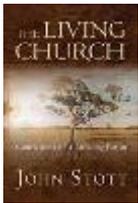


God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?

What are our roles and responsibilities in the process of conversion, and what are God's?
By Brad Wheeler

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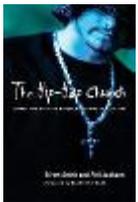
BOOK REVIEWS



Book Review: The Living Church by John Stott

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

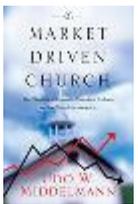
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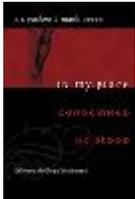
Proud to be a Protestant? R. Kent Hughes, pastor emeritus at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, discusses with Mark Dever his 40 years of pastoral ministry.

Evangelicalism and Anglicanism with Peter Jenson

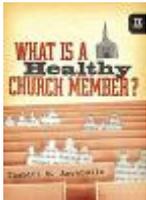
Go to www.9marks.org and click on “Audio”

Peter Jenson discusses Australian Anglicanism, dealing with success, his lack of regard for the academy, training ministers, and more.

NEW PRODUCTS



J. I. Packer and Mark Dever’s *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Crossway) is now available.



Watch out for Thabiti Anyabwile’s *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*, due to be released from Crossway in June 30, 2008.

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Introduction: Unity, God’s Goal for the Church

“Living As a Church”—Class 1

Welcome to the first of thirteen classes on our life together as a church. In this introductory class, my hope is to give you some idea of why we as Christians need a class like this in the first place. To put it simply, we need this class because two things are true:

First, God calls Christians to gather together in local churches to worship him and to reflect his glorious character to the world.

Second, we are still sinners.

The million dollar question is, how do these two statements work together? God calls *us* to glorify him by living together in local churches? How can a still sinful people reflect God?

Unity is Hard

One day, all of God’s people will bow before him, perfectly righteous because of Christ and perfectly unified in humble worship and praise. But God still calls us today—the very *imperfect* people who compose his Church—to the task of displaying the glory of his *perfect* character.

The question of how that can happen in the church is the focus of this class. In particular, our goal is to understand the opportunities and responsibilities we all have as *church members*. How can we, as sinful and selfish people, gather together, not with the forced unity that denies differences, overlooks difficulty, or compromises the message of the gospel, but with unity that preserves the message of the gospel and acts as a compelling testimony to its value? How can we respond to sin in our midst without descending to gossip and slander? How can we trust our leaders but still recognize that they are sinners, too? How can we love people who make us feel uncomfortable because they are so different from us? How can we honestly critique an imperfect church without grumbling?

If you’ve been part of a church for any amount of time, you know that these goals are difficult to achieve. Churches far too often become places of division, complaints, and unhappy people. Therefore they fail to display to the watching world the power of the gospel that should be at work within them.

Our goal for this class is to explore a practical blueprint of what makes a church healthy. What makes it a community where sound doctrine expresses itself in love that glorifies God? My prayer is that you will leave this class with a better understanding of what the Bible says about being a healthy church, and also with some clear ideas of what you can do to help build a healthy church.

I. GOD’S GOAL FOR THE CHURCH—UNITY (EPHESIANS 3-4)

Let’s begin by considering a foundational question: Why is the church important? More specifically, why is it important to God?

To answer that question, let’s look at Ephesians 3 and 4, where Paul lays out the importance of the church in God’s plan of redemption. I’ll run through the whole passage, and then summarize some critical takeaway points.

Unlocking the Mystery of the Gospel

To give you some context, Paul has spent chapters 1 and 2 describing the power of the gospel—that though we as Christians were dead in our transgressions, we are now alive in Christ and reconciled both to God and to each other. Let’s pick up his train of thought in Ephesians 3:2:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the *mystery* of Christ. (vv. 2-4)

What is this *mystery* that Paul understands so well? Skip ahead to verse six:

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

You see? Paul is excited about the fact that Christianity has united Jews and Gentiles together into one body. The hatred and enmity which had existed between them for centuries is overcome in the gospel. As Paul put it a little earlier in 2:14, Christ has “broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles.

Back to chapter 3. In verse 8, Paul says that the proclamation of this mystery—this gospel-induced peace between Jew and Gentile—is central to his ministry:

Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

The Purpose of Gospel Unity

But why is unity in the gospel so important? In verse 10, Paul gives us a unique glimpse into God’s purpose:

His intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Who are the “rules and authorities” that Paul mentions here? We don’t really know. The phrase “in the heavenly realms” suggests that it refers to the spiritual dimension that exists beyond the physical.

What is absolutely clear, though, is that it is through the church—and specifically, through the unity of Jews and Gentiles within the church—that God is bringing glory to himself by showing off *to everyone* (verse 9) his manifold wisdom.

How does the church display the manifold wisdom of God? Only an all-wise God could devise a way to reconcile his love and his justice *while* saving a rebellious people who are estranged from him and from one another.

Unity Applied—How Then Should We Live?

Through the rest of chapter 3, Paul prays for the family of God. He asks God to strengthen them through his Holy Spirit. He also prays that, as Christ dwells in their hearts through faith, they would come to understand just how all-encompassing Christ’s love is for them, and thus be “filled with all the fullness of God” (see verses 14-21).

In chapter 4 Paul begins to apply the truths we have just discussed, calling the Ephesian Christians to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” My guess is that when you hear this exhortation, you probably start to think immediately of your own personal holiness. But if you keep that exhortation firmly planted in the context of chapter three, it’s clear that he doesn’t have our individual holiness in mind here so much as our life *together* as a church!

Look at verses 2-3, where Paul talks about what should characterize our relationships in the church:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Paul has more than one person in mind here. He’s talking to a *group* of people, not just individuals.

Through the next few verses, Paul describes our calling as one body and explains that our unity with each other is fostered by the gifts God has given to his people (verses 4-11). And what’s the goal of these gifts? Verses 12-13:

To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Some Things to Remember

Well, that's a lightning run through two marvelous chapters of Scripture. Let's pause for a moment and notice three truths in this passage that are of critical importance:

First, the unity of the church is central to the message of the gospel. One of the great accomplishments of Christ's work is that he has broken down the dividing walls of hostility that exist—because of sin—between human beings. Through the blood of Christ we are reconciled with God and we are reconciled with one another. It cannot be otherwise.

Second, church unity showcases the wisdom of God. The church isn't a collection of people who merely tolerate one other long enough to sing some songs and hear a sermon every Sunday; the church is a gathering of people who demonstrates a unity so powerful that it can only have come to pass by the hand of God.

Third, cultivating unity is our responsibility as church members. It is the *entire church* that has been gifted by the Spirit, and so Paul calls the *entire church* to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. And, as we see in 1 Corinthians 1 and James 2, the New Testament authors will rebuke the *entire church* when unity is damaged. Not just church leaders. Church *members*.

Unity Throughout the Bible

So what is God's goal for the church? Unity. Why? Because when redeemed sinners with little in common choose to love each other, that displays God's wisdom and glory like nothing else.

This truth is not unique to the book of Ephesians. It is found throughout the Bible. Consider Jesus' words in John 13:34-35:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

Jesus continues this thought in his prayer for believers in John 17:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (v. 23)

Or think of Luke's description of the early church in Acts 4:

All the believers were one in heart and mind . . . with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them. (vv. 32-33)

Even in the Old Testament, the mission of God's people was to reveal—as a corporate body—God's character to the nations around them. When God chose Abraham, his ultimate goal was not to save just Abraham as an individual. God intended to make of Abraham “a great *nation*” that would bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3).

Similarly in Ezekiel 36, God promises to save and reestablish the nation of Israel so that all the nations around them would know that he is God. It was his goodness to the people *as a whole* that would glorify him in the world.

Unity is Not Just an Option

We can see from all this that unity among God's people is not just an optional addition to our lives as Christians. It is an integral part of our life as God's people. Remember how starkly John puts this in 1 John 4:20:

If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

The bottom line is that we need to realize that focusing on “my individual life as a Christian” is fundamentally wrong-headed. God accomplishes his purposes in believers primarily *corporately*, not individually. That's why the word-pictures the Bible uses to describe the church—living stones built into a spiritual house, members of a body,

and so forth—emphasize the communal nature of the church. God will fulfill his purpose for the church as it acts in unity, as a *community* of believers.

II. THE RIGHT KIND OF UNITY

Ironically, the concept of unity has become quite divisive over the past hundred years or so. People have understood the Bible's call for Christian unity in many different and conflicting ways. So what do we mean, exactly, when we talk about Christian unity?

One Extreme—Unity at All Cost

Some people say that Christian unity means that all people who call themselves Christians should organize together institutionally, or at least cooperate together as a single body of believers. The problem with Christianity, they say, is that our doctrinal disagreements—between Catholics and Protestants, or Evangelicals and theological Liberals—damage our ability to influence this world for the kingdom of God. Therefore, we should set those differences aside and unite in the greater cause of making the world better.

The problem with this expansive view of unity, as many Christians have noted, is that it would be a shallow unity, indeed. Many who call themselves “Christians” would disagree on some very fundamental questions:

- What does it mean to be a Christian?
- Who is God?
- Who is Jesus Christ?
- What must people do to be saved?
- Do we even need to be saved from sin at all?

When there is disagreement about basic issues like those, it's hard to imagine how any real unity can be fostered. Sure, you could ignore such questions and declare yourselves unified anyway. But organizational unity for its own sake is pretty meaningless, isn't it? Even worse, it can confuse the world as to the nature of Christianity and the gospel.

It is certainly a good thing to cooperate with others for the sake of a common goal—working with Roman Catholics to protect the rights of the unborn, for example. But while that is a *type* of unity, it's not *Christian*, per se. I'll partner with non-Christians to protect the rights of the unborn.

The Other Extreme—No Unity At All

At the other extreme are those Christians for whom unity is almost a bad word. Such separatists may be right to regard the kind of ecumenism that we just considered as confusing and contrary to gospel purposes. But these separatists can go too far, declaring that they will share Christian fellowship only with those who agree with them on every point of doctrine.

Many separatistic churches place undue focus on doctrines that are not clear in Scripture, such as their own understanding of the end times or particular rules for Christian living. As a result, they become known more for being divisive, schismatic, and legalistic than for holding out the life of the gospel.

The idea that a local church would isolate itself from other churches is almost as preposterous and unbiblical as an individual Christian isolating himself from other Christians. Even as we struggle against a wrong-headed, utopian view of globally organized Christian unity, we must also fight to reclaim the high place that real Christian unity should hold in our lives—both between individual Christians and churches.

Avoiding the Extremes—True Christian Unity

In this fallen world, real Christian unity falls in between those two ends of the spectrum I just described. Perhaps a helpful way to get our heads around the kind of unity Paul talks about in Ephesians is to think of it in terms of an **action**, a **purpose**, a **source**, and a **place**.

1. The **action** that defines Christian unity is love. In particular, it is love for our brothers and sisters in Christ that crosses worldly boundaries. In this world, people divide along all kinds of socio-economic, racial, and ethnic lines.

And people certainly divide when one person sins against another. But as we have seen, the gospel of Jesus Christ tears down those walls, both the walls of life circumstance and the walls of offence-rendered and hurt-received. Now we as Christians are called to love those whom we would not naturally be drawn to love. Think of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:46.

If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Or chapter 18:21-22

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

*2. The **purpose** of Christian unity is the glory of God in the vindication of his gospel.* Unity that exists for any other purpose may well be valuable, but it is not the Christian unity that we are exploring in this class.

This is a crucial point in determining whether we may unite with another group of people and describe it as Christian unity. Is this other church or organization laboring for the same God as we are? Are they seeking to proclaim and vindicate the same gospel? Or are there fundamental differences that will cause people to believe in a different gospel altogether?

These are not always easy questions to answer, but that does not mean we are free not to ask them. The decision to unite with another church in gospel work is one that has enormous implications. The last thing we want to communicate to the world is that we as a church are somehow "okay" with beliefs that actually repudiate the biblical gospel.

*3. The **source** of Christian unity is the love of Christ.* As John puts it, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Real Christian unity has at its root a deep understanding that we are forgiven in Christ.

Do you remember Jesus' words in Luke 7:47? "He who is forgiven little, loves little." And he who has been forgiven much, loves much. Unity that glorifies God and vindicates the wisdom of the gospel is unity that is powered by our understanding that we have been forgiven in Christ. When Christ's love for us is the source of our love for one another, that is a supernatural love, one that can only be explained by the power of God working in us. But if unity is driven by an affinity which is familiar to the world—one based merely on a desire to clean up a neighborhood, for example, or effect some sort of social change—how will the wisdom of God to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" be displayed? No, the unity for which we strive is one based on something that the world simply cannot fit neatly into its godless categories. It's a transcendent unity based on Christ's love for us.

*4. Finally, the **place** where Christian unity is primarily worked out is the local church.* Of course, Christian unity is not limited to an individual local church, but it works itself out most practically in that context. It is in the local church that we learn to rejoice with people with whom we may not naturally rejoice, and to weep with people with whom we may not naturally weep. In the local church we learn to share our lives with people who share one profound love with us: the love of our Lord Jesus Christ who has forgiven us of our sin.

Understanding all that, we might define Christian unity like this:

True Christian unity is found in God-glorifying, gospel-revealing love for all brothers and sisters in Christ, fueled by our forgiveness in Christ that expresses itself most clearly in the assembly of the local church.

That is the kind of Christian unity that will declare God's wisdom to the world.

III. THE BENEFITS OF UNITY

The unity we seek in the local church is not just theoretical. It has real implications for our lives, and real benefits to us as Christians. For the next few minutes, I want us to turn our attention to exploring some of the benefits that unity brings to a local congregation.

As we walk through each of these, keep two questions in mind:

- First, do you see this particular benefit in our church generally?
- And second, are your own relationships with the members of this church structured in such a way that this benefit accrues to you and to others?

Here then are some of the benefits of Christian unity that Scripture holds out to us:

1. Assurance of Salvation

In 1 John 3, we read:

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. (verse 14)

And later,

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. (vv. 19-20)

John is writing here about the importance of loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we look at our relationships with other Christians and see unity and love rather than discord and strife, it should encourage us that we are in fact the children of God. Unity in the body of Christ is an important part of a believer's assurance of salvation.

2. Encouragement

The author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 10:23-25:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

These verses begin with a stirring call—to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. That's really hard to do, which is exactly why God has written these words not to you as an individual, but to us as a church. Our life together as a church is important because God knows we're not self-motivated all the time. We need each other's prayer, correction, and encouragement so that we may love each other. This type of encouragement cannot happen in an atmosphere of dissention and strife. It happens when there is unity.

3. Orthodoxy

The third benefit of unity I'd like us to consider comes again from Ephesians 4. Unity protects our doctrine. Look at where we left off in verse 14. Remember, Paul was writing about building up the unity of the church.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (vv. 14-16)

What will have this kind of impact? The unity Paul has been describing for the previous thirteen verses. Unity protects our doctrine. It protects us from the tyranny of faddish teaching, from the danger of being pulled into error. More than creeds and statements of faith, more than bishops and popes, unified congregations have been the primary means God has used to protect the core teachings of the Christian faith.

Today, efforts to recapture unity often get a bad reputation precisely because they come at the *expense* of orthodoxy. But far from seeing a delicate balancing act between doctrine and unity, Paul sees unity as our main hope for *preserving* our doctrine.

4. Evangelism

In John 17, Jesus prays,

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me . . . May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (vv. 20-21; 23b)

The church's unity is one way that non-Christians will recognize the divinity of Christ and his divine mission. Moreover, it is part of how they will come to understand the love of God.

That ambitious, God-given objective should make us consider the role our church plays in our own evangelism. Of course evangelism is more than simply bringing people to church, but that doesn't mean that the church has *no* role to play in evangelism. Exposing a non-Christian to the love we have for each other as Christians is a powerful witness to the work of God in our lives.

There are other benefits of unity we could consider as well:

- A unified church is more likely to pray for itself and others.
- Its members are far better able to hold each other accountable, because they know each other and love each other.
- Even the disciplinary actions of a unified church are more powerful because they are more obviously driven by love and not factionalism.
- A unified church has the luxury of focusing the attention of its leadership outward rather than on solving problems within. The list goes on and on.

IV. CONCLUSION

Remember the question with which we began the class: how can an imperfect people display the glorious character of a perfect God? What's the answer?

A still sinful people can display both the love and holiness of God as they live in gospel unity: a unity that doesn't come from white washing sin, but calls it what it is—sin; but a unity that's born of the forgiveness of sin—the forgiveness of Christ which we both proclaim and extend to one another.

This entire course is a class about unity—unity that proclaims Jesus Christ's greatness to the people around us because it flows from and celebrates God's work of redemption.

Over the next twelve weeks, we think practically about how we can build a church marked by that kind of unity, one that therefore protects and proclaims the life-changing message of the gospel. I pray that God will use these weeks to help us better understand the role that each of us is to play in that great work.

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Church Membership—The Context for Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 2

I. INTRODUCTION

Good morning and welcome! This is the second class in a thirteen-week course on living together as a church. This morning, we will consider the idea of church membership and how it facilitates unity within the church. Before we begin, let's pray.

Church Membership—Why Bother?

I wonder if you've thought much about why it's so widely expected that Christians should *join* local churches. After all, we don't see any explicit exhortation in the Bible to “join a church.” We also know that membership in a church does not in any way contribute to our salvation. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Moreover, one might argue that this issue of church membership is just a matter of semantics. Why do I need to put my name on a list? Can't I be a part of the church just by showing up, listening to the sermons, and talking to people? Those are the sort of issues we'll consider today as we talk about church membership.

Last week we talked about how God has chosen to display his manifold wisdom and glory through the church. We thought about the significance of unity, and of God's people relating to one another in ways that display God's glory. Over the next hour, we'll see that it is church membership that provides the context for that unity.

But I'm Already a Member!

Before we begin, let me address one question you might be asking already. Perhaps you're thinking, “This lesson on church membership is all fine and good, but how's it relevant to me? I'm already a member of this church.”

Well, the purpose of this class is *not* to convince *you* to join a church. That's what we do in our membership class—we exhort prospective members to join a church, whether this one or another one, for their good and God's glory.

In this class, we want to do something different. We want to consider how church membership provides a necessary context for a healthy church culture, and we want to make the case that commitment to a local congregation is one of the basic ingredients of a healthy, unified local church. All the other aspects of unity that we'll discuss in the coming weeks—praying together, submitting to godly leadership, and others—all assume that we share some level of commitment to one another. That is why it is so important—even for people who are already church members—to think carefully about the responsibilities and privileges associated with being a member of a church.

A Roadmap

In today's class we will focus on three main points.

First, we will see from Scripture that God calls Christians to commit to a local church body, to do so *formally*, and even—yes—to be *members* of that body.

Second, we will look at how the commitment of church membership facilitates unity in the church.

Finally, we will think about how we should talk to non-members about the importance of church membership.

II. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There's a common notion out there that the New Testament does not say anything at all about joining a local church. And of course that's true if you're just looking for the words “join a church” or “sign this card” in the Bible.

But to say that the New Testament doesn't know anything of church membership is simply not true. The New Testament *does* call Christians to be committed to a particular local church. Not only so, it also expects that this commitment will be a *formal* one, so that everyone will know who has made that kind of commitment and who has not. In fact, you may be surprised to hear that the New Testament even goes so far as to call this kind of commitment *membership* in the church!

It's About Commitment

One of the most prominent themes in the entire New Testament is Christians' calling to love one another. Jesus could not have put it more plainly when he said

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12)

The apostle John then reminds us in one of his letters:

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (1 John 3:23)

And Paul says in Romans 12:10:

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

The love that Christians are called to have for one another isn't just a feeling, either. It is love that works itself out in concrete actions. Look at all the different ways the New Testament describes how Christians are to love each other:

- Rom 12:15 tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep.
- Ephesians 4:2 tells us to bear with one another.
- Eph 4:32 says we are to be kind to one another, and forgive one another.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says we should encourage one another, and build one another up.
- Heb 3:13 tells us to exhort one another.
- Heb 10:24 says to stir one another up to love and good works.
- Jam 5:26 tells us to confess our sins to one another, and pray for each other.
- 1 Peter 4:9-10 says we are to show hospitality to each other, and use our gifts to serve one another.

And of course there are other passages, too. The point is that all those actions require *relationships*. You can't encourage, exhort, and stir others up to love and good works if you're just casually running into them at church once a week. You need to have real and vibrant relationships in place. In fact, doing all that requires an understanding that you are sharing life together, that you are open to hearing exhortation, encouragement, and even rebuke from one another when it's necessary. Put simply, it requires commitment.

Who's In and Who's Out

The commitment Christians make to one another in the church is not just casual and "understood." Throughout the New Testament, it seems to be a *formal* one. In other words, the early church knew who was a part of their community and who was not. They had a very clear understanding of who was *inside* the church and who was *outside* of it.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for not expelling a man who is in serious sin. In verses 11 to 13, he writes,

But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral, or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'

Notice how Paul refers to those "inside the church" and those "outside the church." But how does he know who's in and who's out? How does the church distinguish between those who are part of it and those who aren't? The answer is that they must have known very clearly which people had formally committed themselves to the church,

and which had not. That is really the only way that Paul's exhortation to "expel" the sinful man makes any sense. How could the church "put out" someone who had never been "put in?" How could they expel someone from their fellowship if they had no clear understanding of which people were already *in* their fellowship? They couldn't, at least not with any meaning. The church could only legitimately remove from its fellowship those who had formally committed to the church, identifying themselves with it.

Later, in 2 Corinthians 2, we find that the church had indeed followed Paul's advice and expelled the man. He apparently repented of his sin sometime after that, because Paul says in 2:6 that, "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him."

Look at that sentence carefully, and especially the word "majority." That is important because you can't have a *majority* of anything unless you know who gets counted and who doesn't. Paul must be talking here about a majority of a well-defined whole—that is, a majority of those people who were *known* to be committed to the church. (Perhaps they even had a list. . . .)

"Membership"—It's Our Word

Where does the term "membership" come from anyway? Why do we call this formal commitment a person makes to the church "becoming a member?" Many people assume that the church has just borrowed the term from other organizations—the Rotary Club or Columbia Records, for instance. But in reality, it's the Rotary Club that has borrowed "membership" from the church!

The idea of being a member of a church comes from the apostle Paul, when he describes the local church as a "body" and each person within it as a "member" of that body. Yep, he actually uses that word! Look at what he says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-19:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

And then, just to make the point explicit, he says to this local church at Corinth:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

The image Paul uses here is a profound one. Each of the members in the body is dependent on all the others. As Paul puts it, the eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you." Nor can the head say that to the feet. (1 Corinthians 12:21) No member of the body is independent; each depends in a profound way on all the others. So in the church at Corinth, there were some people gifted to do certain things, and others gifted to do other things. Each "member" in the church was different, yet working together they had everything necessary for the building up of the church body (1 Corinthians 14:12).

When you understand what lies behind the word "member," you see why we put so much emphasis on church membership. "Membership" is not just a word—it is a description of what we intend our commitment to Christ and to each other to look like.

In that light, it starts to sound ridiculous to talk about being a "member" of Columbia Records, doesn't it? But "membership" is the perfect word to describe the deep and practical commitment we share with each other as members of the body of Christ in this local church.

III. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP PROMOTES UNITY

Let's think now about how church membership fosters unity within the church. Specifically, there are two primary ways that this happens:

Unity With These, But Not Those

First and most importantly, church membership defines the group of people with whom we seek unity. Simply stated, church membership unifies because it requires members to be Christians. We unite with people who have repented of sin and trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation.

It is astonishing how often this truth is ignored in churches today. And as you can imagine, this has drastic consequences for church unity. When churches are filled with unregenerate, non-Christian people who hold offices and teaching positions, the result is almost always a church that is full of strife and division. That's why, when we interview a prospective member of this church, we ask him to tell us how he became a Christian and also to explain briefly the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When a church allows into membership people who do not give evidence of faith in Christ, they are left having to force unity on a group of people who are not indwelt by the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. Church membership fosters unity because it makes the nature of our task clear. We are to demonstrate the glory of God's wisdom by uniting in the local church with a specific group of people—those who are fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

Unity With the Whole Body, Not Just a Part of It

The second way that church membership fosters church unity is by calling us to commit to the *entire* church, not just a part of it.

In the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for its quarreling and divisiveness. Some were claiming to be followers of Paul, others of Apollos, and still others of Peter. Paul tells them in 3:4-5:

When one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.

If some of us decided that we were only going to attend church on the Sundays when the pastor is preaching because we like his sermons best, and others of us decided that we would only attend when the associate pastor is preaching because we prefer his sermons, we would quickly become a divided church.

Similarly, if we commit to a small group of friends who are like us in some way, rather than to the church body as a whole, the church will become divided. As Christians, our primary commitment must be to the congregation at large, not to a smaller group of friends. We want to encourage Christians to invest energy in relationships with everyone that God brings to this church, not just with people who are similar to us in socio-economic level, occupation, race, ethnicity, or even interests. Far from being based on any of those things, our unity is grounded in our shared love for Jesus Christ and his gospel.

IV. ENCOURAGING CHRISTIANS TO JOIN A CHURCH

How can we encourage Christian friends who are not members of a church? This is a very practical question because there are thousands of people out there who claim to be Christians, but who have not joined a church. Some of those people are simply afraid of committing to something for fear of being hurt. Others say they have a "theological" problem with the whole idea of church membership, and wonder why they can't be a part of the church simply by showing up. How should we talk to people like that?

You Xenophile!

First and foremost, we should go out of our way to make such people feel welcome in our church. In Romans 12:13, Paul commands Christians to be hospitable. Specifically, the word he uses there is "xenophilia." You may be familiar with the opposite of this word, "xenophobia," which means a fear or dislike of strangers or foreigners. Paul calls Christians not to be *xenophobes*, but *xenophiles*! So the next time you're trying to decide who to talk to after church, or who to invite over for lunch, remember your calling to be a friend of strangers.

Join A Church!

I'm sure many of you know people who claim to be Christians, and yet for one reason or another refuse to commit themselves to a local church. How can we help those people to see the significance of church membership? There are many good points you could make, but let's concentrate on three.

1. **First, not joining a church is dangerous.** We are sinful people, and therefore we simply cannot trust ourselves. By joining a church, we ask others to hold us accountable to live as Christians and, if necessary, even to discipline us if we are not living as Christians. Proverbs 12:1 is instructive:

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.

When we commit to a church by becoming a member, other members can help us guard against our own self-delusion and hold us accountable.

2. **Second, joining a church brings glory to God.** Perhaps you've had conversations with Christians who reject the idea that we need to join the church. And perhaps these friends appear to be strong Christians. They are active witnesses for the gospel, they read Scripture regularly, and they pray frequently.

All these things are good, but by refusing to join a church, a person betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of God's plan for displaying his glory. As we discussed some last week, God displays his glory *through the church*.

God's plan is not about us as mere individuals. It is far larger and grander than that. God wants people to unite around his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—people who have many different faults and peculiarities, people who may be very different from you, people who may not always even be your favorite people, but people with whom you have Christ in common. That's what Paul means in Ephesians 3 where he says that it is through the church that God's manifold wisdom is made known.

3. **Finally, joining a church identifies us with Christ.** In Acts 9, the risen Jesus appears to Saul as he is heading toward Damascus to persecute Christians. Do you remember what Jesus says to him? He doesn't say "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting those Christians?" He doesn't even say "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting the church?" He says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" Jesus so closely identifies with the church that he refers to the congregation of Christians at Damascus as "me."

If Jesus himself so completely identifies with the church, shouldn't we do the same?

V. CONCLUSION

We started this class by asking why anyone should bother with church membership. I hope that by now you have a good understanding of why membership is so important. We are not called to live the Christian life as isolated individuals, but rather as members of Christ's body—that is, as members of a local church. That is not just some arbitrary requirement, either. When we commit our lives to one another in the church, we are given the encouragement and accountability we need, and God is glorified by the amazing spectacle of people from utterly different backgrounds uniting solely for the sake of his Son Jesus. Ultimately then, church membership is both for our good and for God's glory!

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Preaching—The Foundation of Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 3

As Christians, we probably all agree that preaching is important. But what’s not immediately obvious is how the act of preaching—and the act of listening to preaching—contributes to the unity of a local church.

How exactly does preaching foster unity in the church? How we can be good stewards of the preaching we hear, not just for our own individual growth, but for the health and maturity of the church as a whole? These are some of the questions we’ll consider today.

I. GOD CREATES HIS PEOPLE THROUGH HIS WORD

The first thing we must realize is that God’s word and God’s people have a unique relationship. The word of God is not just an optional add-on to the life of the church. Nor is it just one tool among many which will inform and benefit the people of God. According to Scripture, the Word of God is actually the source of our very life.

Life Through the Word—Old Testament

One of the great themes of the Bible is the connection between God’s Word and life. When God gives life, he does so through the power of his Word. Even in the very beginning, God gave life to the universe by speaking. “Let there be light,” he said, “and there was light,” (Genesis 1:3).

Think also of those momentous first words of the Ten Commandments: “God spoke all these words,” Exodus 20:1 says, and Israel was made a nation.

Then there is the stunning vision in Ezekiel 37 of God giving new life to his people after their exile in Babylon:

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. . . . I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. (Ezekiel 37:7, 10).

Notice what calls the bones to life. It is Ezekiel’s spoken word. Ezekiel prophesies, the bones come together, flesh grows over them, and they live. The message is clear: God’s people are given life through the power of his Word.

Life Through the Word—New Testament

In the New Testament as well, God’s people are given life by the Word of God. Indeed Scripture’s teaching about God’s life-giving Word finds its consummation in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. John writes at the beginning of his gospel,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. (John 1:1-4)

What an amazing statement: In the Word was life! It is through Jesus Christ, the Word of God, that we are brought from death to life and “born again” by God’s power.

Paul makes the same point in Romans 10: “Faith comes by hearing,” he says (Romans 10:17). No one comes to faith in Christ simply by looking at the world and drawing their own conclusions. They come to believe in Christ when they hear the gospel message preached to them.

The point is that it is the power of God’s Word that brings God’s people to life. Because of that, God’s Word is central to the identity and mission of his people. Christianity is not primarily about spiritual experience or warm community or even acts of service—though all those things are important in their way. First and foremost, Christianity is about God’s people hearing God’s Word and responding to it in faith. That is why we say that preaching is vital to unity in the church.

For the next few minutes, we'll consider the role of preaching in the church, thinking first about why preaching is uniquely important (as opposed to studying the Bible on your own, for example) and then discussing very practically *how* preaching builds the church's unity.

II. THE UNIQUE ROLE OF PREACHING

Many churches today would insist that they are Bible-centered, and yet they leave preaching as a secondary focus in their church life. Fellowship, music, small groups, or other activities take priority and set the direction of the church, while preaching becomes kind of an afterthought.

Preaching in the Bible

Relegating preaching to secondary status is simply not an option for any church that wants to pattern itself after Scripture. Throughout the Bible, the exposition of God's Word is central to the life of God's people. Here are some examples:

- When God gave his Law to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, he also gave them teachers, the priests, who were to teach the Word of God to them (Leviticus 10:11). The Law of course was perfect, but God knew that his people were not. Therefore he gave them teachers to explain the Law and to exhort the people to obedience.
- In Nehemiah 8, after the wall of Jerusalem was completed, all the people gathered to hear Ezra the scribe read from the Book of the Law. "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Nehemiah 8:8). In other words, Ezra preached!
- Jesus understood that one of the main purposes of his own ministry was to preach. He said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).
- The Gospel of Mark tells us that one reason Jesus called the twelve apostles to himself was so that "he might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14).
- Paul insists that the gospel will only be spread through preaching. "How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Romans 10:14).
- Paul tells Timothy: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the Word!" (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

We cannot claim that our church is founded on the Word of God unless our church is founded on the *preaching* of that Word. Individual Bible study is not sufficient; Bible studies in small groups are not sufficient; coffee hour Q&A's on Sunday morning are not sufficient. Only when our church is centered around the preaching of the Scriptures can we truly claim to be a Word-centered church.

Why Is Preaching Better Than Anything Else?

Between the individualism that marks our culture, and our Protestant heritage of the priesthood of all believers, we can sometimes think that simply having the Bible is sufficient—that "me, my God, and my Bible" are enough to bring us to spiritual maturity. When such thinking is left unchallenged, we can easily begin to undervalue the preaching of God's Word to the community of believers.

So what is it that makes preaching so vital to the life and unity of the church? Why isn't individual Bible study or small group fellowship better, or at least just as good? Let me suggest two reasons:

First, preaching in the church carries unique authority.

Ultimately, the authority of preaching rests on the authority of Scripture itself. In fact, preaching that isn't rooted deeply in Scripture carries no authority at all! Not a few preachers seem to think that their authority flows from

their great personality or knowledge, or even because they hold some church office. But none of that gives someone the right to speak with authority about God; to claim otherwise requires more than a little hubris! Whatever authority a preacher has is not his own; he has authority only so far as he is truly explaining the Bible.

But that brings up another question. Why should we trust a particular preacher's interpretation of the Bible? Any preacher can go wrong in his explanation, interpretation, and application of the Scripture. So what gives us any confidence that a particular sermon is a true and trustworthy interpretation of Scripture?

The answer is that preaching takes place in the context of a local congregation. Therefore, it is backed by the united testimony of an *entire community* of Christians, each indwelt by God's life-giving Spirit. When the church is healthy, the words the preacher says on Sunday morning are tacitly confirmed by the church's elders and ultimately by the congregation as a whole.

If the pastor starts preaching something the congregation believes is contrary to Scripture, then the church as a whole has a duty to say so—gently and respectfully to be sure, but firmly. That's exactly what Paul tells the congregations in Galatia: It is *your* responsibility to make sure the message being preached to you is the true gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). Final authority over the message preached is given to the entire congregation—not to a pope, a presbytery, or pastor, but to the church.

Thus we can have extra confidence in the truth we hear preached in a healthy church, because it is backed by the testimony of a community of Christians. That is one distinction between preaching in a church and our own personal study of the Bible. Preaching represents the unified agreement of Spirit-filled believers, and therefore we can have an extra degree of confidence in its authority.

Second, preaching is applied in the context of relationships.

Preaching is truth that confronts us from outside ourselves—outside our biases, our assumptions, and our sins. As Christians, we all know that our hearts are sinful and our minds are deceptive. Yet we often forget that sin affects even our ability to interpret the Word of God. Yes, God has given us the Holy Spirit to illuminate our understanding, but the presence of the Holy Spirit does not mean that our interpretation of the Bible is free from error.

If we are to understand God's Word rightly, we need other Christians to speak truth *to* us. Moreover, we need that truth delivered to us in the context of community—in the company of a group of people *who know our lives* and will confront us with the truth of God's Word.

There are many important ways we can apply this truth to our lives. Here are three:

1. First, don't think that listening to a CD of a great preacher is enough. It is not. Every Christian needs to be sitting under the faithful preaching of God's word in a real church. Only then are your brothers and sisters able to speak into your life and help you respond in a godly way to what has been preached. Growth in Christ is not an automatic thing. It's not "just add sermon and watch it grow." You need the sanctifying influence of other Christians challenging you, exhorting you, and encouraging you—all on the basis of the preached Word of God.
2. Second, come to church even when you don't want to. Many Christians stop coming to church when they face difficulty in their lives—whether sin or depression or just discouragement. But those are exactly the times when we *most* need to be at church! God speaks to us through the preaching of his Word, and it's during times of spiritual struggle that we ought to be most hungry to hear from him. Don't isolate yourself in times of spiritual difficulty.
3. Finally, let people into your life! None of these benefits will accrue to you if you don't let people know you, or if you don't talk with others about how God's word should *apply* to your life. When you go to lunch with other Christians after the service, don't just talk about sports or the upcoming week. Talk about the truth of what was just preached. Open yourself to be confronted and challenged by those who have just heard the same truth that you have. Preaching is about living community.

III. HOW PREACHING PROMOTES UNITY

For the rest of our class, we'll look at three ways in which biblical preaching promotes unity in the church.

Biblical Preaching Gives Us a Message Around Which to Unite

The first way that biblical preaching promotes unity is by making clear what we are uniting around. As we noted two weeks ago, church unity has a particular purpose—to showcase the power of the gospel by uniting very different people who find commonality in the good news of Jesus Christ. And how is that unity-creating gospel message proclaimed? Primarily through preaching. Biblical preaching makes crystal clear the specific message that defines who we are as God's people.

What does that mean for us as members of this church?

- Above all it means that we should expect everyone who leads us to be committed to gospel-centered preaching—preaching that explains, exalts, and revels in the good news of Jesus Christ. Yes, we all understand the gospel; we are all Christians. But God's people need to hear the gospel message *regularly*. We are forgetful, and therefore we need to hear over and over again that God is holy, that we are sinful, and that our only hope is in Christ's perfect work on the cross. If preaching ever becomes merely a list of to-dos—a mere description of how we should live—then it is no longer Christian preaching.
- It also means that as members, we have a responsibility to protect the church against preaching that is not biblical. In the New Testament, when error slipped into a church's teaching, the apostles did not blame the preacher alone; they blamed the church (2 Timothy 4:3, for example). As a member of this church, you are accountable for the integrity of what you hear on Sunday morning—and for the message that you support with your tithe money. If you're concerned that the preacher is teaching something that is unbiblical, then you have a responsibility to learn more and perhaps even to respond.

Of course, you have to handle a situation like that with wisdom and care. How should we respond to teaching we think is in error? A few guidelines to remember:

First, remember that you may be mistaken. You may have heard something that wasn't really said, or you yourself may be the one who's in need of correction. Humility and thoughtfulness will always serve you better than anger or rashness. When you speak with someone about what you think is an error in their preaching, do so with respect; after all, this is someone in whom the church has decided to invest significant authority. Recall Paul's words to Timothy—"Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father" (1 Timothy 5:1).

Second, consider carefully when and how to raise the issue with the preacher. The severity of the error is important to consider here. If the error you suspect is one that cuts to the heart of the gospel, it might be worth raising it immediately after the service. But if it is a minor point—one of emphasis, or one having to do with non-essential matters of theology, for example—then it's probably not worth monopolizing the preacher while a non-Christian is waiting to ask questions about the gospel. Be wise about when and how you raise your questions.

Third, be careful about talking to other friends about the concern you have. That's not to say you shouldn't talk about it. Sometimes it's a good idea to ask others if they had the same concern. Their thoughts can help you to refine your thinking, or even convince you that your concern is unwarranted. But be wise about whom you talk to. Is your friend a fairly new Christian or a vulnerable Christian? Is your concern going to disrupt that friend's ability to trust the pastor in the future? Are there other issues that your friend would benefit more from talking about? Consider those things carefully before you speak.

Fourth, encourage the pastor more than you raise concerns. Any concern you raise with a preacher—especially if he preaches regularly at the church—ought to be in the context of a long history of encouragement. That means you need to be in the habit of encouraging those who preach in our church. Let them know how God is using them in your life through the preaching of God's word. Speak to them—and with something more than a handshake and an "Enjoy'd it." Encourage with *specifics*. Tell the preacher how this illustration or that application particularly affected or convicted you. Send him an email

on Monday morning and tell him how you're being encouraged and challenged by what he said in the sermon. Thank him for preaching the unity-building Gospel of Jesus so faithfully.

Biblical Preaching Builds Us Up in Christ

A second way preaching can foster unity is by promoting spiritual growth. As a congregation hears week after week who God is, what he has done for us, and how that ought to impact our lives, it will be built up in the faith and better equipped to love. Hearts will soften and grudges will melt away. We will be humbled, encouraged, comforted, and led to repentance, and the result will be a greater degree of unity among the members of the body.

Of course, preaching that falls on deaf ears or unrepentant hearts can hardly accomplish all this. Think about your own life for a moment.

- Are you faithful in applying to your own heart what you hear each week?
- Are you changed somehow each week by what is preached?
- Are you faithfully and humbly working to apply truth to the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ?
- Are they better shaped by God's Word because they live in a church community with you?

When the members of a church are being genuinely changed and shaped by the preaching of the Word, unity will naturally result.

Biblical Preaching Applies God's Word to the Unique Needs and Characteristics of the Congregation

Finally, preaching promotes church unity because God's word is applied to the specific needs of *this* congregation. All churches are not the same. Our congregation has particular needs and characteristics, so when our preacher prepares a message, he is applying God's word with *us* in mind— our strengths, our shortcomings, and our particular struggles and joys as a congregation.

Not only so, but through the preaching of the word we develop a unique vision of ministry as a congregation. Different churches in different circumstances are led by the Holy Spirit to respond to Scripture in different ways. As we listen together to the same message, our unity with one another is strengthened as we develop a common vision of ministry.

IV. CONCLUSION

With all that in mind, what should we do to promote unity through the preaching we hear week after week?

First, we should be careful to keep preaching in its proper place as the central activity of our life together as a church. Nothing else is as important to our growth and unity as the preaching of the Word. Therefore, our conversation, our ministries, and even our weekly schedules ought to reflect and communicate that priority.

Second, we should remember to pray for those who preach to us. Pray that God would speak to them through his Word, guard them from error, give them insight, and use them to edify the church.

Third, we should be deliberate about applying the preached Word to our own hearts. Every time you hear a sermon in this church, it is an opportunity to apply God's Word to your own life and the lives of your brothers and sisters. If you do that, you will be a part of drawing this congregation together in the unity of the gospel.

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Corporate Prayer: God's Power Creates Unity

"Living as a Church"—Class 4

I. INTRODUCTION

You have walked into a class on prayer this morning. That's probably not too surprising if you've been around churches for long—you've probably had a number of classes on prayer over the years. But let me explain what's going to be different about this class. We're going to be looking at the role that corporate prayer has to play in our life as a church. Not your life individually. Individual prayer is crucial—but that's not the topic of this class. Our prayer *together* as a church is the topic here.

Those of you who have been attending this Sunday School know that the goal of our time together is to understand what we can do as church members to foster the love and unity in our local church that uniquely and compellingly demonstrates the power of the gospel. Think of Jesus' words in John 13:35: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Given how central prayer is to our lives as Christians, it makes sense that prayer is a vital part of building unity in our church.

Why Prayer Is Important

Generally speaking, why is prayer so important? Prayer is how God's people respond to him in thankfulness and praise. Prayer is how God's people cry out to him for mercy and deliverance. Prayer is how God's people call upon him to accomplish the work of his kingdom. In short, prayer is how we actively demonstrate our utter dependence on him. It honors him as the source of all blessing.

God calls his saints to be active in the work of the kingdom, whether through preaching, evangelism, and so forth (1 Cor. 3:9). But as we lean on him through prayer, we are reminded that the salvation of individuals and the growth in his churches ultimately comes from him, not from us. When his kingdom is advanced through prayer, he gets the glory because it's eminently clear that he's behind it all. (Indeed, it reminds us that even our activities of preaching, evangelizing, and praying are the result of his work.)

A Few Biblical Examples of Prayer

As early as Genesis chapter 4, "men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (v.26). They realized their dreadful separation from God through their sin after the fall.

In Elijah's great contest with the prophets of Baal, he called upon the name of the Lord, and the prophets called on the name of Baal (1 Kings 18). Elijah prayed:

Oh Lord, God of Abraham, Issac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all of these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again. (1 Kings 18:36-37).

The Lord answered Elijah by bringing down fire upon the offering. So God was glorified because it was evidently clear that he was the one true God, not Baal.

In Psalm 50:15 God says: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

In the New Testament, God's people are still commanded to call out to God, but Christ taught that we should pray to the Father in his name. In John 14:13, Jesus says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."

These examples illustrate how God uses prayer to make it very clear that he is the one who blesses. Therefore he gets the glory.

Raising the Question

But I wonder if you've considered just how important it is to pray together with other Christians. In today's individualistic culture, not much emphasis is placed on corporate prayer. But as we'll see, the Bible attaches great significance to God's people coming together to pray.

For the rest of our time together, we'll begin by thinking about why God has called us to pray together as a church. We'll then consider how corporate prayer contributes to unity, and how we, as members of this church, can contribute to this unity by actively involving ourselves in the prayer life of the church.

My hope is that through the material we cover, we will have a better understanding of the importance of corporate prayer, and that we will be thinking in a more focused way about seeking opportunities to pray with other members of the church.

II. WHY IS CORPORATE PRAYER IMPORTANT?

Let's begin by considering the importance of Christians praying together in the church. I would hazard a guess that the first thing that comes into most of our minds when someone mentions prayer is our own personal prayer times with the Lord rather than corporate prayer. Private prayer is certainly very important. We know this from Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew where he says:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:6).

Clearly, Christians are commanded to pray privately, even secretly.

But the Bible also very clearly calls upon Christians to pray together. Indeed, in Matthew 6, verse 9, just three verses after the verse I just read to you, Jesus instructs his disciples on how to pray by setting forth what we know as the Lord's Prayer.

Beginning in verse 9, Jesus says,

This then is how you should pray: **Our** Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give **us** today our daily bread. Forgive **us** our debts, as **we** also forgive **our** debtors. And lead **us** not into temptation, but deliver **us** from the evil one.

Did you notice all the plurals—"our," "us," "we"? In providing a model prayer for his disciples, Jesus puts it in a form that commends it for corporate use. The prayer naturally lends itself to group prayer because of its using "our" instead of "my." Even praying the Lord's prayer privately—which is fine to do—will remind you that you are praying as part of a family of other believers. The Lord's Prayer is an invitation not only to pray but to pray together with other believers.

So why is corporate prayer—praying together with other believers—so important?

1. It Advances God's Kingdom in Face of Opposition

First, corporate prayer is important because God uses prayer together to advance his kingdom in the face of opposition.

The early church had a number of obstacles to overcome, including persecution. In spite of persecution, it continued to expand. How?

If you have your Bibles, turn to Acts chapter 2 where we learn that the early church gathered regularly for prayer. In verses 42 to 44, Luke writes,

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

As a result—verse 47—“the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Yet this growth often occurred in the face of persecution, which we see several times. In Acts 4, Peter and John are released from prison and the church gathers to hear their report. Then they prayed together, praising God for his sovereignty and asking for boldness in the face of the threats. Luke then tells us:

After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:31)

The result was that the gospel spread even more.

Another example occurs in Acts 12. When King Herod (Agrippa I) arrests Peter in order to please the Jews, the church gathers together and “was earnestly praying to God for him” (Acts 12:5). The night before Herod was to put Peter on trial, Peter was miraculously delivered from imprisonment (Acts 12:5-11).

So we see the power of united prayer in the early church. That power comes from the Holy Spirit, who seemed to be especially active in their corporate prayer. But the Holy Spirit didn't stop working with the early church. Throughout history we've seen God's work to be particularly active when his people have faithfully prayed together.

The power of the Spirit in the early church and throughout history should embolden us to pray together regularly for the expansion of the gospel in our country and around the world. God's work will not be thwarted! And following the example of the early church, we're to call upon him to continue in that work. That's why our church consistently prays for the work of other churches both in the morning and evening services. That's why our church prays for religious freedom in countries where Christians are being persecuted. But it's also why our church desires to see the church expand in the very face of persecution—that God's power and wisdom will be displayed as his church expands—inexplicably (by human wisdom)!—when all the forces of hell are arrayed against it.

2. It Imparts Wisdom and Guidance

Second, God imparts wisdom and guidance to churches as his people gather together in prayer seeking such wisdom.

Corporate prayer was important for the early church as they sought God's wisdom for the internal affairs of the church, such as choosing its leaders. We know from James that God generously gives wisdom to those who ask him for it. So, early in Acts, the church prays together for wisdom when selecting a replacement for Judas among the disciples. They prayed, “Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry” (Acts 1:24-25). And through the casting of lots, God gave them the name of Matthias. Thus prayer is a means that God has given his church through which he guides the church.

3. Our Dependence Glorifies God

Third, God is glorified through our dependence on him in united prayer.

Earlier we talked about how prayer magnifies God by showing our dependence upon him. That dependence is particularly striking when God's people gather together to praise his name, confess their sins, and make their requests known to him. Why? Because such prayer clearly displays our dependence on God to a watching world; it expresses audibly our needs in a powerful way.

In corporate prayer we show our utter dependence to God as a church.

4. Our Unity Glorifies God

Fourth, God is glorified through the unity of our prayer.

As we've heard in past classes, unity among God's people glorifies God. That's why in Paul calls on the *entire church* in Ephesians 4 to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Praying together is one way that we satisfy this command—it visibly unites us together as God's people.

But there's also a special unity through corporate prayer aside from the unity displayed in the physical gathering. When Holy-Spirit-indwelt Christians come together to pray, there is a unique kind of unity and power in the Spirit. Not only do we commune with God, we can trust that a special communion occurs with each other as the Spirit works in us simultaneously and gives a common faith and heart for God's will.

Two things to take away from this section: (i) we grow spiritually as we hear others commit to prayer; (ii) we offer a powerful witness to non-Christians who see the love and commitment that we have for one another in our prayers.

III. HOW DOES CORPORATE PRAYER PROMOTE UNITY?

That's the "why" of corporate prayer. Now, let's get to the "how." How does corporate prayer promote unity in our church—and what can we do as church members to further that end? Let me walk you through three ways that corporate prayer promotes unity.

1. Corporate Prayer Draws Us Together

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that praying together has a natural tendency to draw people closer.

When we pray together, we are leaving behind our own selfish desires and focusing on God and others. So, for example, on Sunday evenings, our church prays for each other in various ways: we thank God for his grace in people's lives; we ask him to heal the sick; we thank him for the good things he has given, like children and marriages; we ask him to bless various ministry and evangelistic opportunities; we ask him to comfort the hurting; and so forth. Both praying for others, and hearing others pray for us, naturally draws us closer together as we learn more about each other and, as we feel the effect of those prayers in the work accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes you'll the pastors describe the evening service as our family time. Praying together draws us together as a family.

How then can we be good stewards of this gift of united prayer? One way is to pursue opportunities to pray with others. For example, have a time of prayer in your small groups (which I trust many of the groups already have). Pray before studying the Scriptures, and then pray for each other so that unity is fostered. And when you pray in small groups, don't just have one person pray but have everyone pray. For example, you can have each person pray for the person on their right or left.

Other opportunities include praying as a family, praying before meals with friends, praying with missionaries, praying with co-workers or friends we see during the week. And you can probably think of many more ways.

One more opportunity to consider is whether there are prayer requests you could share with the congregation that could draw us together and help us as a body to marvel at the power and mercy of God. Think of corporate prayer *for you* as a *service to this congregation*. For some of us, that might feel a bit strange. We're fairly private people who think of asking others to pray for us as placing a burden on them. But that's not how the Bible views things. There's a great passage in 2 Corinthians 1 where Paul is sharing about a particularly difficult situation.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (2 Cor. 1:8-11).

That last verse is right on point: “Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.” Was it a burden on these believers to pray for Paul? Absolutely not. It was a tremendous blessing to lift him up and share in the joy of God’s continual deliverance of him. What if Paul had decided that his problems weren’t worth bothering the church? We should thank God that he did not.

So think about how you can share your needs with others so that we may be drawn together as believers and encouraged by God’s amazing work. Are you struggling in your faith? Are you struggling at work? Are you struggling in your marriage? Are you struggling with evangelism? I remember when a brother in this church shared on Sunday night that he was struggling with his belief in God. His openness was a good example for us. As the church rallied around him in prayer, we were all able to praise God as our prayers were answered. Allow others to bring you before our Lord in prayer—it is a privilege for them.

2. Corporate Prayer Fosters a God-Centered Mindset

A second way corporate prayer builds unity in the church is that it makes us more like-minded theologically as scriptural truths—such as God’s glory and sovereignty—are applied to various situations and circumstances.

God through his Word shapes and molds our minds to know his truths. Prayer gives us an opportunity to apply these truths to specific prayer situations. As God-centered prayers are vocally shared among Christians, they bring greater unity by growing this God-centered mindset among those in attendance.

I think the clearest example of this in our church life occurs in our Sunday evening times. I’ve been very encouraged in listening to the prayers during that service—not because of how eloquent they may or may not be; not because of their level of sophistication or simplicity; but because they increasingly reflect the truths of scripture.

The Sunday evening prayer time has helped me to pray more biblically, and therefore caused me to be more like-minded with others. Here are some examples of common scriptural themes that I continuously hear on Sunday nights:

- a desire to see God glorified whatever the circumstance;
- a recognition of God’s sovereignty;
- praise for God’s grace and mercy in Christ;
- praise for God’s grace in others’ lives;
- a desire for the gospel to be proclaimed among all peoples;
- and a recognition of our sin and hopelessness apart from Christ.

So in prayer, we unite around the truths of God.

The pastors and elders also try to foster this God-centered mindset through the various prayers in our Sunday morning service: the prayer of praise, prayer of confession, prayer of petition, and prayer of thanks. In these prayers, we seek to communicate the gospel by focusing on how God is worthy of all praise for who he is and what he has done, and how we are sinful, needy people in need of a Savior. Also, you may have noticed that often the themes in these prayers reflect the themes in the morning’s text of Scripture.

While we’re on this topic, let me address one issue that you might wonder about. Sometimes people observe that many of the men who lead our church in prayer on Sunday mornings have written out their prayers. That may strike you as a bit strange, maybe even inappropriate. After all, aren’t our prayers supposed to be genuine—from the heart? And doesn’t reading prayers lend itself to unhealthy motivations—seeking the adoration of men rather than God?

Concerning a prayer’s genuineness, I don’t think there’s any reason to say that something that is spontaneous is somehow more genuine than something that’s been carefully reflected upon and considered. Concerning an individual’s motivation, well, the concern is certainly correct. Whether we are reading a prayer or praying spontaneously, we should pray to bring glory to God and not to ourselves. In other words, I’m not sure we can say that someone who prays spontaneously is any less susceptible to wrong motivations as someone who writes out his prayers beforehand.

The important thing to remember here is, the person leading corporate prayer is responsible for leading the prayer in a way that teaches and edifies the whole congregation. Thus, it's often helpful to spend time in advance thinking through how one can pray in a way that edifies the congregation.

Given that praying together fosters unity by making us more like-minded as we hear God-centered prayers, how can we be good stewards of our prayer time?

Let me suggest several ways:

#1—Pray the prayers of Scripture. The Bible presents us with actual examples of prayers that we can pray. Think of the Psalms. Think of Daniel 9. Think of the Lord's Prayer. Think of all of Paul's wonderful prayers, as you'll often find at the beginning of his letters (for example Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; Phil. 1:3-6; Col. 1:9-14; 1 Thes. 2:3-4; let me also recommend to you a book: "A Call to Spiritual Reformation" by D.A. Carson, which looks specifically at the prayers of Paul.)

2—Pray the commands of Scripture. Think of the different things Scripture commands God's people to do, from the Ten Commandments to Paul's commands to put off the old man and put on the new man. As you pray for God's people, ask God to help them fulfill what he requires of them.

3—Pray the "ambitions" of Scripture. That may sound like a strange way of putting it, but consider what Scripture is ambitious about for the lives of God's people. For example, praying for someone who is ill involves praying that God would comfort and heal the person, but it also means asking God to use that illness for that person's spiritual good and God's glory. We know from scripture that God often uses trials in the lives of his people for just these purposes. Another way of summarizing this point would be to say, Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness in your public prayers.

#4—Pray the promises of Scripture. The Scriptures are filled with promises for God's people, and we're told that all of God's promises are "yes" and "amen" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). There are countless examples I could point to. Here's one—Isaiah 41:10: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." So are you in a time of trial or tragedy? Go to the Lord and pray this promise back to him: "Lord, based on the righteousness of your Son which you have mercifully granted to me by faith, please, fulfill this promise: strengthen me; help me; uphold me. Your Word promises that you will, and so I fall entirely on this promise!"

#5—Pray with faith. Of course, when we pray, we should have faith that God can indeed answer that prayer.

3. Corporate Prayer Creates a Unity of Purpose

A third way that corporate prayer creates unity is by uniting Christians around the ministries of the church.

If you attend our Sunday evening service, you will hear a number of announcements about the various ministries at our church, which we then pray for. As the church listens and prays, we become excited together about church plants in Central Asia and Northern Virginia, or about our outreach to other churches through the Weekenders or the latest publications that Nine Marks is working on. Thus, our unity is fostered in corporate prayer as we grow and unite around a common vision of ministry.

IV. PRAYING INDIVIDUALLY FOR UNITY IN THE CHURCH

We've been spending most of our time talking about the importance of corporate prayer in our church. But, of course, private prayer is also important in our church. There are many ways private can be used to build unity in our church. Let me draw your attention briefly to four of them.

1. Pray for the Preacher and His Sermon

As we taught in previous weeks of this class, preaching is the most important thing we do together as a church. Accordingly, we should specifically pray for that time by praying for those preaching and those listening to God's Word.

Over and over the apostle Paul pleads with the church body to specifically lift him up in prayer. So he says to the Ephesians, "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains" (Eph. 6:19; also Col. 4:2-4).

How specifically can we pray corporately for the preacher (in addition of course to our individual prayers)? Two thoughts:

First, use the time while the offering plate is passed—right before the sermon—to pray for the sermon, for the preacher, for your own heart, and for the hearts of others. Ask God to encourage and strengthen the preacher to proclaim God's word effectively and powerfully. Pray that the Spirit would convict people of their sin, turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, and grant an people a desire for God in all his goodness and glory.

Second, use your small groups or family time during the week to pray for Sunday's preaching and the church's times of teaching generally. Just include that as a regular prayer item along with your prayers for each other.

2. Pray Through the Church Directory

In addition to praying for the preacher and his sermon, we should pray for the members of the church. One way to do this is to pray regularly through the church directory, whether by yourself or with others. Pray through the directory one page a day. Ask people how you can pray for them as you have occasion. And then let them know that you have prayed for them. This will encourage others and promote unity.

3. Pray for the Church's Various Ministries and Evangelistic Outreaches

In addition to praying for the preaching and for members individually, we should pray for the church's outreach. Praying for our various forms of outreach unites our hearts around common ambitions. How can you do this? First, join us on Sunday nights. If you are not used to attending church twice on Sundays, it may seem like a bit of a challenge at first, but this is a wonderful time where the family gathers together and prays. This is when we hear about many of the church's outreaches, evangelistic and otherwise. Second, take notes and then pray on your own through the week for the church's work outside its walls.

4. Pray for problems in our church

Lastly, use your individual prayer time to lift up to God difficulties in our church. When you see something that bothers you—anything from someone struggling with anger to concerns about the building—then pray. You might decide to do other things as well, like address the matter to an elder. We're always happy to talking about these things with you. But always start by praying hard for us as a church. Don't just sit back and ignore a problems or complain about it. Pray. Ask God to give you a right heart, but also to preserve his church and to transform us more clearly into his image.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we've looked this morning at the importance of prayer in the church and how it promotes unity. We've also considered various ways that we, as members of this church, can foster unity through praying with others. I hope this class has encouraged you to strategize on how you can be good stewards of corporate prayer time, whether that's in our Sunday services, small groups, family devotionals, Angel Tree prayer meetings, morning prayer times, discipling relationships, or just impromptu prayer with others.

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Church Government: Godly Authority Fostering Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 5

Church government. I’ll bet at least half of you woke up last night thinking: “I’ve got to find out more about church government!”

Okay, maybe not.

Why Talk About Church Government?

Church government is not something most Christians think much about. It’s like a piston in a car engine. Maybe you know it’s important, but you don’t give it a second thought. Yet if it wasn’t there, or was broken, you’d notice pretty quickly.

There are several reasons we want to take an hour to think about church government.

- First and foremost, God wrote about it in his Word, and therefore he is glorified as we follow his instructions.
- Second, a sound biblical structure will make a church more likely to sustain its witness over many, many decades.
- Third, understanding how our church is governed will help us to be more faithful church members. The more we know about how our church works, the more deliberate we can be about promoting unity.

What exactly is church government? Put simply, it’s the system by which decisions are made in a church, a description of where authority resides. How, for example, should we decide what to put in our statement of faith? Who makes that decision? The answer to that question depends on our system of government.

Obviously, that’s pretty important. Church government can thus be a great tool for unity in the church—or a great detriment to it.

Over the next hour, we’ll think about how a biblically-based church government promotes unity, and how we can contribute to the unity of this church. My hope is that we will gain a better understanding of how God has called us to organize our lives in the church.

I. ELDERS—THE SHEPHERDS OF THE FLOCK

The Bible describes two offices in the church—elders and deacons. We won’t take the time to describe these offices fully, because most of you have been or will be introduced to them in your membership classes. If you want to know even more, Mark Dever’s little book, *A Display of God’s Glory*, describes these offices in depth. This morning, I want to focus particularly on how these offices foster unity in a church.

The term “elder” (or, in the Greek, *presbuteros*), is used interchangeably with “overseer” or “bishop” (*episkopos*), and “pastor” (*poimenas*).¹ In Acts 20, Paul uses all three terms when he’s addressing the elders of the Ephesian church:

¹ Although some churches since the second century A.D. have used the word “bishop” to refer to a single individual with authority over several churches, this was a later development of the term and is not found in the New Testament.

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for *the elders* of the church.¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: . . .
“²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*. Be *shepherds* [or pastors] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” (Acts: 20:17-28)

Peter does the same in his first letter:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:² *Be shepherds* of God's flock that is under your care, *servicing as overseers* . . . (1 Peter 5:1-2).

Elders are charged with the spiritual oversight of the church (Acts 6:1-6; 20:28). They are to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, and they are also charged with being the principal governing body of the church (1 Timothy 5:17—“The elders who *direct the affairs of the church* well are worthy of double honor . . .”).

How Elders Promote Unity in the Church

With that background in mind, let me suggest four ways that having a biblical eldership promotes and protects unity in a church:

1. First, an elder-led church puts authority in the hands of those most qualified to exercise it. It entrusts the primary preaching and teaching duties, along with significant decision-making authority, to men who meet the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:6-9.²
2. Second, elder leadership places special responsibility for the spiritual health of the church in the hands of those who are especially accountable before God. In Hebrews 13:17, we read that elders “keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” Thus the members of the church can have confidence that their elders are not unaccountable and free to act out of their own self-interest. In caring for the flock, they are accountable to God himself.
3. Third, God requires members to “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority” (Heb. 13:17). Unity in the church is fostered through submission to authority, because submission to godly authority makes us more humble and less headstrong, more deferential and less defiant. As in a home, or in our own relationship with God, humble recognition of authority brings benefits. Thus Hebrews 13:17 goes on to say, “Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for *that would be of no advantage to you.*” Presumably then, obeying your elders and making their work a joy *will* be an advantage to you!

Let's pause here for a moment, because this is an enormously important point, and one that is not easily accepted. By telling a congregation to obey their elders, the Bible very intentionally introduces *authority* into the church. Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of authority *anywhere*, and perhaps especially in the church. Authority can be abused, they say. It can be misguided, misdirected, and used for evil. All true. Yet God instituted authority for our own good. Rightly used, authority helps the church to be unified. It helps us to learn how to trust other people, it keeps our pride in check, and it reminds us that we're not sufficient on our own to serve God.

Of course it is also the elders' responsibility to exercise authority properly—and as we have seen, they will be held to account for that by God himself. In 1 Peter 5:2-3, Peter tells the elders: “Be shepherds of God's flock . . . not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock.” The church does not belong to the elders. It belongs to Christ, and the elders must exercise their authority with that fact always at the front of their minds. They should be servant-hearted, marked by the same humility that marked Christ.

4. Fourth, elder leadership promotes unity because it places leadership in the hands of *several* men, instead of just one. In Acts 14:23, we read: “Paul and Barnabas appointed **elders** for them in each church . . .” The word is plural, as it is in many other places in the New Testament (See, for example, Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus

² The Bible is clear that only men are to serve as elders. In 1 Timothy 2:11-14, we read that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man. See *also* 1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 11:2-16. Whatever the exact authority Paul intended to speak of here as inappropriate, it clearly involves women teaching.

1:5; James 5:14; Philippians 1:1.) How does having multiple elders foster unity in the church? Let me suggest three ways:

First, decisions made by the elders collectively, rather than by a single elder, are more likely to have the support of the entire congregation. Think of Proverbs 15:22—“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”

Second, a plurality of elders requires each elder to be willing to submit to his fellow elders. In order for a group of elders to operate effectively, each elder must submit himself to the others, showing patience and mutual respect for one another. This picture of unity among the elders serves as a model for the congregation.

Third, a plurality of elders helps the leadership to know the congregation better. With a plurality of elders, it's less likely that members of the congregation will feel neglected, or feel like they don't have access to the leadership.

Church Members' Responsibilities

With that understanding of how the office of elder promotes unity, how can we as church members further those ends?

First, obey your elders and submit to their leadership, just as Hebrews 13:7 commands. That doesn't mean that an elder can tell you to purchase a blue car rather than a red one. Elders' authority rests in explaining the word of God. They are to provide godly wisdom based on scriptural principals and truths, and, when they do, members should follow. In a few weeks, we'll devote an entire session to the topic of what to do when we disagree with the elders. But normally, we should follow.

Second, strategize to make the elders' work a joy and not a burden. Look for ways to encourage your elders and pray for them. Work to model the role of an intelligent church member: Concern yourself in the work and decisions of the church. Take your decision-making responsibility as a member seriously, provide relevant information that you think the elders may have missed, but at the same time gladly submit to their wisdom and decisions. In doing so you will help to create a culture of trust and unity within the church.

Third, carefully consider the qualifications of those put forward as potential elders. The elders' recommendation for a new elder should always be given great weight by the congregation, but you also should make an effort to get to know prospective elders. Talk to the nominee. Ask him questions. Hear his testimony about how the Lord is working in his life, and if you have concerns about a nominee, talk to another elder about it. Part of your responsibility as a church member is to make sure that the men who are recognized as elders are truly qualified. And not only will talking to the nominees help you to fulfill that responsibility, but it will also help you to know and trust that person if he finally becomes one of your elders.

II. DEACONS—THE SERVANTS OF THE CHURCH

The second office clearly set out in Scripture is that of deacon. In the New Testament the word *diakonos* can be translated as “deacon” or “servant.” Thus deacons are the church's servants (Acts 6:1-6). They attend to the practical details of church life—administration, maintenance, the care of church members with physical needs, and preparation for the services, among other things.

The qualifications for deacons are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, and are similar to those of elders. There are, however, two clear differences. Unlike elders, deacons can be women as well as men. And second, unlike elders, deacons are not required to be able to teach.

How Deacons Promote Unity In the Church

In Acts 6, there is a great picture of how the service performed by deacons contributes to the church's unity. In the early days of the church, the Hellenistic (Greek) Christians began complaining against the Hebrew Christians because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So, upon the recommendation of the apostles, the church appointed seven deacons to make the food distribution more equitable (vv. 2-5). In this, we see three ways that deacons contribute to the unity of the church:

1. First, deacons care for *all* the members of the church. The neglect of the Greek widows was causing spiritual disunity within the church. One group of Christians was complaining against another group, and in a particularly dangerous way – along cultural lines. By carefully attending to all of the widows, the deacons defused the situation and preserved the church’s unity.
2. Second, the deacons allowed the apostles to devote their time to the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6:2-4). Today, deacons play the same role in support of the ministry of the elders. Thus they are a great blessing to the church not only in the particular work that they do, but for how they free up the elders to devote their time and energy to prayer and the Word.
3. Third, deacons foster unity by distributing work through the entire congregation. When deacons recruit volunteers for particular needed ministries in the church, all the members of the church are given opportunity to participate in the joy of serving others.

Church Members’ Responsibilities

What are some of the implications of this? What does this mean for us?

First, we should look for deacons who are peacemakers. If deacons are meant to foster unity, then those who serve should have a reputation for healing division within the church, not creating it. They should not be concerned about protecting their own turf, lobbying for greater visibility, or competing with the elders. Instead, deacons should be joyful servants who delight in contributing to the well-being of the whole body.

Second, we should support the deacons by volunteering to serve in their various ministries. When we do, we promote unity in the church by encouraging the deacons, serving the body, and helping to accomplish the work for the good of the church.

III. THE CONGREGATION—THE FINAL COURT OF APPEAL

Having considered the offices that Scripture describes for the church, there’s another question to be answered. Who has the final say on matters in the church? The elders? The pastor? An executive committee made up of delegates from each Sunday School class together with the leaders of each ministry team?

Well, no. Throughout the New Testament, it’s the congregation as a whole that seems to have final authority, particularly in three significant matters of church life—personal disputes, membership and discipline, and doctrine.

In What Matters Does the Church Have Authority?

1. Personal Disputes—In Matthew 18 (vv. 15-17), Jesus makes the congregation as a whole the final court of appeal on matters of dispute between Christians. If one member has sinned against another and refuses to listen to his fellow church members, the matter should finally be brought to the entire church for resolution.
2. Membership and Discipline—In 1 Corinthians 5, we see that it is *only* the congregation that has authority to discipline a member. Paul tells the Corinthians to expel a man from their fellowship; later he mentions that a majority of them had indeed inflicted that punishment (2 Corinthians 2). When the man repented, Paul urged the whole church to re-admit him. What we see in this example is that the congregation has the final say in who is a member of their fellowship and who is not. In matters of membership and discipline, the congregation is the final court of appeal.
3. Doctrine—Finally, the congregation is also responsible for its own doctrine. In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul calls on the churches of Galatia to sit in judgment over any preacher (even himself!) who preaches a gospel different from the one they had accepted. Many other times in the New Testament, it is the church as a whole that is blamed for bad teaching, not the leaders. Again, in doctrinal matters it is the whole church that is given authority and that is held accountable by God.

Implications for Unity

The fact that the congregation has final authority over these significant matters has huge implications for the church's unity.

For one thing, congregational authority fosters unity by forcing the congregation to take responsibility for protecting the gospel—which is the very thing that unites us as Christians. It forces us to make sure that those we admit into our fellowship believe the same gospel we do. The result is a church that is unified at the core by a trust among those who are its members.

Also, congregational authority fosters unity by protecting the church from serious error. Again and again, history has shown that hierarchical church governments tend to spread error quickly. When the national or worldwide leadership of such a church falls into error, they can force that error on local churches, thus creating enormous disunity and strife. Of course no particular form of church polity prevents churches from error and division—congregational churches included!—but more centralized polities seem to have a (slightly) worse track record than congregational polities in maintaining a faithful, vital, evangelical witness. Moreover, consider what happens when a congregational church does fall into doctrinal error. At the very least, the error is likely to remain isolated, since that errant congregation has no authority to force their error on other churches.

Why is that important to you? Keep watch and make sure that this church is congregational in practice, not just in name only. When things are going well, it can be easy to acquiesce and cede your responsibility to other people. But the preservation of the gospel depends on the *members* of the church vigilantly safeguarding what has been entrusted to them. Take that responsibility seriously.

IV. HOLD AUTHORITY, BUT SUBMIT? WHAT GIVES?

There's one final question we need to consider today. We've seen that Scripture gives the congregation final authority on certain matters of great significance. Yet it also tells church members to obey their leaders and submit to their authority.

So what gives? How can we obey and submit to our leaders, and at the same time exercise our congregational responsibility to guard the purity of the gospel?

Is It Serious? Is It Clear?

One helpful way to determine when it's appropriate to challenge a decision of the elders is to consider (1) how serious a matter is (ii) and how clear it is.

Let's say, for example, that the elders proposed an amendment to the statement of faith that would deny that Jesus Christ is divine. Now *that* is about as serious as it gets! Also, it's clear from Scripture that Jesus Christ is indeed both man and God. This is the kind of issue on which the congregation should never defer to the elders. In fact, this is where, if the elders continued to insist, the congregation ought to pull out all the stops, remove the elders from leadership, and even discipline them from the church! The church must preserve the integrity of the gospel message.

On the other hand, let's say that the issue in question is whether a certain person ought to be admitted into membership, or whether a person should be recognized as an elder or deacon. These also are serious issues, of course, but in most cases they won't be entirely clear to the congregation. Not every member of the church will know every prospective member or officer to the same degree. Here it's probably best for the congregation to trust the elders and follow their lead—unless you have some clear reason for opposing their recommendation.

Our Responsibility

In light of all this, how can we as members foster unity by participating in the decision-making processes of the church? Let me suggest two ways:

First, take seriously your responsibility to guard against false teaching and error in the church. You are a member of this church, and therefore you are responsible for guarding the church's doctrine. If you think there is error being taught from the pulpit, you need to learn more about that, find out what the pastor or elders believe on that point, and if finally necessary bring that error before the church for resolution.

Second, take seriously your responsibility to be involved in decision-making. Attend the church's members' meetings, and vote on the various questions that come up. By voting along with the rest of the congregation on important matters, you are showing your agreement with the elders and the rest of the church. That, in itself, brings glory to God.

IV. CONCLUSION

Godly and biblical leadership is crucial to the building of a church that glorifies God. When leaders exercise proper authority in the church—and when church members submit to that authority while still taking their own responsibility seriously—the whole church working in harmony displays God's image and wisdom to the world. And that, after all, is why we are here!

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Fellowship: Building a Bond of Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 6

For the first few weeks of this class, we looked at some of the key building blocks of a healthy New Testament church. We explored the essential attributes of the church and considered how each of those fosters unity. We also thought about how we, as individual members, can promote unity.

Over the next two weeks, we turn to a different set of questions: How should church members relate to one another? What should their relationships look like? What does it mean to have healthy relationships in the church? Why should we care?

I. LOVE, AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

So how should Christians relate to one another? What should characterize their relationships? The Bible actually has a lot to say about this, and the answer is pretty simple: Christians are to *love*.

Love One Another

Jesus gave his disciples a very clear commandment in John 13, one that sets the entire agenda for Christian relationships. He said:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)

The most important thing we can say about how we are to relate to other Christians is this: We are to *love each other*. Love is the key to healthy relationships, and it is also the foundation of our unity as a body.

Love—A Display of God's Glory and Wisdom

Why is it so important for Christians to love each other? Think back to Paul's argument in Ephesians 3. God is glorified when very different people love each other simply because of their shared faith in Christ. In that way, we say to the world that the gospel of Christ trumps everything else—whether race, class, nationality, or personal interests.

Through our love for one another, non-believers see the amazing work God has done in us, and most importantly, they begin to see who God is and what he intends for humanity.

Love—A Reflection of the Trinity

There's another reason that love is so important, one that is much more mysterious: Our love for one another reflects the love that exists between the persons of the triune God. Jesus says so in an amazing passage in John 17:22-23:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me*.

Incredible! In some mysterious way, our oneness with each other reflects God's oneness in himself—as we seek to share the same glory and love of Christ with each other that the Father and Son share.

Of course there's no way we'll ever understand that fully, but perhaps it's enough simply to stand in awe of it. Our imperfect love for one another reflects, somehow, the perfect and inexhaustible love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share together in the Godhead.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

Before we think practically about how to love each other, let's consider some biblical truths about Christian love.

Love is Hard Because We Are Sinners

First, love is not natural to us. We are sinners who naturally focus first on ourselves—our own needs, our own desires—so love is hard for us. That may be why the New Testament exhorts Christians to love each other so often: We need the reminder over and over again!

In his book, *Love in Hard Places*, (pp. 52-53, 60-61) D. A. Carson notes that, even as Christians, we still have a sin nature; and therefore we will naturally gravitate toward our own little circle of “in people”—those whom we consider most compatible with ourselves. Even though we are called to love one another, our flesh still yearns to divide over fleshly characteristics like race, culture, economic status, or age. Because we are sinners, we will always be self-focused first, and then “same-focused.”

That's exactly what Christian love calls us to struggle against. When we do God is glorified. If Christian love meant nothing more than loving those who are in some way like you, our love would be indistinguishable from the world's love. As Jesus said,

If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷
And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Matt. 5:46-47)

As a Christian, therefore, you ought to be struggling to love more broadly than is comfortable for you. Ask God to give you grace to love people even when it is not easy.

Our Love Flows from God's Love

1 John 4:9 says that we love one another only because God first loved us. Now what does that mean? Is it a *quid pro quo*—“I invited him to dinner because he invited me?” “God loves me, so I guess I have to love someone else?”

No, of course not. What it means is that our love has its source in God's love for us. The fact is, we could not love at all apart from his love. Our love is not based on our own abilities. Rather, it is a response to God's unfathomable love for us, and especially to the greatest display of that love: God gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life.

Loving others requires some understanding of the depth of God's love. It's only when we grasp something of the depth of God's love that we are able to respond in love toward others. As John put it in 1 John 3:16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” So Paul prays for the Ephesians:

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:17-19)

Paul wanted the Ephesians to know Christ's love so that they would respond in ever-increasing love for others. We love because he first loved us.

Love Is Empowered by the Holy Spirit

Love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's work (Gal. 5:22). We cannot suddenly decide one morning, “You know what? I'm think I'm going to love others more today. Here are ten ways I plan to do that.”

No, Christian love is an outpouring of our hearts enabled by God's work in our lives. “God's love,” Paul says, “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). In fact, he says in Galatians 5:22 that “The fruit of the Spirit is love.”

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it rightly, saying, “When God was merciful, when He revealed Jesus Christ to us as our brother, when He won our hearts by His love, this was the beginning of our instruction in divine love.”

Practically, this means that you should be filling your mind with thoughts of God’s incredible love for you. That’s how your heart will be softened and you’ll begin to *desire* to love others.

- Meditate on Scripture verses that speak about what Christ did for you on the cross.
- Think of how faithful God has been in your life, both in saving you and in sanctifying you.
- Pray that God would give you an understanding of how deep his love is, and that your response would be to love others.

When Jesus told the parable of the ungrateful servant who wouldn’t forgive a small debt even though he had been forgiven much more, his aim was not to make anyone feel guilty. He was explaining something very basic about the nature of grace. When we understand how much we’ve been forgiven, it empowers us to love. If we do not love, we do not understand forgiveness.

Love Brings Great Joy

Finally, fellowship with other Christians brings great joy and strength to a believer. Psalm 133:1 says, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.”

Paul writes to Philemon, too: “I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you” (Phil.1:7). What a wonderful picture of how love affects the Christian heart! Philemon’s love comforts Paul and refreshes the hearts of the saints.

The bond that develops between Christians who love one another is deep and profound. Remember Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, when the elders wept and grieved as Paul departed from them. Or think of John’s second letter, where he tells his readers that he longs to see them face-to-face “so that our joy may be complete.” Loving others in the church—and being loved by them—is one of the greatest sources of joy God has given us in this life.

III. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER?

How can we fulfill this command to love one another inside the church? What does Scripture say to us about what love should look like?

First, Love People Who Are Not Like You

God expects you to love people who are different from you. Christ’s love was indiscriminate: Though he was perfect and sinless, he chose to befriend sinful people just like us. Think of that contrast: the One who is flawless and perfect in every way associated with sinners and ministered to those who were the most despised in all society.

This kind of non-discriminating love is a theme throughout the New Testament. James 2 tells us not to show personal favoritism. And Paul exhorts us in Romans 12:16, “Do not be haughty, but *associate with the lowly*. Never be conceited.” Therefore, form relationships with people who don’t look like you, who are not the same age as you, who are in a different stage of life from you, or who have a different personality.

- If you’re young, visit the elderly.
- If you’re elderly, talk to the young.
- If you’re not a child, care for the children.
- If you *are* a child, play with an adult.
- If you’re not a teenager, help with the youth group.
- If you *are* a teenager, get to know someone who’s not.
- If you’re an extrovert, slow down and befriend an introvert.

- If you're an introvert, force yourself to talk to someone—anyone.
- If you're well-paid in your job, make a friend of someone who isn't as well off.
- If you're not so well-paid, learn to love those who are.
- If you're White, consider whether you're inviting your Black friends into your life in the same way you do your White friends. Do you have any Black friends?
- If you're Hispanic, consider whether you're doing this with your Asian friends. Do you have any Asian friends?

Christian love bears witness to Jesus because it breaks the barriers that normally divide people.

Second, Love Sacrificially

When Jesus died on the cross, he demonstrated a sacrificial, selfless love—a love that was costly. As Christians, we are called to do the same.

The Bible calls us to love sacrificially in different ways and in different relationships. In Ephesians 5:25, for example, we read this remarkable passage:

Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Also, in our relationships with other members of the church, we are to love sacrificially. Paul tells the Galatians to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2), and in our own church covenant we promise to “bear each other’s burdens and sorrows.”

Practically this could mean a number of things. It may involve patiently bearing with a brother or sister’s spiritual struggles for a very long time. It may mean providing material help to someone who is in need. Or it may mean giving up a really good Friday night to visit someone who is ill.

This kind of love is not usually convenient; that’s what the word “sacrificial” means. Just as Christ has borne our sorrows, so we are called to love one another—not because Christ is merely an example, but because his love compels us and empowers us to love in a way that the world will not always understand.

Third, Love By Speaking the Truth

Christian love involves constantly speaking the truths of Scripture to each other. We love one another by reminding, encouraging, exhorting, and admonishing one another with God’s word. That’s what Paul tells the Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16).

All our relationships in the church should be marked by truth-telling. Parents should be teaching their children through family devotions and other activities, and husbands should be washing their wives with the water of the Word. As God’s people teach, encourage, and admonish one another in all their relationships, the whole body matures and deepens in its faith. Thus we are drawn closer together as a congregation, and closer to God as well.

Paul presents a beautiful picture of this in Ephesians 4:15-16:

Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Of course speaking the truth also means exercising a spiritual care and watchfulness over each other. “Encourage one another daily,” we are told, “as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13). In all our relationships—small groups, the family, discipling relationships, or even informal friendships—we should be confessing our sins to each other (James 5:16), asking probing questions, and helping each other fight against sin and press forward in the Christian life.

Sometimes this will include gently rebuking each other. Now this is something most of us naturally shy away from because we want to avoid confrontation. But it is the loving thing to do.

- Leviticus 19:17 instructs, “Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.”
- Similarly in 2 Samuel 12:1-7, the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David for his sin and to lead him to repentance.
- James says that “If one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19)

Unbelief is a constant and dangerous temptation, and our love for each other is shown in part by helping to fight it off.

How can we show this kind of love? A few suggestions:

- Pay attention to what is happening in others’ lives. Do you know friends who once seemed to be very active in the church and have now drawn back? Give them a call to see what’s going on. Pray for them specifically.
- Be willing to talk about general patterns in a brother or sister’s life that might reduce his usefulness in the Kingdom—patterns such as taking a job that would cause particular stress and tension in the family, or going on a trip that would put him under great temptation to sin, or failing to take advantage of an opportunity to grow spiritually. A genuine love and concern for others will probe into these areas as well as instances of blatant sin.

In short, view every conversation as an opportunity to encourage and edify another member of the church. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:29, “do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Fourth, Love by Showing Humility

God expects his people to be humble with each other, just as Christ was humble before the Father. Paul writes about this in Philippians 2:3-8:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!

So how do we love with humility? Paul tells us in Colossians 3:13-14:

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

We love by humbly submitting to each other, considering others better than ourselves, looking out for their interests over our own, bearing patiently with our brothers’ and sisters’ faults, and forgiving them when they wrong us.

All this, of course, is altogether contrary to our fleshly nature, which naturally gravitates toward pride and self-absorption. Yet still, God calls us to have the same humble mind that was in Jesus Christ.

Fifth, Love the Whole Congregation

Scripture calls us to love the entire congregation, not just certain individuals within it. How can we do that? What can we do that will express love to the entire congregation? Here are four ways:

- First, pray through our church directory faithfully—a page each day, for example. If you don't know a specific need of someone, you can always pray for them the prayers we find in the New Testament. By doing that faithfully, you'll develop a concern for every member of the church, not just the ones you know well.
- Second, volunteer for tasks that benefit the whole church. Run the sound system on Sunday morning, work in the nursery, or stand at the doors and greet people when they arrive.
- Third, build others up through discipling and teaching, so they in turn can minister to others.
- Fourth, tithe generously. There's no getting around it. The work of the ministry requires money, and by giving generously to the church, you are showing a very practical kind of love to the entire congregation.

IV. CONCLUSION—LOVE WITH KINDNESS AND COMPASSION.

You know, someone could do all the things we've talked about, yet still be cold and distant from other people. You can go through the motions of love without really loving.

Paul makes this point clearly in 1 Corinthians 13:3 when he says, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." Love is more than doing good deeds. It's more than fulfilling a duty. Christian love is characterized by genuine affection and desire to see others prosper.

Think for a moment about the story of Jesus and the leper in Mark 1:40-41:

A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

Why does Jesus touch the leper? Did he have to touch him in order to heal him? No, Jesus healed people many times without touching them. Jesus touched the leper to express compassion to him—to show him love in a way that the leper had probably not experienced in many years.

Pray that God would give you this same attitude, and cause you to be marked by a Christ-like, *hands-on* compassion, kindness, humility and gentleness.

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Discontentment: A Test of Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 7

Everyone struggles with discontentment at one time or another, and it’s particularly difficult when we are discontent with the church. Don Whitney writes that no one can hurt a believer as deeply as a group of other believers.

Can you recall the last time you were deeply disappointed by another church member? What about the last time you felt like a church let you down? Maybe you felt like an outsider months after you joined. Or maybe the congregation was unconcerned about a priority that mattered to you. Difficulties like these easily lead to feelings of resentment.

Discontentment will always be with us. At least in this life, we won’t rid ourselves of it entirely. So this class isn’t about how to avoid discontentment. It’s about how to deal with discontentment when it comes.

Above all, we can take comfort in knowing that God gives us grace to work through discontentment, and he will use it to serve his glory and our good. How we respond to discontentment, therefore, can be either a great source of evil for the church or a great source of good. How then should we handle discontentment so that it spurs us onward to unity? That’s what we’ll consider today.

I. THE BITTER FRUIT OF DISCONTENTMENT

What is discontentment? It’s a desire for something better than the present situation. Now, on the one hand, it’s inevitable that people in a sinful world will be discontent.

This world is broken by sin and *should* be better. On the other hand, it’s also inevitable that sinful people like us will often put our hope in circumstances rather than in God. That’s why discontentment with the church can bear such bitter fruit.

Let’s look at three ways in which discontentment, if not properly handled, can harm the church’s witness:

1. Discontentment Can Lead to Complaining and Grumbling

Paul warns us in the book of Philippians to “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation” (2:14-15).

One thing that will make our witness compelling to the world around us is this: we do not complain or grumble. (See also James 5:9). When we allow discontentment to result in complaining and grumbling, we damage our reputation as Christians and harm the witness of the church.

2. Discontentment Can Lead to Discord

When we are unhappy with something we are tempted to talk about it. We criticize. We rally support to get people to see things our way. Behavior like that, no matter the virtue of the original concern, quickly causes factions and dissension within the church, something Paul lists alongside idolatry, witchcraft, and fits of rage (Gal. 5:20). We must address discontentment carefully because it so often bears the fruit of discord.

3. Discontentment Distracts from What Really Matters

As individuals and as a church, our charge is to “make the most of every opportunity” (Colossians 4:5). When our passions and energy are focused on what makes us unhappy, it becomes difficult to work together for the expansion of God’s kingdom. Discontentment consumes our own time and attention; it saps our energy; and it consumes the time and energy of our brothers and sisters, our elders and staff.

III. HOW TO HANDLE DISCONTENTMENT

Discontentment can bear bitter fruit in the life of the church. However, if it is handled well, discontentment can actually lead to a strengthening of the body. When we respond to discontentment in a godly way; when we submit to each other for the sake of Christ and do the hard work of love, we bring great glory to God. We show that our unity as a church doesn't stem from perfect agreement, or compatible personalities, but that it flows from shared hope and satisfaction in Christ.

How do we do that? As with any other area of the Christian life, the key isn't to memorize a list of things we can *do* to respond to discontentment. It's to understand how the message of the *gospel* transforms our response to discontentment. Here are four general guidelines for addressing discontentment.

1. Pray for God's Mercy

First and foremost, Scripture tells us that we are unable to do anything of value in our own strength—and that includes responding to discontentment. Remember Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

When we find ourselves discontent, start by praying and crying out for God's mercy. It's foolish to think that we are mature enough or strong enough to handle discontent by our own power. We are fallen human beings, and our minds can easily be deceived.

When something difficult happens to you at church and someone asks you about it, is your first reaction to say, "Thanks—but I'm okay. Really, I am." Oh really? Are you okay because you've relied on the strength of God to forgive and to love beyond your own ability? Or are you okay because you think you have what it takes to shoulder everything by yourself?

When you encounter discontentment, pray. You are entering into a struggle that you cannot win on your own. Pray that God would give you discernment and wisdom. Pray that he would show you if your discontentment is rooted in your own sinful desires, and then pray that God would change those desires. We as a church would honor God far more if we tried to fix things ourselves less often, and spent more time in desperate pleading for God to heal us.

2. Examine Your Desires

Second, we need to carefully examine our hearts and try to understand the desires at the root of our discontentment. Is there sin that you need to confess? Are there desires that *should* be satisfied in Christ, but that you are wrongly seeking to have satisfied in others?

James writes in chapter 4 of his letter,

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. (James 4:1-2)

James gets right to the connection between discontentment and circumstances. We feel discontent because we have put our hope in our circumstances rather than in God.

But circumstances change. God does not. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore we must examine our hearts' desires in light of God's word. Are you fighting or quarreling with other Christians? Then there's a good chance you have some ungodly desires that you need to address.

For example, perhaps you're unhappy because someone is better friends with a particular person than you are. What's at the root of that discontentment? Do you want that friendship because it would convey a special status that you covet? Are you jealous of a friendship that seems so close? Ask God to identify sin in your life, and then confess it as sin. Think hard about the root problem: What desires lay behind your feeling of discontentment? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Are you putting your hope in the approval of men rather than in Christ's provision for you? The gospel will counter that desire.
- Are you impatient with the inefficiency of others? The gospel will remind you that you can only do things in Christ's strength, in his time, and for his ends.
- Do you feel you deserve better treatment than you've received? Think instead of what you truly deserve from God. Remember the gospel's call to lay down your life—and your rights—for the sake of Christ.

A good part of the discontentment we feel can be put to rest simply by examining our desires and repenting of sin.

3. Fill Your Heart With a Passion for God's Glory

Not only must we repent of sinful attitudes, we must replace them with godly ones. Here, again, the gospel transforms the situation. God has lavished his riches on us by forgiving us of our sins. In light of that, the reasons for our discontentment can suddenly seem quite small. When we're filled with a passion to see God's glory proclaimed, discontentment rooted in selfishness melts away.

So how do we cultivate that kind of passion, especially on those days when we're feeling discontent?

First, do good, even when you don't feel like it.

When you are unhappy with someone in the church, pray for that person. Pray that God would prosper them, and that he would help you to understand that person's worth as one of his children. Thank God for saving them.

Even more, express that thankfulness in concrete ways. Send the person an encouraging e-mail, or meet some need in his or her life. Choosing to love someone at an extremely practical level can be one of the best ways to soften your heart in the midst of discontent.

Now, you might be thinking: But if I am feeling negative things while I say encouraging things outside, isn't that hypocrisy? No, it's not. Disciplining yourself to work for the good of another, even when you don't feel like it, is not hypocrisy. It's war against sin. It is part of what it means to persevere in love.

Don't wait until your heart is perfectly right to do the right thing. When we fight against our ungodly affections with godly actions, the Holy Spirit can use that to convict and change our hearts.

Martin Luther is famous for having said, "If you're going to sin, sin boldly." He's often misunderstood there. What he meant was that Christians should not refrain from doing good works just because evil motives are mixed with good ones. Our motives are never going to be perfectly righteous, but that shouldn't stop us from doing what is right. Do the good work in spite of your sinful motives—"Sin boldly!" Luther said—and trust God to use even your imperfect good work to convict and transform your heart.

Second, count others more significant than yourself.

Consider what Paul says in Philippians 2:3: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." We recite this verse pretty often, but do we really live it?

Why should you consider other Christians "more significant" than yourself? Because they are more capable or more godly? No. It's because they are Christ's possession. He has bought them with his blood, and they are precious in God's sight.

Much of our selfish discontentment begins because we have imagined that we are more important than the people around us. Considering others more significant than yourself is not only humbling, it's a great way to remind yourself of the unmerited grace God has shown you.

4. Be Careful with Your Words

How you choose to talk about your discontentment with others will determine whether that discontentment spreads or subsides. So what should you talk about and how should you talk about it?

First, do the things we've talked about here—pray, examine your desires, and fill your mind with thoughts of God's glory—before you speak with anyone. Any conversation you have should have as its goal either to confess sin or to constructively plan how you might engage the situation and encourage the church. If your conversation does not fall into one of those two categories, then it may well be complaining and grumbling.

Second, don't talk to another member simply to "vent" your frustrations. Talking about frustrations can be helpful, but only if the purpose is to confess sin, seek counsel, or plan a constructive response. Using a conversation merely to let off steam or seek affirmation in your discontentment only worsens the problem. The temptation to sin in anger can be incredibly strong, and it is something against which we must guard ourselves.

Third, don't talk about the sin of other Christians. In Matthew 18, Jesus lays out very clear steps for dealing with sin in the church, and the first one is to confront the person who has sinned. Unless you have confronted the person and he has refused to listen, talking with anyone else about that person's sin is gossip.

Fourth, don't lobby support for your position. The Bible refers to a person who does that as "divisive"—one who seeks to create factions in the church.

When you become discontent with the church, or with other Christians, you have a choice: You can either stoke anger in your heart, gossip, and contribute to strife and disunity in the church. Or you can pray, examine your desires, fill your heart with a passion for God's glory, guard your words, and participate in building a unified, God-glorifying church, even in the middle of a fallen world.

IV. SPECIFIC AREAS OF DISCONTENT

Discontentment can arise because of just about anything, but it seems to especially arise in several areas. What are the areas, and how do we respond?

1. *The Church Isn't Meeting My Needs*

One common reason for discontentment is a feeling that the church is not meeting one's felt needs.

Perhaps you've been a member of the church for several months, and yet you're still finding it difficult to make close friends. Maybe you feel dissatisfied because your particular gifts are not being recognized and used in the church.

Whatever the issue, we must remember that joy in the Christian life doesn't come by finding a careful balance between serving others and being served. No, that's not the picture that the Scriptures give us of the joyful Christian life. Christian joy comes as we give ourselves completely in service to Christ and his people. After all, the command is to "*Love* one another," not to "*Be loved* by one another." The language is active, not passive!

So what should you do if discontentment takes root because you feel like you're not being cared for? Pray, and then search your heart. Are these feelings flowing from selfish and ungodly desires? Are you more concerned about whether people are reaching out to you than you are about whether you're reaching out to others? Your desire to use your gifts—does that come from a desire to be personally satisfied, or from a genuine desire to benefit the church?

Then seek God's glory even in the midst of your discontentment. Remember that God's priority is for you to glorify him by loving others. Meet someone else's need, and you may find that your deepest need all along was not so much to *be loved* as to *love*.

2. *I Don't Like That Person*

Perhaps it's an issue of envy or rivalry: you resent the blessings God has lavished on a particular brother or sister. Or maybe it's just a basic feeling of discomfort: someone behaves in a way that's radically different from what you're accustomed to. How do you work through discontentedness in areas like this?

Again, it's a matter of thinking of those people in light of God's grace and glory. Learn to pray for people whom you dislike, and ask God to bless and mature them. Remember that those people, though broken and imperfect today, are being transformed into Christ's likeness with ever-increasing glory. Loving those whom we find

uncomfortable is not easy, but it is hugely important, for it's through those kinds of relationships that God is most glorified.

3. I Disagree with the Leadership

A third category of situations in which we may struggle with discontentment is when we disagree with decisions of church leaders. We will devote the next class to understanding how we should express and resolve those disagreements biblically. The one comment I'll make now is that everything we've talked about today also applies to discontentment caused by disagreement with church leaders.

When you encounter this kind of disagreement, remember to pray for God's mercy, to examine your heart's desires, to fill your heart with a passion for God, and to be careful in how you speak to others about the disagreement.

V. CONCLUSION

In his first letter, Peter said, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). There are few areas where Christians are more susceptible to stumble than in the area of discontentment. What begins as a mild critique or a moment of insecurity can wreak havoc in a church, as members pursue selfish agendas and sink more and more into unhappiness and discord.

In the end, we must remember to put our hope in God and not in our circumstances. At the root of discontentment is the idea that things would be better if some person or situation would simply change. Compared to the one who is Lord of those circumstances, and who has promised us surpassing joy in himself, those circumstances are a poor ground for our hope. Let's pray that, as a body, we would pursue the joy that is found in him alone.

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Church Leadership—Submission for the Sake of Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 8

Hebrews 13:17 is a hard word for Christians today. “Obey your leaders and submit to them,” it says, “for they keep watch over your souls, as men who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Obey. Submit. Those are strong words, particularly in our egalitarian, individualistic culture.

Yet the Bible’s call to obey and submit to our leaders in the church is to our advantage, the verse also says. Did you catch that? Through submission we model the godly humility that should characterize us as a church, and through submission we maintain our Christian unity in the midst of disagreement. Thus we demonstrate that our shared faith in Christ is more important than any differences of opinion over matters that aren’t central to the gospel.

Ultimately, our trust in church leaders involves more than trusting men. It’s finally a confidence in Christ, who gives leaders to his church and works through them for blessing. That said, we’re not to become unthinking “yes men,” either. The New Testament actually holds the *congregation as a whole*—not just the leaders—accountable for unbiblical teaching in the church. Trusting our leaders does not mean that we accept their every opinion without question.

As with so many things, we must maintain a careful balance between fulfilling our responsibilities as church members and obeying our leaders. In this class, we’ll think about how we can maintain that balance—how we can encourage the leaders of our church, and what we should do when we disagree with them.

I. MAKE THEIR WORK A JOY, NOT A BURDEN

One of the best things we can do to promote unity in the church is to help make our leaders’ work a joy and a delight. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that both we and they are sinners. Even so, our calling, says the author of Hebrews, is to “obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden.”

There is a tight connection between a congregation’s attitude and their leaders’ ability to lead them well. Put simply, our leaders will lead us better if we behave in a way that makes us easy to lead. So many unhappy church situations could be resolved if congregations saw their leaders as partners in the church’s great calling, rather than as adversaries to be overcome.

Remember that *you* are the ones your leaders are watching over. “They are keeping watch over *your* souls,” says Hebrews. God values our souls highly, and therefore he appoints leaders to keep watch over us and to protect us. Thus it is important to make the work of our leaders a joy, not a burden.

How do we do that? Let’s think through a few ideas.³

1. Believe in Jesus Christ, and Walk in Obedience

First and foremost, we can encourage our leaders by believing the gospel and by walking in obedience to God’s Word. Think of John’s statement in 3 John 4: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

Church leaders take great joy in seeing God work in their people’s lives—

- watching as God conforms them more closely to the image of Christ;
- seeing them use their gifts for the edification of the body;
- knowing that they are loving one another and persevering in the faith through the hard times of life.

³ These ideas based on Wayne Mack and David Swavely, *Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church*.

Of course, no one can be encouraged in that way if we keep our delight and growth in Christ to ourselves. So don't be afraid to let your leaders know how God is working in your life. Tell them how the Holy Spirit is convicting you and maturing you; tell them about areas of your life in which you need prayer. To see the work of God in a church member's life is a wonderfully encouraging thing for a church leader.

2. Cultivate and Preserve Unity in the Body.

Paul said in Philippians 2:1-2:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Paul wanted the Christians in Philippi to be like-minded, one in spirit and purpose. That's not something that just *happens* in a church. It requires work. It requires members to deliberately aim at being "shock absorbers"—people who are able to bring calm and clarity to touchy situations. As James wrote, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18). That kind of a congregation is a great encouragement to its leaders.

So how can we be "shock absorbers" in the church? Here are a few suggestions:

- First, act toward others in love. Remember what Peter writes: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).
- Second, remember that while our disagreements are temporary, the people with whom we disagree are eternal. We must never become so jealous of the rightness of our views that we hurt and damage the people with whom we disagree.
- Third, encourage others to trust our leaders. Remind them that while no leaders are perfect, we should err in the direction of trust, not cynicism.

3. Pray for Your Leaders.

In 2 Corinthians 1:10-11, Paul writes,

On him [Christ] we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

This passage gives us two reasons for why we should pray for our church leaders.

- First, they have been given a task that is formidable and beyond human strength—to shepherd a congregation of sinful people. Therefore we should pray that God will grant them gracious favor.
- Second, we should pray for church leaders so that we may rejoice and thank God when our prayers are answered.

4. Express Your Love for Your Leaders.

It is good for us to remind our leaders constantly of our love for them. In 2 Corinthians 7:5-7, Paul describes his experience of this in moving terms.

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

What an amazing turnaround Paul describes here—from "this body of ours had no rest" to "my joy was greater than ever!" Consider this: your encouragement might be how God chooses to comfort a leader who is struggling.

5. Seek Your Leaders' Counsel, and Graciously Accept Their Reproof

We should take the advice of our church leaders very seriously. After all, part of their calling as shepherds is to identify and address problems in our lives before they become damaging.

There are two things we must remember here:

- First, if we want our leaders to give us specific and well-conceived advice, they'll have to know what is going on in our lives. It's a good habit to make sure that one or even several church leaders are aware of your present joys, struggles, and difficulties.
- Second, treat godly rebuke as precious and worthy of careful consideration. As we read in Proverbs 9:8, "Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you."

Pray that God would mature you in Christ so that you would react positively to reproof, rather than with defensiveness or denial.

6. Believe the Best About Your Leaders' Character and Decisions

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13—

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

Wayne Mack and David Swavely make the point well in their book, *Life In the Father's House*:

Though we are always prone to give ourselves 'the benefit of the doubt,' our sinful flesh has a strong tendency to be suspicious, skeptical, and even cynical toward others. This is especially true of church leaders. Many members make a regular habit of enjoying 'roast preacher' at their Sunday meal, and labels like 'power trip' are often carelessly tossed around when difficult decisions are made by leadership. But biblical love, according to 1 Corinthians 13:7, 'believes all things, hopes all things.' A loving member will assume the best about his leaders and trust them until some clear words or actions cause him legitimate concern about their wisdom or motives.

As fallen creatures, we are naturally suspicious of authority, and often we are far too ready to think or even say, "Aha! You did this! And for this reason!"

When we are tempted to be cynical about our leaders' motives and decisions, we must discipline ourselves to *trust* them in the absence of clear reasons to the contrary. And we must discipline ourselves not to assume bad motives unless there is some objective basis for doing so.

The fact is, our leaders must make many decisions concerning which we, as members, will have incomplete knowledge. We'll seldom be able to look at all the facts that they will have looked at in making their decision. Therefore, it's potentially foolish in those situations to assume that we know better. More than that, it's downright judgmental and arrogant to assume the leaders had sinful motives for their decision. Again, we're seldom able to look at all the fact that they had to look at in making the decision. Only God knows the heart of a man; we may evaluate a man's actions, but we should never presume that we understand his motives.

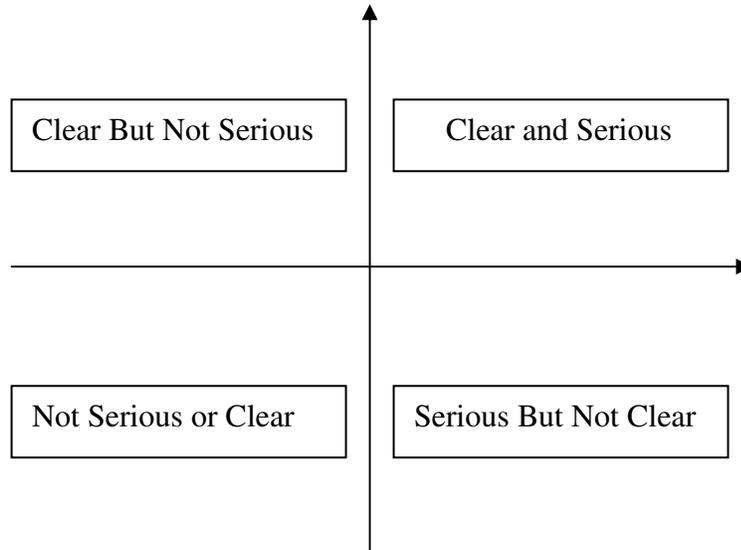
Those are six ways in which we as a congregation can obey the Bible's command to respect those who serve us as leaders, and to make their work a joy and not a burden:

- (1) Walk in obedience to Christ.
- (2) Cultivate and preserve unity.
- (3) Pray for church leaders.
- (4) Express your love for them.
- (5) Seek their counsel and accept their reproof. And
- (6) Trust their character and decisions.

III. WHAT SHOULD WE DO WHEN WE DISAGREE?

Of course there will be times when we disagree with our leaders and when we should tell them so. Maybe it's an isolated decision; maybe it's a cluster of decisions that are setting a new direction for the church. Yet how we respond to such decisions, and how we may express our disagreement, can either promote unity or fostering dissent.

Below is a diagram that will help us to think about how we should respond in various situations. Every question that faces us has a certain degree of clarity and a certain degree of seriousness. How clear and how serious a certain matter is will determine how we should respond to leaders with whom we disagree.



them.

Clear But Not Serious

In the upper left section are those matters that are clear to almost everyone, but not particularly serious. For example, there may be a question over whether we should paint our church building a bright shade of purple. On that question, like others in this category, there will usually be little disagreement because it's clear; but when there is disagreement, it should never be rancorous.

Neither Serious Nor Clear

In the lower left section are matters that are neither serious nor clear—matters which aren't particularly important, but concerning which there will probably be several different opinions. Which brand of photocopier should we purchase? How many songs should we sing in the morning service?

While there may be times to have spirited discussions on these issues, a church will do well to submit without hesitation to the decisions of its leaders, and leaders should be happy to submit to one another according to their areas of responsibility (so the preaching pastor might happily submit to an administrator concerning which copier to purchase). If you have an opinion about an issue like this, speak up—but never in a way that is strident, disruptive, or that risks undermining the individual who is taking the lead on the relevant issue.

Now, these two “not serious” quadrants on the left are comparatively easy to think about compared to the two quadrants on the right, which we'll address in a moment. But consider how many controversies occur in churches over matters that aren't serious. People often object to the idea of submitting to our leaders by point to issues that would fall into the “serious quadrants.” But it's worth asking ourselves, “Am I even willing to submit in these first

two quadrants, or am I that convinced of my own opinions?" Think about what great strides toward unity a church would take simply by attending carefully to these first two boxes!

Serious But Not Clear

Now, admittedly, things get more challenging when we get to the "serious, but not clear" quadrant in the lower right. What do we do here? This might include questions like, "Should we recognize Joe as an elder?" or "Should we purchase this large piece of property that will stretch our budget?"

On these kinds of questions especially, a congregation should listen carefully to their elders and give them the benefit of the doubt. These are the issues that require the most thought, the most investigation, and the most detailed judgment. And God has given us leaders to do that kind of detailed thinking and recommend a course of action to us.

Now, that doesn't mean that all their recommendations will be easy for us to accept. So how do we disagree in a godly way about things when the answer is far from clear, but the implications for us as a church are serious? Here are a few suggestions:

- First, we can help the elders by bringing them relevant information. The elders will not always be aware of every need in the church, nor will they always have all the information necessary for making a particular decision. You can play a helpful role by bringing information to the elders that they might not have.
- Second, if you disagree with a decision that the elders have made, sit down and talk with them. Try to understand their reasoning. Of course that means that elders must not be far removed or aloof from the congregation. They see their spiritual care for the congregation as their highest duty in the church. So give yourself a full opportunity to be persuaded, and approach the matter with a teachable spirit.

If you still disagree with the elders even after talking with them, that's okay. Every Christian is not going to agree on everything all the time. You can trust the elders and disagree with them about a certain question all at the same time. This is where the rubber hits the road with regard to obeying Hebrews 13:17. It's one thing to obey leaders when you think they have a great idea. It's another thing to submit when you disagree with their decision. In those times, we submit because we are acting in faith, trusting Christ to rule over us through the leaders he has placed over us.

In fact, this is what the elders themselves must do when they disagree with each other. They submit to the majority of the other elders. At some point or another, every elder will be in the minority on an issue. When that happens, that elder is called to submit to the majority, trusting that God is working through the elders as a whole. When the matter is decided, the minority should not continue to lobby support or hold a grudge. In that way, our elders try to model for all of us how to graciously submit when things don't go our way.

- Third, be careful how you discuss issues with others. Don't go behind the elders' backs, lobbying support in the congregation and trying to overturn their decision. Don't deride the elders' decision in your conversation with others, and so risk undermining their trust in the elders. If you speak about your view at a members' meeting, do so with grace, kindness, and humility. How many times have we heard about members' meetings boiling over into shouting matches? That's something we desperately want to avoid.

Finally, when others begin to deride the leadership in conversations with you, explain to them that they should talk directly to the elders if they have a concern. Tell them kindly but firmly that deriding the leadership to other members is sinful and divisive.

Clear and Serious

The last category includes issues that are clear and also serious. This is where the congregation becomes the final emergency brake against poor decisions by the elders.

It is on issues like these—issues of discipline and doctrine—where the apostles appeal to the church *as a whole*. Would the church at Corinth continue to fellowship with a man in serious and unrepentant sin? Would the churches of Galatia add to the requirements of the gospel? Here the congregation must act.

But how would this kind of “emergency brake” action take place? Most likely, it would mean that the congregation would vote down the elders’ motion and refuse their recommendation. In some extreme situations, they might also call for the resignation of the elders. Throughout this whole process, a church must keep several things in mind:

- First, there should never be any secret campaigning or canvassing in the church. If a member thinks the elders are crossing a line, he should be clear with them about his opinion. Even in the worst situations, opposition to the elders should not be first sprung on them at a public meeting. If you plan to vote or speak out against the elder or elders, you should most likely explain this to them privately beforehand.
- Second, in a situation like this, the members should seek the counsel of godly leaders from other churches, preferably those who know this church and its elders well. Other leaders can provide wisdom and perhaps even prevail upon the elders to repent of their error and reverse course.
- Third, we must take great care to protect the name of Christ in the midst of what may well be a heartbreaking disagreement. Sometimes we’ll read stories in the papers about church members who have told outside media about a disagreement in their church, presumably trying to rally support and place pressure on their opponents. How appalling! How worldly! Are they not bringing shame on the name of Christ in order to get their way? The apostle Paul lambasted the church at Corinth for taking disagreements between church members to civil court (1 Cor. 6). Imagine how he would have reacted to the trumpeting of the church’s disagreement to the world at large!

Even more importantly, think about how God views such tactics. Amidst any disagreement, the reputation of Christ must be paramount in our minds. We must take no action and speak no word, regardless of the circumstances, that would ever defame Christ’s name in the eyes of the world around us.

All of us should pray that our church never has to experience a situation like this. But should that day come, let us take hope in the amazing way that God has preserved us through the years, and let us rejoice that his purposes will triumph regardless of our behavior.

IV. Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, an elderly pastor, Edward Griffin, spoke to his church one final time before he retired. We would do well to heed his words in regard to all those whom God has given us as leaders:

For your own sake, and your children’s sake, cherish and revere him whom you have chosen to be your pastor. Already he loves you; and he will soon love you as ‘bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh.’ It will be equally your duty and your interest to make his labors as pleasant to him as possible. Do not demand too much. Do not require visits *too* frequent. Should he spend, in this way, half of the time which some demand, he must wholly neglect his studies, if not sink early under the burden. Do not report to him all the unkind things which may be said against him; nor frequently, in his presence, *allude* to opposition, if opposition should arise. Though he is a minister of Christ, consider that he has the feelings of a man. ⁴

May we too glorify Christ by so caring for our leaders.

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⁴ Edward Griffin, “A Tearful Farewell from a Faithful Pastor,” 1809

Church Discipline—Preserving God-Glorifying Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 9

A central theme running through this course has been the tension between God’s grand purpose for the church and our own sin. God intends the church to be the manifestation of his glory on earth, and yet we are sinful, selfish people. Therefore, much of what we’ve discussed has focused on how we can live together in God-glorifying love and unity.

There will be times, however, when members of the church will sin and refuse to repent. Those are perilous times for church unity. On the one hand, we might choose to ignore sin, which threatens the purity of Christ’s church. Or we might act harshly in self-righteous anger, which destroys the unity to which we have been called. Neither of these are godly responses. So how should we react to unrepentant sin in the church?

Fortunately, the Bible has given us wisdom on this issue, and this brings us to the topic of “church discipline”—a biblical response to unrepentant sin. Contrary to what most people might think, discipline is an inherently positive thing. It is commanded in Scripture, and it is for our good.

The Heart of Church Discipline

The model for discipline in the church is the discipline our heavenly Father exercises with his children. The book of Hebrews tells us, “The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12:6). Furthermore, the purpose of discipline is righteousness. “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

At its heart, then, church discipline is one way believers in Christ care for each other; it’s speaking the truth in love. It’s also how we protect the church from serious, unrepentant sin which dishonors Jesus Christ.

I. TWO KINDS OF DISCIPLINE

There are two kinds of discipline that take place in the church—formative and corrective.

Formative Discipline

“Formative discipline” is administered far more frequently. In fact, it happens all the time to every church member. This is simply the process of bringing people to maturity in Christ through positive instruction and teaching—through formation. When the Word is preached and we are convicted, or when Christians encourage each other, that is formative discipline. (See for example Ephesians 4:11-12; Hebrews 10:24-25; and Colossians 3:16.) This kind of discipline is crucial because God uses it to prevent the sin that might require corrective discipline. The more the church is shaped by formative discipline, the less it will need corrective discipline.

Corrective Discipline

“Corrective discipline” is the specific admonishment or correction of a particular member for sin.

Sometimes corrective discipline is informal, as when one member says to another, “Hey, Tom, I think you’re wrong there.” Occasionally, it is formal, as when the entire congregation acts together by saying something like, “Mary, we know that you claim to be a Christian, but we must now treat you like a non-Christian because you won’t stop lying.”

In his book *The Deliberate Church*, Mark Dever and Paul Alexander describe the relationship between these two types of discipline like this: “If we were to compare discipline in the body of Christ to discipline in a physical body, then formative discipline would be like eating right and exercising, whereas corrective discipline would be like surgery.”

II. THE BENEFITS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Today we'll concentrate on the second of these kinds of discipline—corrective discipline. What are the benefits of corrective discipline? There are several.

- First, corrective discipline is for the good of the person disciplined. Some people object to the idea of discipline on the grounds that it is somehow unloving. But the truth is that discipline warns a person of the danger of sin and calls him to repentance.
- Second, corrective discipline is good for other Christians. As the church speaks and acts against sin, the whole congregation sees the serious nature of sin and its consequences.
- Third, corrective discipline is good for the church as a whole. Church discipline keeps the local body pure by protecting it from moral decay. Furthermore, it addresses sin that would otherwise lead to strife and conflict in the church.
- Fourth, corrective discipline is good for the corporate witness of the church and, therefore, non-Christians. It powerfully protects our corporate witness in evangelism, because people notice when there is a whole community of believers whose lives are different from the world. It helps to produce a community of changed people, a community that gives hope to non-Christians that people really can change.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, corrective discipline is for the glory of God. Christians are called to be conspicuously holy, not for our own reputation but for God's. Our lives are the store-front display of God's character in the world, and we want Christ to shine in the eyes of the world. One important part of that is the responsibility to address sin in the church that would bring dishonor to his great name.

When church discipline is necessary, how should we exercise it? Furthermore, how can we do it in a way that will both protect Christ's reputation and promote unity? The Bible gives us guidance on the appropriate use of discipline in various situations.

III. WHAT IF SOMEONE SINS PERSONALLY AGAINST YOU?

First, what should you do if someone sins against you? How should you react? Do you give them a piece of your mind, and then refuse to talk to them? Do you say nothing and hold a grudge for years? No. Neither of those are options according to Scripture.

Jesus addresses this question in Matthew 18:15-17:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Jesus specifically describes at least three steps that Christians are to follow in this situation: First, go and talk with the brother who has sinned against you. Second, if your brother will not listen, take one or two other people with you and talk to him again. Third, if he still refuses to listen, tell it to the church, which can finally expel him if he refuses to repent.

Step One: Go and Show Your Brother His Fault

Let's think about the first step in more detail. In most cases, talking to the offender will resolve the dispute without the need for anyone else to become involved. In fact, that's what we ought to hope for—to win our brother over. Given that, we should spend some time preparing our own hearts and minds before confronting someone like this.

Preparing Our Hearts

Ken Sande in his book, *The Peacemaker*, offers some suggestions on how to do that:

- First, pray for the person you are planning to confront. Pray that God would grow that person spiritually, and that he would desire to know more of God. This will soften your own heart toward that person in preparation for your talk.
- Second, make sure you have just cause to go to the offender. Our minds can be very deceptive. Therefore, pray and think carefully about whether you have a biblical basis to go to this brother or sister. Moreover, prayerfully consider whether *you* have some fault in this dispute that may require you to seek forgiveness from this person. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:5, “First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”
- Third, examine your own heart. Make sure your motives are proper and that you are not going to the offender out of anger, revenge, pride, or some other sinful attitude (Romans 12:19). Instead, be sure your goal is reconciliation—for the good of both your brother and yourself, and for God’s glory. Is this more about getting something off your chest, or is this more about serving them and helping them out of their sin?
- Fourth, don’t talk to others about your brother’s sin simply to make yourself feel better, or to gain a sympathetic ear. It may be fine to talk about the situation with another person if you need wisdom about how to approach the offending person, or if you are uncertain whether an offense really has been committed. But using a conversation as an outlet for anger is gossip. It undermines unity and is a violation of Matthew 18. In fact, even when you need counsel from another person, you can almost always get advice from them without mentioning the name of the offender.
- Fifth, when you confront the offender, remember to act and speak in a spirit of gentleness, humility, and love. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1).

Before we move on to the second step in the process described in Matthew 18, we should make two further points.

Confront For Every Offense?

First, you may be asking yourself, “Does this mean I have to go to my brother for every little offense?” Certainly not. Proverbs tells us that to overlook an offense is a glorious thing, demonstrating patience and forbearance (Prov. 19:11). And Peter tells us that love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

You should go to your brother or sister only when the offense has created an unreconciled state between the two of you, or when it presents a danger to the offender. Do you carry the offense from day to day? Is it difficult to forgive the person? Is the sin, no matter how great or small, endangering this person’s ability to reflect Christ to the surrounding world? Is it a sign of larger struggles, or could it lead there? If the answer to any of those questions is “Yes,” then you probably need to confront your brother or sisters with the sin.

Reconciliation is Your Responsibility, Whether You’ve Sinned or Not

Second, while Matthew 18 requires the *wronged* person to seek reconciliation with the offender, Matthew 5:23-24 requires the *offender* to seek reconciliation.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother.

So important are good relationships between Christians that Jesus tells the offender even to interrupt an act of worship to seek reconciliation. What a marvelous picture these two passages present together! When there is conflict between two Christian brothers, both are obligated to initiate reconciliation. They are to *rush* to each other for reconciliation!

Step Two: Take One or Two Others Along

If the offending person will not listen, then Jesus instructs us to take one or two other people to talk to him. This serves two purposes. First, the offender may be more likely to listen to a third party than to the person who has been sinned against. Second, the additional people also serve as witnesses of the meeting in case the discipline process advances to the next step.

If you ever find yourself at this stage as one who has been wronged, keep a couple of things in mind.

- First, consider how objective the sin is. Are you confronting your brother for something that is finally a matter of opinion or perspective? For example, are you confronting them because you think they are spending too much money, or because you think they are prideful? Those may be legitimate concerns, but they are not really matters that could ever be *proven* before the church. If you've spoken with the person about a concern like this and they have disagreed with you, it's probably best to drop the matter and pray for the convicting and restoring work of the Holy Spirit. The process of church discipline is for matters which are concrete and easily proven.
- Second, make sure the people you bring along are trustworthy, discreet, impartial, and have good judgment. The offender will be more likely to listen to a person like that.
- Third, let the offender know what you're about to do—even before you do it. The very realization that you are following Jesus' instructions for church discipline may cause that person to think more carefully, have a change of heart, and repent.
- Finally, be careful not to lobby the witness to your side. That may constitute gossip or slander.

Step Three: Tell It to The Church

If the offender still refuses to listen, the matter should be brought before the church, which can terminate his membership if he refuses to repent.

It's worth noting that Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18 are not a maximum standard, but a minimum one. In other words, none of this means that you can't do *more* than Jesus commands. You just can't do *less*. So for example, Jesus does not mention talking to the elders before taking the matter to the whole church, yet that is typically an appropriate step to take.

Did you notice the pattern in Matthew 18? With each step, more people become involved to bring help. Even in the final step, in which the person is removed from the church and cast upon the world, as it were, the world itself will be used providentially to bring about repentance, if that is God's will.

IV. WHAT IF YOU SEE ONE CHURCH MEMBER SIN AGAINST ANOTHER?

Matthew 18 gives us guidance about what to do if someone sins against us. But what if you see a brother or sister sin, yet their sin is not against you? Maybe he sinned against another Christian, or maybe his sin is not against any individual at all. Do we have a biblical obligation to talk with that person about their sin?

The answer is yes, but with some qualifications.

Galatians 6:1 tells us: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." And in Luke 17:3 we read, "If your brother sins rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him."

On the other hand, the Bible also warns us not to be busybodies who look for opportunities to point out faults in others. (See 2 Thessalonians 3:11, which warns against being a "busybody," and 1 Peter 4:15, which condemns "meddlers.") All of us are sinners, so it would be unproductive to call attention to every single sin we witness. How do we know when it's appropriate to approach a brother or sister about sin?

This is an area in which there are no hard and fast rules, and it finally depends on the wisdom God gives in each circumstance. But here are some questions that might be helpful.

- First, is the sin bringing public dishonor to God? Are outsiders seeing it, and does the sin affect their perception of Christians in a way that lies about God?
- Second, is the sin hurting others? Is it causing other Christians to be tempted or is it setting a bad example?
- Third, could the sin lead to discord and disunity in the body?
- Or finally, is the sin seriously harming the offender? Is it damaging his relationship with God?

If you answer “yes” to any of those questions, then it probably would be appropriate to talk to the offender about the sin.

V. WHAT IF SOMEONE SINS PUBLICLY AGAINST THE ENTIRE CHURCH?

So far, we’ve been discussing personal sin, where only a very few people know about or are affected by the sin. But what happens when a church member’s sin is open and egregious, so that it becomes a matter of public knowledge in the congregation, or even in the outside community?

We see such a situation in 1 Corinthians 5:1-11, where Paul exhorts the congregation to expel an individual who was committing a serious public offense—having an affair with his father’s wife.

With such public sin, Paul does not advise the church to follow the first two steps of Matthew 18. He simply exhorts them to expel the offender. (See 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 11, 23; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; and Romans 16:17). In fact, if the church does *not* take action in these circumstances, the church is remiss.

Paul wanted the church to excommunicate this man for at least two reasons.

- First, it was *for his good*. Excluding him from the church would make it clear to him that his profession of faith was undermined by his ungodly living.
- Second, if the church did nothing, it would give public approval to serious unrepentant sin, and send the message that Christ himself does not care about sin. Thus Paul exhorts the church to act so that Christ’s reputation would be preserved.

VI. WHAT IF A CHURCH LEADER SINS?

Finally, we should consider what Scripture says about sin among the church’s leaders. The guiding passage for such situations is 1 Timothy 5:19-20:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

Paul’s aim here is to protect elders from spurious attacks and accusations. Before any discipline action against an elder can be brought, there must be two or three witnesses to the sin. The wisdom of this is clear: Church leaders are often engaged in situations that may lead to unfounded accusations against them, so it is good to make sure that they are protected.

With this passage in mind, let’s address two situations: What if you hear rumors of an accusation against an elder? And what if you personally encounter an elder in sin?

If You Hear Rumors of an Elder’s Sin

What if you hear a rumor from someone about an elder being in sin? What is your responsibility? There is one simple rule here: Ensure that you are not party to gossip and slander. Tell the person from whom you heard the rumor to talk to that elder about it, not to you. Actively discourage them from spreading slander about that elder, and instead to address the situation in a biblical manner.

If You Witness an Elder in Sin

What if an elder sins against you personally, or what if you witness an elder sinning? What then? Here are a few guidelines:

- First, talk to him about it. Keep in mind, of course, that the situation may not actually be what you think it is. So act humbly, remembering that this person is in the position of elder because the church has found him to be above reproach. Give an elder the benefit of the doubt.
- Second, don't think you have to handle the situation alone. It is fine to approach another individual in the church—or preferably another elder—with your concern. When your intent is to keep the matter quiet and discreet, involving a minimal number of people, you are not violating the intent of 1 Timothy 5:19.

The specific language of the passage is instructive here. What does "*Do not admit a charge* against an elder" mean? Does it mean that you are forbidden from asking for help from other people, or that they are forbidden from listening to you? No. The word translated "admit a charge" (*paradechomai* in the Greek) actually means "to accept something as true," not merely to listen or to consider something. Therefore, we might translate the verse, "Do not accept a charge against an elder as true except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."

Thus, if an elder has sinned against you and you need help in the matter, this does not mean that you cannot ask another church member or elder for help—or that they are forbidden from helping. It simply means that the other person should not blindly accept your accusation as true without carefully investigating the matter to establish whether your claim is true or not. If he determines that it is, then he becomes one of the "witnesses" required in 1 Timothy 5:19.

- Third, if the church leader will not repent when you confront him, carefully determine if you ought to pursue the matter further. Again, it's important to decide if your concern is an objective matter, or if it's a matter of opinion or perspective. If it is the latter, it's probably best to let the matter drop. But if it is an objective issue—embezzlement, for example, or sexual misconduct—then it is your responsibility before God to continue to follow 1 Timothy 5:19. Speak with others who witnessed the sin, and ask them to confront the elder with you. If necessary, bring the matter to other elders, who will also act as the witnesses called for in 1 Timothy 5:19.
- Fourth, for the discipline process to begin, then the person who has been wronged must bring forward one or more individuals who are willing to act as co-accusers with him. People can fulfill the role of the witness in 1 Timothy 5:19 even if they have not been eyewitnesses, so long as they have carefully investigated the matter.
- Finally, we must remember that sin committed by an elder is very serious. Paul commands the church to rebuke a sinning elder publicly, which means that some statement of the nature of the offense must be made to the church. Leaders who break trust can be restored only after an appropriately open response—if at all. Clearly, leadership carries a higher burden, because the sins of an elder cause greater injury to the church.

VII. CONCLUSION

As a church, we are to represent Christ's holiness and purity. Thus we should be jealous for the reputation of Christ, and this should cause us to embrace the idea of church discipline. Indeed, we should treasure the reputation of Jesus so highly that we would *desire* to be disciplined for any stain we might inflict on the church by our sin.

A moving example of this kind of passion for God's reputation is found in an account from 19th century Virginia:

An aged and prominent member of a church was overcome by drink . . . He reported himself to the church, deplored his sin, expressed his penitence with a flood of tears, but called upon the church to do her duty, and shield herself from the reproach which his misconduct was calculated to bring upon her. The deep distress of this man excited commiseration in every bosom—the whole church was in tears. As

soon as their feelings would allow it, a proposition was made to pass over the offense and dismiss the case. Many were the voices immediately lifted in its favor. One tremulous voice alone was heard to oppose it—it was the voice of the offender himself. At length the pastor, who was a man of intelligence as well as of approved piety, arose. Every eye was fixed upon him with intense anxiety. He expressed his regret for the misfortunes of the brother, and the same regrets were felt by all . . . but he concluded with adding, that he concurred with the brother in thinking that the honor of the church required that she should express, in the most decided manner, her disapprobation of the act of which he had unfortunately been guilty, and that the offender should be excluded . . . The church . . . yielded reluctantly to the concurrent views of the pastor and the offender himself. The latter was excluded, but after a month or two was restored. He has never since, within our knowledge, done anything to dishonor the cause of his Savior (Joseph S. Baker, “Church Discipline,” in *Polity*, ed. Mark Dever, 266).

May we all have such a passion for the reputation of Christ in this local church.

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Encouragement: Safeguarding Unity in Holiness

“Living as a Church”—Class 10

In the first chapter of his letter to the Colossians, Paul says something remarkable:

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Col. 1:28-29)

Did you catch that? Paul says his aim is to present everyone *perfect* in Christ. *Everyone*.

Now that’s what you call an audacious goal! Yet we are called to do the same thing. Hebrews tells us this:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:23-25)

What a massive responsibility. As Christians, and especially as fellow church members, we are accountable for each other. Together, we are in a life and death struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil, and our goal is to cross the finish line together and present *every one* of us *perfect* in Christ.

Part of that is what we talked about last week—confronting sin in each other’s lives. But our task is bigger than that. In the passage from Colossians, Paul doesn’t just talk about admonishing. He also speaks of teaching. And in Hebrews, we are told to consider how we might spur one another on toward love and good deeds—proactively, lovingly, urgently pushing our brothers and sisters ahead in the life of the kingdom.

Now to be clear, this class isn’t intended to make us all busybodies. The New Testament roundly condemns the idea of being a “meddler”—of butting in where we have no relationship and no permission to speak into a person’s life. But where we *do* have a relationship or the opportunity to build one, we are to encourage each other in the Christian life. How we do that—how we spur one another on toward love and good deeds—is the subject of our time in this class.

I. OUR ENEMIES IN GODLINESS

As members of a Christian church, we are called to encourage each other to live fruitful lives for the kingdom of God. That is not an easy task, and therefore we must have our eyes opened to what we’re up against. We must know the enemies that would keep us from growing in godliness. Here are two.

1. *Our Struggle is With Our Own Hearts*

First and foremost, our enemy is our own heart—the core desires that motivate our decisions and actions every day. Jeremiah puts it plainly:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

James, too, points to the desires of the heart as both the cause of temptation (James 1:14) and of external conflict (James 4:1). When we find our brothers and sisters in this church making decisions that don’t align with their calling in Christ, we must remember that the ultimate source is not external, but rather the sinful desires in their hearts.

Why does this matter? Because it has massive implications for how we should go about encouraging other Christians.

So often, our goal with other Christians is to get them to behave differently. “If only he wouldn’t spend so much time around those people,” we say. Or, “If only she would spend more time volunteering at church.” “If only he would switch into a job that gave him more time with his family.”

But behavior is not the ultimate problem, and that understanding should shape our encouragement to other Christians. Here a few implications of this:

- *First, while we can sometimes manage to change a person's behavior, only God can change the heart.* As we involve ourselves in the lives of others, we must remember that prayer is our best weapon, that guilt and coercion cannot address the core of these issues, and that our desperation for God to act merely increases the glory due him. Certainly there may be times when we work for behavior change (holding someone accountable for sexual sin, for example) but that is not our ultimate goal. What we finally want to see changed is the *heart*.
- *Second, we must not compare ourselves to others based on the externals of our life.* A church where people evaluate themselves and take confidence in their own spiritual actions—the relative length of their quiet times, the number of old books they're reading, the number of people they're discipling, the number of friends they're evangelizing—is not a gospel church. It is a legalistic church. Of course we must look at externals as a sign of spiritual health, but we must remember that they are the *fruits* of repentance, not repentance itself.
- *Third, we must take to heart the old phrase, "But for the grace of God, there go I."* It is no accident that immediately after Paul exhorts us to restore those caught in sin in Galatians 6:1, he warns us against our own pride and self-reliance. Our hearts are more corrupt than we can ever know, and capable of more evil than we will ever realize.
- *Fourth, we must remember that our goal is not finally to feel happy and fulfilled.* There are many ways to feel happy which never get to the issues of the heart. Our goal in encouraging others is not merely to make them feel good—about themselves, about the world, or about God—but to help them know and experience the abiding joy of having their desires transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Thus the first enemy we face as we struggle to watch over our brothers and sisters is the deceitfulness of our own hearts.

2. Our Struggle Is With Hollow and Deceptive Philosophies.

A second enemy we face is hollow and deceptive philosophies. Paul writes to the saints in Colossae in Colossians 2:8,

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

We are all philosophers. All the time, we are creating philosophies of meaning in our lives. What matters? Why do things happen? What's worth living for? Though we usually know the correct answers to those questions, we are easily deceived and taken captive by sinful and deceptive philosophies.

We often fool ourselves into believing that we are immune to the world's philosophies, that we can ignore the message being blared at us day after day. But the world's ideas of meaning and purpose can gain a foothold in the desires of our hearts without our even recognizing it.

That leads to what Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp call "gospel gaps" in our lives.⁵ Our guiding philosophy should rest on the truth of the gospel, but the way we act and think is often inconsistent with the gospel.

In other words, there are gaps between what we believe and what we do. And such gaps don't stay empty. All of us operate with a mix of gospel truth and worldly philosophies in our minds, and part of our goal as Christians is to identify and root out what is worldly.

Seven Counterfeit Gospels

⁵ Lane and Tripp, *How People Change*.

Being able to recognize gospel counterfeits is incredibly important. In their book *How People Change*, Lane and Tripp lay out seven of these counterfeit gospels. How many of these do you recognize in your own heart?

1. **Formalism.** “I participate in the regular meetings and ministries of the church, so I feel like my life is under control. I’m always in church, but it really has little impact on my heart or on how I live. I may become judgmental and impatient with those who do not have the same commitment as I do.”
2. **Legalism.** “I live by the rules—rules I create for myself and rules I create for others. I feel good if I can keep my own rules, and I become arrogant and full of contempt when others don’t meet the standards I set for them. There is no joy in my life because there is no grace to be celebrated.”
3. **Mysticism.** “I am engaged in the incessant pursuit of an emotional experience with God. I live for the moments when I feel close to him, and I often struggle with discouragement when I don’t feel that way. I may change churches often, too, looking for one that will give me what I’m looking for.”
4. **Activism.** “I recognize the missional nature of Christianity and am passionately involved in fixing this broken world. But at the end of the day, my life is more of a defense of what’s right than a joyful pursuit of Christ.”
5. **Biblicism.** “I know my Bible inside and out, but I do not let it master me. I have reduced the gospel to a mastery of biblical content and theology, so I am intolerant and critical of those with lesser knowledge.”
6. **Therapism.** “I talk a lot about the hurting people in our congregation, and how Christ is the only answer for their hurt. Yet even without realizing it, I have made Christ more Therapist than Savior. I view hurt as a greater problem than sin—and I subtly shift my greatest need from my moral failure to my unmet needs.”
7. **“Social-ism.”** “The deep fellowship and friendships I find at church have become their own idol. The body of Christ has replaced Christ himself, and the gospel is reduced to a network of fulfilling Christian relationships.”

So that’s what we’re up against. We are battling the desires of our hearts, even while we struggle with worldly philosophies that fill the gaps in our lives. Yet praise God for the hope of the gospel! Because of Christ’s death on the cross and the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives, we can know that it is God who works in us both to will and to act according to his good purpose (Phil. 2:13).

II. THE CONTEXT FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

Before we talk specifically about how we can help our brothers and sisters in Christ in their struggle for godliness, let’s think about the kind of atmosphere that will facilitate that work. There are two relationship challenges that we need to watch out for—hiding our struggles, and not helping when struggles appear.

Nothing we say in this class will be of any use if you are not willing to reveal your struggles to others, and if you are not close enough to others to know when and how they need help. So here are two good questions to ask yourself:

- First, are you helping to make this a church that welcomes struggling people? Or do you only welcome people when they have it all together?
- Second, do you make it a regular habit to share your struggles with others? Or do you keep everything locked up in your own soul?

So what can we do to create a church context where struggles are honestly faced and addressed?

How to Help Others

Nothing can make a church more unwelcome to struggling people than a bunch of church members who work hard to look like they have no problems of their own—or even worse, who look down on those who admit their struggles.

When someone bears their soul to you, act in humility. Even as you work to help them hate the sin in their hearts, strive to sympathize with them. It is only the grace of God that prevents you, too, from stumbling into the same trap.

One thing that will help is to refrain from offering trite solutions that make it sound like only a fool would have that problem. “Struggling with depression? Just read your Bible more; and spend more time outside. Then you’ll feel better.” Don’t just try to *solve* people’s problems; *listen* to them. Remember that the godly saints of the Bible struggled mightily. Don’t pretend that only “bad Christians” suffer in this life. You’ll have half the Psalms arguing against you.

How to Be Helped

There is nothing godly about handling your struggles alone. That kind of independence doesn’t show strength; it shows pride. Be willing to engage in the “ministry of dependence.” Show that you recognize your dependence on Christ by being dependent on other people.

On the casual level, that means going deeper than “Fine, thank you” when people ask how you’re doing. Be honest: “I’m doing okay, thanks. It’s been a rough week, but God seems to be teaching me a lot.” On a deeper level, confess sin to your brothers and sisters. Give them the opportunity to minister to you and to rejoice when God answers your prayers.

Above all, we want to build a church full of honest relationships—relationships that welcome struggling people.

III. HOW TO ENCOURAGE STRUGGLING PEOPLE

The Christians around us are fighting both the flesh and the hollow and deceptive philosophies around them. We are exhorted to encourage them and to instruct them. How do we do that?

The answer is that “it depends.”

One passage that might be helpful as you seek to encourage others is 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14. Paul writes there:

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

How are we to care for those around us? By warning those who are idle, encouraging the timid, helping the weak, and being patient with everyone.

When you encounter a struggling brother or sister in Christ, run through those categories in your mind.

- Is this person idle (or “unruly” as the New American Standard puts it), and in need of exhortation?
- Is he timid and in need of encouragement?
- Or is he simply weak and in need of someone to help shoulder their burden?
- Whatever the case, how can I have patience with this situation?

As you consider what course of action to take, remember two important things that will be necessary in every situation:

First, speak Scripture to them. That does not mean simply throwing a verse at them. It might mean reminding them of a pattern in salvation history, like the fact that God always proves himself faithful. It might mean reading through a book that explains and applies Scripture. It might mean studying a passage of Scripture with them.

Second, “preach” the gospel to them. Whether a person is idle, timid, or weak, the problem is finally that their understanding of the gospel is in need of repair. At the root of the problem is a “gospel gap.” So use Scripture to help your brother or sister realize how their understanding of the gospel is deficient, and share with them afresh

the joyous good news that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Let’s consider now each of the three categories Paul lays out in 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

“Warn Those Who Are Idle.”

Suppose you’re talking with Sue, who will not remove herself from the path of temptation. She is very tempted to be in love with the things of this world, and watching a particular show on television always seems to leave her discontent with the life God has given her. But she really, really likes the show, and she has fun talking with friends the next morning after it airs. The two of you have talked about how this show is playing a destructive roll in her life, but while she confesses this sin, her life hasn’t changed.

What do you do? Where is the gap in Sue’s understanding of the gospel? There’s probably at least three gaps. **First**, there’s probably some idol represented by the show that she believes is more satisfying than God. Maybe the beautiful people on the show? Maybe her ability to feel like she’s “with it” when talking about the show the next day with her friends. Explore what those idols might be. That’s what she’s worshipping.

Second, recognize that that idol is where she’s finding her justification. Is it the idea being beautiful or with beautiful people that makes her feel justified before the world? Does she feel justified when her friends regard her as cool or “with it”? Whatever it is that makes us feel important, good, special, worthy of recognition—that’s the thing we’re using to justifying ourselves. By the same token, that’s the thing we’re worshipping. So, is she worshipping Christ, knowing that her justification is bound up *entirely* in him? Or is she worshipping the world, wanting the justification and approval of the world more than anything?

Third, because she’s still worshipping some idol and seeking her justification through that idol, she’s failing to repent. She’s not fleeing temptation. The question Paul would put to her is, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Rom. 6:2). Does Sue understand what repentance looks like? Is she taking Jesus’ words seriously, that “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off,” (Mark 5:30)? Does she understand that mere regret is not repentance?

Talk with Sue about the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow. Show her 2 Corinthians 7:10:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Warn her of the consequences of sin and idolatry in her life. Remind her of the amazing love and freedom that are hers in Christ!

Or consider Matt. Matt comes to church regularly, but he isn’t very involved. In fact, other than his weekly visits to church, his life isn’t much different from his moral, non-Christian neighbors. If you could listen in on his conversations, you’d quickly get a feeling for where his passions are—his job, the new house he bought on the shore, and his boat. Matt may well be a Christian, but he is worldly, and he is trying to serve two masters.

While there is no explicit sin in his life, Matt certainly has his own version of the gospel gap. Like Sue, he understands his sin and God’s salvation on an intellectual level, but it he hasn’t really internalized what it all means. Jesus said that if we understand that we’ve been forgiven much, we will love much. He also told us that we cannot love both him and the world.

So what do you do?

First, state your concern to Matt about what looks like an inconsistency of his claim to faith and his love of the world. The apostle John’s words are pretty stark: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15) Once again, we have an idol problem—a worship problem. What does he really love and worship?

Second, you might be able to help Matt see this by asking him to consider who is the *active* god in his life. That is, which god is guiding his values, ambitions, pleasures, and decisions on an hour to hour basis through the

week? Ask him to consider whether this other god will be able to mediate for him before the throne of God the Father on Judgment Day.

Third, warn him of the danger of investing his talents in things that are passing away. And pray that God would enable to see through the lies he's believe, that he would understand God's forgiveness, and that he would thereby be driven to love of the true God.

“Encourage the Timid.”

Regarding those who are “timid,” think of people who have given in to sin, who have tried to walk in righteousness but have failed so many times that they have completely given up. You might see this with sexual sin, or with someone who finds marriage so difficult that he sees no option but divorce. These people aren't obstinate; they've just tried to follow Christ and been exhausted by it. In their words, “It isn't working.”

How do we encourage these Christians?

- Make sure they really are “timid,” and not simply in need of a strong warning.
- If they do need encouragement, then remind them of God's promises in Scripture. 1 Corinthians 10:13 is a good place to start: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”
- Recognize that at some level they're being deceived, whether by themselves, the world, or the devil. Maybe they've been deceived into believing they cannot change, even though they really want to—“John, you're *always* gonna have this struggle; you might as well give in.” Maybe they've been deceived into believing they want to change, when really they don't because they still love their sin more than anything—“I want to change...but, then again, I can't imagine life with out *this*.” Introduce them to Christians who have seen God provide victory, and who can help diagnose the specific lies they are believing.
- Find specific truths and promises to counteract the lies they are believing. Spend time with them. Offer regular, specific accountability.
- Pray earnestly that God would give them faith in his promises, and encourage them to pray for the same thing.
- In all you do, show them the hope of the gospel. Remind them that we have received the righteousness of Christ and the Holy Spirit who is our hope for real change. Remind them also that God has good purposes for them in even this most demanding trial. He is in control, he is good, and he will carry onto completion what he has begun in them.

Think, for example, of Joe. Joe is in his late twenties and still trying to figure out what to do with his life. He works in a dead-end job, doesn't find himself particularly useful at church, and would like to get married but isn't anywhere close. In short, he's been struggling for several years with what God's purpose might be for his life. Joe feels like he's close to giving up, though he doesn't know what “giving up” would really mean. But it sounds dramatic anyway. How do you encourage him?

Again, look for the gospel gap. It could be in several places. In a strange way, he could have fallen into legalism: Having begun with the Spirit, he now thinks of his goal in terms of human effort. He considers his worth to be directly related to his productivity (or his lack of productivity), and that has resulted in despondency.

Remind Joe that his worth before God is grounded in Christ's finished work, not his own. Share with him the glorious hope that God has given to all those who are his children.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)

“Help the weak.”

Who is weak? In a sense, all of us are. But there are some in our midst who are weak in ways that make them spiritually vulnerable. If the timid are those who have faith but *will* not exercise it, the weak are those who *cannot* exercise faith without great difficulty.

Max has been diagnosed with clinical depression. He is unable to do the amount of good that he once could. He struggles mightily with his relationship with God now that many of the emotions of faith he once counted on—without ever realizing it—are few and far between. Through work with his pastor, he has come to recognize some of the spiritual roots of his problem, but his mind is still susceptible to that downward spiral of depression, and there is a physical-chemical side of his disease that is hard to escape. He is discouraged and downhearted in many different ways. Max is weak. How can you help him?

Well, consider how he is weak. He may be weak in faith. His present emotions feel like they will last forever, so God’s promises seem so distant as to appear non-existent. Help him learn to trust God more than himself.

Or perhaps the help he needs is the constant reminder that there are Christians in his life who love him, and whose love is rooted in something much more secure than his own “lovability.” Read through Ed Welch’s book *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness* with him, looking for where there might be gospel gaps that are at the root of these struggles.

Above all, share with Max the gospel of hope. Help him to see how his sufferings are producing perseverance, character, and ultimately, hope. Remind him why he can trust the goodness of God even as he wonders why he is struggling. Remind him that Jesus is returning and that one day he will see with his own eyes the great things Jesus was doing through all these present trials.

As a last example, consider those in our church who are frail in their old age. They are weak in a very physical sense of the word, and yet that physical weakness can make them weak in many other ways as well. Have they put too much confidence in their of productivity? In their close friends or spouse? In the physical pleasures of life?

The loss of those things may well expose gospel gaps in their life. You can help them by reading Scripture, praying, and using your strength to point them to the gospel. People sometimes need your faith in order to exercise their own. Your reading of Scripture, praying, or talking about the gospel may be just what this saint needs to remember the One in whom they believe.

Encouraging such brothers and sisters may be as simple as providing physical help so that they can carry out their desires to help others. Mail letters. Provide transportation to church. Helping someone, even on a very menial level, can do wonderful spiritual good.

Finally, encourage them with the reward that awaits them in heaven, and let them encourage you as those who live just footsteps away from eternity. Ask them to share with you what they have come to love about God, how they have found him faithful. You will be helped even as you help them. You may never know how much those conversations keep at bay the temptation to complain against God for pain, and suffering, and loss.

“Be patient with everyone.”

Finally, be patient with everyone. Never condemn, and never justify yourself by your own relative strength or holiness. Instead, be patient. Be marked by a patience that is driven by humility; that comes from knowing how patient your heavenly Father is with you; and that delights to serve your brothers and sisters because they are reflections of God’s character.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, here’s what C. S. Lewis wrote about the love of God:

In awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of his love. You asked for a loving God; you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the “lord of terrible aspect,” is present; not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious

magistrate, not the care of the host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes . . . It is certainly a burden of glory not only beyond our deserts but also, except in rare moments of grace, beyond our desiring.

We love because he first loved us. Our love comes from his and ought to reflect his. May that persistent, venerable, jealous, inexorable love be ours for this church. May we labor to present *everyone* perfect in Christ.

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Serving and Giving: Sacrifice for the Sake of Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 11

In Mark 10:45, Jesus says, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus also calls us to take up the cross and follow him. Part of how we do this is to serve Christ’s body, the church. As he says in Mark 10:43, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.” Greatness in Jesus’ eyes is serving others, especially in the church.

This morning, we are considering how we should serve and give to the church. What do we mean by serving or giving? We mean *spending yourself*—your time, your gifts, your resources, your energy—for the good of the church.

The model for our service to each other is Christ’s service to us. Just as Jesus’ service was a result of his love both for us and for his Father, our service to others should flow from a love for other people and for God. In serving, our joy in Christ overflows with generosity.

Today we’ll consider how God has called us to serve each other in the church, and how that service contributes to unity. Starting with a theology of service, we’ll walk through four ways in which service can contribute to unity. Along the way, we’ll flag several different instances of “Service Gone Wrong”—that is, ways we can stumble into an attitude that fails to glorify God.

I. A THEOLOGY OF SERVICE

In 1 Peter 4:10-11, we read:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

This passage provides a theology of service within the church. From it, we learn five simple but important truths:

1. Each Christian has received a gift.
2. The gift is not deserved, but is all of God’s grace.
3. We are responsible to use that gift.
4. We should use it for the benefit of others and for the glory of God; and
5. We should serve through God’s strength.

Paul makes another important point in Ephesians 4:12, where he says that all these gifts are given “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.”

All these gifts are for the strengthening the *whole* body, not just various parts. We are to minister to each other with the goal not just of helping individuals, but of helping the *whole body* grow to maturity in Christ. Ultimately, we are striving for unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

That’s why God gives gifts to his people—not primarily as a means of fulfillment for us as individuals, but for the maturing of his church.

“Service Gone Wrong” #1

That brings up the first example of “Service Gone Wrong”—the person who feels entitled to serve in the way he thinks he’s been gifted, and who fears that he cannot find fulfillment if he’s not serving in that particular way. That person has misunderstood this passage and the whole idea of service as well. Service in the church is for the strengthening of the body, not for our own personal fulfillment.

II. HOW SHOULD WE SERVE IN A WAY THAT PROMOTES UNITY?

Given this goal of unity, what should characterize our service in the church? What should be our motive for serving and giving of ourselves?

First, Serve in God’s Strength and with Great Joy

God is not finally interested in his people merely doing good deeds, but rather doing good deeds in a spirit of joyful dependence on him. Remember 1 Peter 4:10, where Peter says, “If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength of God.”

Imagine two people considering whether to help with a clean-up at the church. One says, “Oh, I suppose I’ll go. It’s worth a few brownie points with the leaders. Besides, I’m pretty good at that sort of thing; I’ll be able to impress the folks there.” So he comes and grumbles about the tools, and talks on and on about his abilities. He works, but his attitude lacks the joy and gratitude that ought to characterize Christian service, and is marked by a selfish desire to impress others.

The other person, who—just to make it more interesting—has been down with the flu lately, says “Man, I’d love to go and help clean the church, but I’m just not feeling up to it. Maybe I could just go and talk to people and encourage them. Or maybe I could just pour coffee.” So he prays, and as it turns out he feels well enough (and non-contagious enough) to go and help with the clean-up. He does the best he can with a rag and broom. He’s not out to impress anyone. He’s there because it gives him joy to be working with God’s people.

As these two (perhaps somewhat extreme) examples highlight, what matters to God is not merely *that* we use our gifts, but *how* we use them—in cheerful reliance on him. This is the attitude we should have when we give our time, money, or energy to the church. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, we read:

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Of course, too often we *don’t* give cheerfully, but merely out of guilt or compulsion. But Scripture exhorts us to give joyfully because it allows us to participate in the building up of God’s kingdom.

“Service Gone Wrong” #2

That’s “Service Gone Wrong #2”—serving because of guilt rather than because of gratitude and recognition that our service is building God’s kingdom.

What does guilt-driven service say about God? It says that we are serving not because we *want* to, but because we *have* to. It’s the difference between letting your perfume-laden aunt kiss you when you’re a kid (because you’re supposed to), and joyfully enduring a long journey to visit loved ones when you’re an adult (because the reward is worth more than the cost).

Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 8:2-3 how the Macedonian churches gave in just this kind of gracious spirit:

Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

What a great description! The Macedonian Christians *urgently pleaded* for the privilege of serving. Our service should be characterized by the same kind of joyful attitude. Moreover, we should try to cultivate this attitude by

preaching the gospel to ourselves, and by thinking of service to others as a high privilege, an opportunity to be involved in advancing God's kingdom.

What If We Don't Feel Joy?

Now this may raise a question in your mind. What if we don't have this attitude? What if our service is cold or partly motivated by guilt or fear of man? Should we stop giving? Would it be hypocritical if we continued to serve?

No, not if our goal is to drown our bad motives with good deeds, rather than to pull the wool over people's eyes. It's all about our motivations, finally. If we've become content with our cold heart and just want to fool people into *thinking* we're thrilled to be serving the church, then we are indeed hypocrites. But repenting from coldness of heart may very well mean throwing ourselves into service and praying that God will give us joy.

Second, Never Believe that You Are Useless for Service

One obstacle to a church full of joyful service is when its members are hamstrung by a feeling of uselessness. That can lead to envy of others or even discontentment with God himself. Paul directly rejects this idea of uselessness in 1 Corinthians 12, where he again uses this wonderful image of a body with many members.

Paul explains that the body of Christ depends on diversity. God has gifted church members in many different ways, and when we compare ourselves with others, we are actually resisting that God-ordained diversity. Thus Paul says in verse 17:

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?

And then in verse 19: "If they were all one part, where would the body be?"

The answer is simple: The body wouldn't exist! What makes Christ's body function at all is the diversity of gifts among its members.

Moreover, Paul reminds us that the way gifts are apportioned is a matter of God's sovereignty. In verse 18, he says:

But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

God designs the parts of the body just as he wants, and he does it for our good. If we say we are useless or wallow in discontent, we are second-guessing the way God has distributed his gifts in the body of Christ.

What does this mean for us? It means we should serve in the church anywhere we can. We should thank God for the gifts he has given us, and we should not feel useless or discontent merely because we're not serving in the way we might *wish* we were. There are so many ways to serve in this church that are crucial to its health, and different parts of the body serve in different but important ways.

This is not just true of spiritual gifts, either, but also of the physical gifts that God gives us. Some members are particularly rich in time, others in money or relationships.

- If you are rich in time—single members, for example—build up the body by helping members move, by babysitting, or by going on mission trips.
- If you're rich in money, support the church financially, both regularly and for special projects and unexpected needs. Keep a special eye out for members who have financial needs that are sapping their joy and hindering their own service.
- If you are rich in relationships—families with children, for example—build up the body by mentoring other members. Invite single members to spend time with your family, or provide a home-away-from-home for college students.

Every member of the body is useful and integral to the church's life. Thus we should be content with the gifts our wise and loving God has chosen to give us.

“Service Gone Wrong” #3

So we come to “Service Gone Wrong #3”—the person who gives up serving because they don't see their contribution as important. We must never understand service to God as valuable primarily because of the temporal result. Service is valuable, whatever the size of its immediate impact, because of what it says about how much we value God. Which did Jesus say was more valuable—the widow's two copper coins or the thousands from the wealthy? (Mark 12:42-44)

Does It Dishonor God to Ask for More Gifts?

But that raises another question. Does all this mean we shouldn't desire other spiritual gifts? If God is the one who gives us gifts according to his good pleasure, does it dishonor him to ask for gifts we do not have now?

No. Scripture says it is good for Christians to earnestly desire the spiritual gifts we don't have. In 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul tells the Corinthians to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts.” The fact is, we can long for spiritual gifts we don't have without regarding the ones we *do* have as useless. We can ask God to give us more gifts without coveting those of others. Again, it's all in the motivation. If we desire more spiritual gifts for our own glory or because we're jealous of others, we are sinning. But if we desire them so that we can serve the church even more, then we are simply asking God to glorify himself in us—and that is a desire every Christian should have.

Third, We Should Use Our Gifts Humbly

In 1 Corinthians 12:14-20, Paul admonishes those members who might feel useless or discontent with their gifts. But he turns in verses 21 to 26 to exhort those who have been given gifts of greater responsibility to exercise those gifts with humility. In verse 21 we read,

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!”

Those in positions of greater responsibility or visibility in the church must not carry out their duties with an air of superiority. Unity in diversity is impossible without Christ-like humility, and it is those who have the most responsibility in the church who must show the most humility. When that's lacking, people can become territorial, bitter, and suspicious. The results are devastating for the unity of the church.

We should recognize and honor the service of all the church's members, no matter how visible or invisible, no matter how significant or insignificant their service may appear to be. A great way to do this is to acknowledge people's service, particularly in areas of ministry that may be unseen or behind the scenes. Send a card of encouragement, or thank someone for their work—whether it's running the sound system, duplicating audio tapes and CDs of sermons, or working in the nursery.

“Service Gone Wrong” #4

Service can go horribly wrong here when people grumble that others in the church aren't doing their fair share. Where does that attitude come from? At some level, it comes from a poor understanding of how God values service in the church. Maybe it comes from pride, a confusion of the *value* of service with the *quantity* of service. On the other hand, maybe it comes from a heart that is too quick to disdain and condemn those who are missing out on God's great gift of service, and not quick enough to show such people compassion and help them find their place in the body.

Fourth, we should serve because it glorifies God and produces many other benefits.

Our service to the church yields several benefits—for ourselves, for others, and most importantly for the glory of God.

Giving Money Glorifies God

Take for example the service we render by giving financially to the church. When we give faithfully, God is glorified because we are simply returning to him what is already his. “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it,” says Psalm 24:1.

That’s why we talk about money not so much by focusing on tithing, but to focus on lifestyle. What we do with *every cent* of our money says something about our view of God and what he means to us. With that view, we should give as much beyond the tithe as we can.

Giving Money Enables Good Deeds

Giving faithfully also glorifies God by enabling good deeds to be done.

- The money you give allows the church to support church planting in this area and around the world.
- It supports the regular preaching of the Word of God.
- It pays staff so they can serve us without having to work outside the church to support their families.
- It helps the church to build up and encourage members, providing for the needs of those members who are less fortunate through a benevolence fund.

In these ways—and many others—unity is promoted in our church as we share the money and possessions God has given us. Indeed there is no clearer example of this than in Acts 4:32-37, where the believers were sharing everything with each other.

Giving Money Benefits the Giver

Finally, our giving also benefits us. In Malachi 3:10, the Lord says:

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.

This is an amazing challenge from God. It isn’t a guarantee of getting rich. It’s a guarantee that God will give us all we need to abound in every good work. Don’t just think of this verse in terms of money, either. Take risks to serve God and his church. You will find that you are far more conservative in your estimation of your ability to give than your all-powerful God is!

It’s worth noting, too, that giving faithfully also helps us to control our spending on things that may not be good for us. There is an almost infallible human rule: Spending expands to fill income. If you make more, you buy more, and the things you buy have to be stored and repaired and insured.

One way to work against the tendency to desire more and more from this world is to make sure that as our income grows we give a greater and greater percentage of it to advance the kingdom.

John Wesley was one of the great evangelists of the 18th century, born in 1703. In 1731, he began to limit his expenses so that he would have more money to give to the poor. In the first year his income was 30 pounds. He found he could live on 28, and so gave away two. In the second year his income doubled to 60 pounds, but he held his expenses even, so he had 32 pounds to give away. In the third year his income jumped to 90 pounds, and he gave away 62. In his long life, Wesley’s income advanced to as high as 1,400 pounds in a year, but he rarely let his expenses rise above 30 pounds. Well, this baffled the English Tax Commissioners so badly that they investigated him in 1776, insisting that a man of his income must have some silver dishes somewhere that he was not paying excise tax on!

“Service Gone Wrong” #5

So there is “Service Gone Wrong #5”— the person who serves only slightly because their heart is captured by the world. As Christians, we should take care that our minds remain set on the things of heaven, not on the things of this world.

III. PERSEVERING IN DOING GOOD

Let’s close with two final points about service in the church.

First, Persevere in Service Through Christ’s Power

Paul warned his readers in 2 Thessalonians 3:13: “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good.”

Why does he warn of this? Because it happens often. People tire in their service. When year follows year and weariness sets in, there may be a temptation to pull back or even stop serving altogether.

When that happens, fall back on your call to be a servant. Make sure your service is fueled by prayer and a healthy dose of God’s Word. Just as food provides the fuel necessary for our physical well-being, prayer and God’s Word provide the spiritual nourishment that fuels our service. When we remind ourselves of God’s goodness, and of what he has done for us in Christ, we are re-energized to serve him.

It is when we are spiritually dry that our service becomes just another chore, and we become weary and discouraged. Service stops being the fruit of the Spirit and becomes the works of the flesh. So ignite your heart and mind to service with thoughts of God’s grandeur and grace.

“Service Gone Wrong” #6

That brings us to our last instance of service gone wrong—exhausting ourselves by trying to serve in our own strength, rather than serving out of growing and vibrant relationship with God. There is a fight to be fought in the Christian life. But it is not the struggle to serve as much as we can in our own strength. The fight is to grow in the knowledge and love of our Lord, to be satisfied in him, and then to serve out of the overflow of all that—from a heart filled with a deep love for God and a desire to serve because it brings great joy.

Second, Look for Opportunities to Serve in this Church

As you think about serving the church, know that there are countless opportunities. Here are just a few:

- Serve in the children’s ministry.
- Give rides to seniors.
- Help with the college ministry or the youth group.
- Show hospitality by setting up the snacks after the service.
- Write cards of encouragement.
- Greet visitors.
- Volunteer to help copy sermon tapes and CDs.
- Help set up for weddings and funerals.
- Have people over for dinner.
- Talk with the awkward person after the Sunday morning service.
- Build relationships with people who struggle to form relationships.

These are great ways to build up God’s church and bring glory to God’s name.

IV. CONCLUSION

For almost two thousand years, God’s people have faithfully served in the church. They have been driven by a love of God and a desire to glorify him. We are a people who are driven to serve because the Lord Jesus Christ has served us in unfathomable ways. May we be quick and zealous to serve each other in this church; may our service flow from a passion for Christ; and may it be characterized by great joy and thanksgiving.

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Worship: Praising God in Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 12

What is worship? What does it mean to worship God? And what does worship have to do with the unity that should exist in the body of Christ?

There is a strong connection between worship and unity. For one thing, worship is one of the sweetest and most valuable fruits of the unity we’ve been discussing. Also, true worship will naturally foster unity. When we focus our hearts and minds on Jesus Christ, finding our greatest satisfaction in him, the Holy Spirit also fills us with a desire to love those around us. And that contributes mightily to unity.

But if there is such a connection between worship and unity, it’s ironic that worship is so often the cause of *disunity*. Disagreements over musical style are rampant in churches, and far too many Christians are even willing to leave a church because they are not getting a “good enough” worship experience.

Then there are other questions about worship, especially in the context of a congregation. Exactly what is it about corporate worship that makes it different from several hundred individual quiet times happening at the same time and in the same place? What can we do to help others glorify God during our weekly worship service?

We obviously can’t tackle everything there is to say about worship in this class. But it’s important for us to consider how we can help each other toward the ultimate goal of worshipping Christ.

I. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

First, we must understand what worship is. Developing a biblical definition of worship is not easy. There is no one-to-one correspondence of any Greek word to our English word “worship.” It’s clear, however, that worship extends far beyond what goes on in a church building on a Sunday morning—and certainly far beyond praise in the form of song.

Worship in Spirit and Truth

One of the most important biblical passages about worship is John 4, when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well. After Jesus alludes to the sin in her life, she invites him (as a diversion) into a debate on worship. Should believers worship in Jerusalem, as the Jews said, or at the twin mountains Gerizim and Ebal in Samaria? Jesus responds by telling her that one day worship will not be constrained to either place (verse 21), and then he says something quite remarkable:

A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:23-24)

The words “in spirit” and “in truth” are important for understanding true worship.

- “In spirit” means that true worship is not limited to some physical location, whether a church or a temple. Worship takes place in the human heart—the human spirit—and is not confined to any particular “holy” place.
- “In truth” means that true worship takes place by means of the One Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is called the “true vine,” the “true manna,” the “true Shepherd,” the “true temple,” the “true Son.”⁶

Worship in the New Testament

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p. 37

Other New Testament passages also teach about worship. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (10:31). Thus worship is a matter of a Christian’s whole life, not just one “holy” time of the week.

To the Romans, Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (12:1). Christ, the perfect Lamb, is the one sufficient sacrifice for us, and his death fulfilled the Old Testament temple worship system. Thus the sacrifices we offer now are not burnt offerings; rather, we offer every aspect of our lives to God. We are called to offer our whole selves to the Lord, always and continually.

Indeed, worship is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. Revelation 14:7 sums up the demand God makes of the human race: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.”

Defining Worship

So then, how might we define worship? D. A. Carson defines it like this:

Worship is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, *human worship* of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, *Christian worship* is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers. Such worship therefore manifests itself both in adoration and in action, both in the individual believer and in *corporate worship*, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation.

Tim Keller defines worship simply as “obedient action motivated by the beauty of who God is in himself.” In other words, it is something much more than being moved in our affections, but it is certainly not less.⁷

Given all this, here are five things we can say about the nature of worship (unpacking some of that dense Carson quote):

First, worship is God-centered. It is our proper response to the magnificence, the splendor and majesty of God’s character—a God who is, as Carson writes, delightfully worthy” of our praise. Worship goes beyond simply *knowing* what God is like; it means that we take *delight* in the perfection of his attributes.

Second, worship is Christ-centered. We see this very clearly in Revelation 5, where the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the slain Lamb, is the only one in creation who can open the scroll of history. So Christ “stands in the very center of the throne,” one with God himself (v.6), and is praised as the one who was slain, who is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. From then on in the book of Revelation, worship is addressed “to him who sits on the throne *and to the Lamb.*” Worship is no less Christ-centered than it is God-centered.⁸

Third, worship is Spirit-enabled. Paul says it most clearly in Philippians 3:3—“For it is we who are the circumcision, *we who worship by the Spirit of God.*” In its own power, the human mind is incapable of perceiving or delighting in the excellencies of God. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates us, gives us spiritual sight, and brings us from spiritual death to life. When we worship, we do so not by our own power, but by the Spirit’s.

Fourth, worship encompasses our entire lives. Worship is not merely singing praises to God; it involves both adoration *and* action. Worship does not end with what we *say*, but includes what we *do* as well.

⁷ *Worship by the Book*, p. 204.

⁸ *Worship by the Book*, p. 42

Fifth, worship is delight in the beauty of God and of Christ. It is not delight in the *experience* of worship. In our evangelical culture, *worship* too often refers to the emotions we experience while we sing about God, and we can end up adoring that experience more than we adore God. True Christian worship involves both the mind and the emotions. Thus, if our worship of God is so emotional as to be devoid of thought—or so cerebral as to be devoid of passion—then we are not truly worshipping. True worship is both thoughtful *and* passionate. True worshippers worship in spirit *and* truth.

II. WHAT IS CORPORATE WORSHIP?

So what about corporate worship? Is it simply worshipping God with a group of people? Does it matter what we do in corporate worship?

What if our church decided to go hiking together in the mountains every other Sunday morning, instead of gathering in this building? We'd still be assembling together, and we'd be worshipping God, too. So would that qualify as corporate worship? Or what about a church picnic—is that corporate worship? After all, we're doing things for the glory of God, and we are doing them together as a congregation.

But no, surely there's something more to corporate worship than that.

Doing What God Wants Us To Do

The fact is, corporate worship is not simply doing worshipful things together as a church. It is doing the things God *wants us to do* when we are gathered together. This couldn't be clearer in the teaching of Scripture:

- First, there is a great difference between us and God. He is infinite, all-powerful, and all-knowing. We are finite, frail, and ignorant. Thus we cannot know who he is unless he reveals himself to us, nor can we understand *what kind* of worship will be pleasing to him unless he tells us.
- Second, we are sinful to our core. Not only are we incapable of determining what will please God in worship, but without divine guidance, our hearts would naturally tend *away* from true worship, not toward it.
- Third, God cares very much about the *way* in which we worship him.
 - Even at the very beginning, God looked with favor on Abel's offering but rejected Cain's (Gen. 4:4-5).
 - In the second commandment, God prohibited worship through images, making it clear that he alone regulates how he will be worshiped (Ex. 20:4). When the people made the golden calf in Exodus 32, they didn't intend it to be *another* God. They were worshipping the God "who brought them up out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4-5). However, they were worshipping Him in a way he had forbidden, and the consequences were disastrous (Ex. 32:19-28).
 - When Nadab and Abihu offered up "unauthorized fire" to the Lord, "contrary to his command," God struck them dead (Lev. 10:1-3).
 - When Uzzah reached out to steady the ark, his intentions were good. Yet he was trying to "serve God," so to speak, in a way that God did not want to be served. "Therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark" (2 Sam. 6:7).
 - Jesus rejected the worship of the Pharisees, quoting from Isaiah that "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mark 7:7).

The point is that God does not leave us free to improvise in our corporate worship. Indeed he has told us in the Bible what ought to happen when a congregation gathers publicly for the purpose of worshipping God. Here are some of the things we see congregations doing together in the New Testament:

- Publicly reading Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:15, 16)
- Listening to preaching and teaching (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:13)

- Sharing the Lord's Supper and celebrating Baptism (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11)
- Encouraging each other and praising God in song (Eph. 5:19).
- Praying together (Acts 2:42)
- Publicly confessing our faith together (1 Tim. 6:12)

And of course, all these elements should be infused with the truth of Scripture.

Therefore, we might say that *corporate worship is a congregation's act of praising God together through the forms and elements commanded and exemplified in Scripture.*

Worship is Not Singing

One important implication of all this is that corporate worship is much more than singing, as when people say, "Now that we're done worshipping, let's listen to the preacher." In fact, the *center* of our corporate worship—the *most* important worship we do—is the hearing from God through his preached Word. Of course singing is a part of our worship, and God has made us in such a way that music deeply engages our hearts and stirs our affections. That's why Scripture commands us to do it. But while singing is worship, we should never fall into the trap of thinking that worship is singing.

III. HOW CORPORATE WORSHIP IS UNIQUE

What does corporate worship do that our own private worship does not? There are many things, of course, but here are four:

First, Corporate Worship Displays our God-Glorifying Unity

Personal quiet times are wonderful and worshipful times, but there is something special about gathering publicly with the entire church and praising God together. By singing, praying, reading and preaching Scripture, and confessing our faith *together*, we show the world in a unique way that we are united by our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a bitter irony here, however, because the corporate worship time—which ought to be a church's greatest display of its unity in Christ—often becomes one of the biggest points of division in the church's life! People insist on hearing their own favorite style of music; they complain that they "can't worship" because this or that is happening in the service; and they privately seethe because the service isn't meeting this or that felt need. For something that is supposed to reflect unity in Christ, the public worship service can become an astonishing source of selfishness and strife.

How do we fight against that? How do we make sure the corporate worship time remains a reflection of God's glory and our unity in Christ, rather than an occasion for strife? Very simply, we must hear what Paul commands in Philippians 2:3-4: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others." In other words, we must submit to one another, love one another, and serve one another for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Second, Corporate Worship Allows Us to Help Each Other in Worship

One of the great advantages of worshipping together as a church is that we can help each other to grasp the glory of God and to respond joyfully. That happens in the structure of our worship services, in the musicians' playing their instruments, in the swell of voices as we sing together, in the work of men who have studied hard to prepare a sermon, and in other ways as well.

Here are a few things we can do to help each other worship God when we gather together:

- Regularly attend the services.
- Sing joyfully and loudly.
- Discuss the sermon after the service.
- Express joy to each other during the service.
- Welcome those around you who are unfamiliar.
- Be attentive; take notes during the sermon.

- Foster a culture of prayerfulness.

The author of Hebrews tells us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). That certainly includes helping each other to worship.

Third, Corporate Worship Is Edifying

Third, corporate worship is an opportunity for us to edify each other. You might be surprised to discover that in Scripture, God is not the only one we address during times of corporate worship. Paul writes to the Ephesians, for example, “Speak to *one another* with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19).

When we sing on Sunday morning, or read Scripture, or pray, we are communicating not only to God but also to each other. Why is this important? Because we are weak people, who need constant reminding of the great truths of Scripture. As Peter wrote, “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have” (2 Peter 1:12). We need to be reminded to persevere in this life, and our corporate worship time is perhaps the most important way we do that for each other.

Finally, Corporate Worship Offers a Taste of Heaven

It’s often been observed that the Bible begins in a garden but ends in a city. Heaven is the place where the whole community of God’s people will dwell with him forever, praising his name and delighting in his glory.

Corporate worship is a snapshot of that experience—one we can appreciate in this life. The author of Hebrews paints a beautiful picture of what awaits us:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (12:22-24)

When we come together in worship on Sunday morning, we catch a glimpse of the glory of that final congregation in heaven. That’s when heaven feels most real, and the things of God feel most valuable.

IV. CONCLUSION

Despite the brokenness of this world, we are made for heaven—and the more we act in light of that truth, the better we will use this life for the glory of God. Thus we need to be reminded, every Sunday, of what it will be like to praise God forever with his people.

Life can be difficult, and when we walk through hard times, our Lord’s promises and the final dwelling he has prepared for us can seem far away, almost like a fairytale. So savor the moments when you are surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ who are enraptured with his beauty. Relish those times when heaven feels real, because you know that you will worship with these brothers and sisters—and millions more—for all eternity.

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Evangelism: A Harvest of Unity

“Living as a Church”—Class 13

Christians today often see evangelism as either 100 percent the job of the church or 100 percent their own job. So either they structure church life around the needs and interests of non-Christians and then invite people to church; or they see the church’s job as training Christians to share their faith with family and friends.

The problem with the first model is that the church is not fundamentally an evangelistic outreach. It’s a community of Christians striving for holiness and maturity in Christ. Thus if Sunday morning is treated as nothing more than an evangelistic appeal, we will fail to grow and mature as a church, which will ultimately stifle evangelism.

The second model is no better, though, because the church *is* one of God’s primary tools for evangelism. Evangelism is not just an individual activity; it is a *corporate* one. Throughout the Bible and the history of the church, God has used the witness of the church to draw people to himself.

I. THE CORPORATE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

The church’s corporate witness is a common theme in the New Testament. Think of Peter’s description of the church in 1 Peter 2:9. The people of God are a “chosen people,” “a royal priesthood,” and “a holy nation,” whose purpose is to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Think also of Jesus’ words in John 13:35—“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The early church saw this in action:

All the believers were together and had everything in common . . . And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44, 47)

And Acts 4 says:

All the believers were one in heart and mind . . . with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:32-33)

Indeed the grand witness of Christ in the world is the church. As Christians, we are called to live our life together in such a way that the world sees the reign of God in our community. For all that the world may see in the life of an individual Christian, the clearest picture of God’s character and will for human beings is always the church—a community of God’s people bound together in love for Christ and for each other.

One of the most colorful early church scholars was a North African by the name of Tertullian, who lived from around 160-225 A.D. Tertullian wrote his famous work *Apology* in order to defend Christians against slanderous charges being made against them. In that work he noted the unity of Christians, saying:

We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope.

He then noted how the church’s love impacted unbelievers around them.

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another.

A conspicuous, congregational love in a loveless world will not be ignored. By living out the gospel as a distinct community, the church displays to the world the gospel’s transformative power.

II. THE UNIQUE POWER OF A CONGREGATIONAL WITNESS

So how does that happen? What about our community compels an unbelieving world? Put another way, what does the church contribute to the whole picture of the gospel that can’t be communicated by an individual? Here are five ways our life together can further and empower evangelism.

First, Christian Unity in the Church Is a Powerful Witness to the World

The life of the church shows Christian unity to the world in a way that personal evangelism cannot. Jesus said the world would believe our message when they saw our unity. In John 17:20-23, Jesus prayed,

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In a world full of war and constant conflict, the supernatural unity of a church family bears witness to the power of the gospel. It's much easier for someone to dismiss your individual testimony than it is to discount the testimony of an entire group of people living together in unity under Christ.

One implication of this is that we should always be careful to protect and preserve unity in our church. Of course there are times when you will be forced to decide between unity and a host of other good things—sound doctrine, holiness, love, and so forth. But when you are forced to make those decisions, keep in mind that breaking unity has effects on the church's witness. Your relationships with other Christians in this church can impact the reputation of Christ in this city.

Second, Christian Love in the Church Is a Powerful Witness to the World

Francis Schaeffer calls the love of Christians for each other the ultimate answer, the "final apologetic," that we can give to the world. What marks us out as Christians in the eyes of the world—more than sound doctrine, more than passion in worship—is our love. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples," Jesus said, "if you love one another" (John 13:35). When Christians love each other, it is a reflection of how God has loved us in Christ.

Our love is often shown in good deeds. So in Matthew 5:16, Jesus says "Let your light shine before men, that they may *see your good deeds* and praise your Father in heaven." Similarly, Peter states in 1 Pet. 2:12, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Christians' good deeds are a window through which the world comes to see and glorify God.

Third, Christians in the Church Can Help Each Other Witness

Another great advantage of evangelism in the context of a congregation is that we help each other witness. As we've already seen, God has given Christians all kinds of different gifts. That diversity can be invaluable in the task of evangelism. One member may be particularly good at initiating a conversation with a non-believer. Another might have a particularly powerful testimony. Yet another may be gifted at making people feel at ease in the conversation.

In this way, various members of the body support each other in displaying Christ to non-believers. This is a really powerful idea. Talk with people who have become Christians through the ministry of this church. Quite often, an initial contact was made by one person, but then others contributed to the process. Ultimately, the person was converted not through *one-on-one* but through *group* evangelism. Are you beating yourself up over the fact that you can't do all those things well? Well then, team up with other Christians to combine your gifts with theirs.

Of course that initial contact still has to occur. So don't shirk your responsibility to build relationships with non-Christians in order to share the gospel. Once that happens, however, the corporate witness of the church can be a powerful help in communicating the gospel to your non-Christian friends.

Fourth, the Church's Corporate Witness Glorifies God in a Unique Way

God is uniquely glorified when we bear witness to him together. An assembly of believers can give glory to God with greater volume and variety than the individual can alone. The broader the testimony, the more God is glorified.

Imagine you're out at dinner or a sporting event with a group of Christians from the church, and there are one or two non-Christians in the group. An opportunity arises and you begin talking about how you became a Christian. One person talks about how God used a difficult event in her life to draw her to Christ. Another person talks about being raised in a Christian home. God is uniquely glorified by this type of congregational witness because it testifies to the countless ways that he extends his saving grace. Ultimately, it presents the non-Christian with a richer picture of how God works in the world than any picture you can present by yourself.

Fifth, Christians Work Together Through the Church for Global Missions

Christians can work together through the church to advance the gospel around the world in a way that individuals cannot. In the local church, Christians can pool their wisdom, experience, financial resources, and prayers, directing them all to the common purpose of making God's name known among the nations. Proclaiming the gospel around the world should be an end and purpose for every local church.

III. HOW TO USE THE CHURCH'S WITNESS

How then can we take full advantage of the church in our evangelism?

First, Expose Non-Christian Friends to Our Life as a Church

Invite non-Christian friends and co-workers to church, and plan ahead to make good use of the church body during their visit. Ask a couple of other members to pray for your friend. Invite your friend to a service where there's a baptism so he can hear a testimony of how a life has been changed (which is one of the reasons our church has people being baptized give their testimonies). Look at the sermon text in advance so you can discuss it with your friend before and after the visit. Arrange with a few other members to go out to lunch after the service, so your friend can interact with a group of members.

For that matter, help to make this church a place where members will be excited to bring their non-Christian friends:

- Make your love and care for other Christians evident.
- Greet visitors warmly and quickly, and express an interest in their lives.
- Invite visitors to lunch after the service or to some other social event where they will be able to interact with the body.

Here's a challenge to you: After the service today, look for people who are standing by themselves and don't seem to know anyone. Strike up a conversation with them. They might be Christians, or they might be non-Christians. But either way, you'll be welcoming them with Christ's love.

Second, Talk to Non-Christians About Our Life in the Church

Sometimes it's just not possible to introduce our friends and colleagues to our life in the church. Perhaps schedule, location, or circumstances make it impossible for them to attend a service or a social event right now. Or maybe they're not interested. How can we use the witness of the church under these circumstances?

The simple answer is to talk to them about the church! People naturally talk about the things that are most important to them. As Christians, that means we will want to talk about this church. Look for ways to talk about activities or ministries that you're involved in. Talk about a sermon you heard that addressed an issue of particular interest to your friend.

Maybe it's as simple as asking your co-worker about his or her weekend. That's a great way to get to know more about that person, and perhaps even gain an insight into their mindset and worldview. And then maybe your friend will ask about your weekend, too. If so, don't just talk about the game you went to on Saturday. Talk about the church! Sometimes, that exchange will naturally lead into a conversation about the gospel.

IV. REFLECTIONS ON THIS COURSE

As we come to the end of this course, let's reflect a bit on the church and our lives together in it. This class has been about living together as a church—how we as members can promote the unity that protects our doctrine, safeguards holiness, displays the wisdom of God, encourages, exhorts, teaches, promotes evangelism, and communicates the character of our merciful God to the watching world.

God's Purpose for the Church

Ephesians 3:10 tells us that the church stands at the very center of God's purpose in the world:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The glorious mission of the church is to display before all the heavenly hosts the remarkable wisdom of our God, and we can take comfort in knowing that not even the gates of hell will prevail against it in that mission. One day, the whole world will bow before our God in worship and praise. Every eye will behold him, robed in splendor's majesty, and every tongue will praise him for his glorious work in redeeming a people for himself.

But we're not there yet. For now, God has left the task of displaying the glory of his *perfect* character to the very *imperfect* people of his church.

The question of how that can happen has been the focus of this class. Particularly, our goal has been to understand the opportunities and responsibilities that we *as church members* have in pressing toward that goal. Above all, it is our unity that displays the power of the gospel to a watching world. Just as God's wisdom was displayed in the early church by Jews and Gentiles coming together as members of one body, so it is displayed in our church today when people who are different in so many ways unite in the body of Christ.

How can we exercise our responsibility to preserve unity within the church? That's been the topic of our discussions for the last thirteen weeks, but let me highlight two points as a summary of our time together:

First, Preserve the Gospel Message

This is our most important responsibility as Christians—and as church members. Whether we are members of this church or another church, we should always make sure that the church's teaching and preaching is true to Scripture. Remember that in the New Testament, when error slipped into a church's teaching, the apostles did not blame the preacher. They blamed the congregation (2 Tim. 4:3).

Second, Love One Another

In Christ, God showed us a love that was sacrificial, selfless, and costly. Now we are commanded to show that same love to others. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 says this:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

This is how we should love. Love people who are different from you. Love through your service, your prayers, your encouragement, and your admonishment. Love through your patience, forbearance, and humility. Love by discipling and teaching others. Love by being present at church services. Love by using your spiritual gifts to build up the church. Love by clothing yourself with kindness, compassion, warmth, and generosity toward others. And do it all for the sake of Jesus Christ.

That kind of love is a great witness to the gospel. It promotes unity, strengthens the body, and most importantly, displays God's glory. That is because you are incapable of loving in that way by your own strength. You were a sinner in rebellion against a just and all-powerful God, but God in his mercy changed your heart, forgave you of your sins, filled you with his Spirit, and enables you now to love other people in a way that glorifies him.

V. CONCLUSION

Human history began in a garden with the fellowship of a husband and a wife. It will culminate, as we see in the book of Revelation, in a city—an eternal society of light in which God himself is personally present. The perfect fellowship of Eden will be restored, and God’s people will enjoy a perfect intimacy with him made possible only by Christ’s work of redemption and the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence. The garden has become a city. Faith gives way to sight. Thus, in that city, God’s people will enter fully and eternally into the love of God.

Believe it or not, the church on earth today presents a true, if imperfect, picture of this coming reality. Our calling in the nitty-gritty work of church life is to show the world a glimpse of that coming glory.

Most of us live with too little awareness of the enormity of what we are caught up in by belonging to Christ. Most of us don't take enough time to consider how our lives fit into God’s eternal plan for the church, and consequently our lives lack the aroma of eternity. Let’s be motivated today by knowing that our lives in the church are part of God’s eternal plan to display his glory—not just to this world, but to all the heavens.

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God Helps Those Who Help Themselves? Roles & Responsibilities in the Process of Conversion

By Brad Wheeler



“God helps those who help themselves.” Do you remember the first time you heard this “truism”? I first heard it in a church!

Why I remember the sermon I can’t say, but I do remember as a young Christian hearing those words roll right off the pastor’s tongue. No proof was offered, no biblical text cited. The truth seemed self-evident. And I must not be alone. According to George Barna, 68 percent of born-again Christians agree with this statement, and 75 percent of Americans at large.[1]

I have always been suspect of “Christian” polling, so I decided to conduct my own poll at work. I asked ten people, five men and five women, all who claim to be Christians, whether they agree with the statement. The results? Eight out of ten—that’s 80 percent, for the mathematically challenged—agreed with the statement!

Of those eight, four are professing evangelicals, three of whom go to Southern Baptist churches, while the other attends a Christian church. Of the remaining four who agreed but who do not classify themselves as “evangelical,” two are professing Roman Catholics, one is a Methodist, and the other is non-denominational. The two who disagreed? A Reformed Baptist (no surprises here), and an evangelical Episcopalian.

What this means is, four of the six (67 percent) evangelicals agreed with the statement (compared to Barna’s 68 percent). As a Southern Baptist, I sadly observed that all my denominational friends agreed, one of whom is the wife of a husband in ministry. Perhaps Barna is right after all.

SOLA BOOTSTRAPIS

Where does this idea come from? It doesn’t come from the Bible;^[2] it comes from Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. And Franklin and his contemporaries adapted it from one of Æsop’s fables—Hercules and the Waggoner (6th century BC). In the story, a waggoner’s heavy load becomes bogged down in mud. In despair, the waggoner cries out to Hercules for help. Hercules replies, “Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel. *The gods help them that help themselves.*”^[3] It’s rather ironic that a *polytheistic* tale appealing to Greek mythology has now made its way into the pages of Scripture.

What’s the significance of all this? It reveals how most Christians conceive of their relationship with God. To paraphrase, “If I put my shoulder to the wheel, then God will help me.” My preaching professor used to call this *sola bootstrapis* theology. I first move to reform my life, then God will—and perhaps is obligated to—respond and cooperate with me. Which means our relationship with God is both conditional and synergistic.

As Christians considering the topic of conversion, we might ask whether this is how we should appeal to non-Christians? “Put your shoulder to the wheel of salvation, and God will then come to your aid?” Do we summon them to self-activity, where “there is no road to deity except by way of human activity?”^[4]

What exactly is our role and responsibility, and what is God’s role and responsibility, in the process of conversion?

THE ORDO SALUTIS DEFINED

Protestants have historically considered this question in the *ordo salutis* (Latin for the “order of salvation”). The *ordo salutis* “describes the process by which the work of salvation wrought in Christ is subjectively realized in the hearts and lives of sinners. It aims at describing in their logical order, and also in their interrelations, the various movements of the Holy Spirit in the application of the work of redemption.”^[5] It simply seeks to answer those questions that drove Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Namely, how do I find a gracious God, and how do I obtain the benefits of grace acquired by Christ?

Biblical scholars point to passages such as Romans 8:30, “and those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” for biblical evidence.[6] The *ordo* received extensive treatment by the Protestant Scholastics.

Some scholars today eschew the whole discussion, fearing that it turns salvation into a mechanistic process more akin to Aristotelian philosophy than the biblical witness. Though this critique is not without merit, the *ordo salutis* is still helpful. One must simply keep in mind that salvation is a unitary process intimately connected with our union in Christ. “Regeneration, faith, conversion, renewal and so on, after all, here frequently do not denote consecutive components on the road of salvation but sum up in a single word the whole transformation that takes place in humans.”[7] All the benefits are given to the elect at same time. The emphasis is not primarily chronological, but *logical* and *causal*.

THE *ORDO SALUTIS* AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Critical to the *ordo salutis* is the state of man’s condition. The old axiom presents our options: speaking in moral terms, Pelagianism says that man is well, semi-Pelagianism that he is sick, Augustinianism that he is dead. If man is morally well or only partially impaired, then he can cooperate with God’s grace to save himself (Roman Catholicism). But if man is dead in trespasses and sins (cf. Eph 2:1-3, 12), vitiated and impaired not in part but the whole, then he lacks the ability to save himself. Salvation must not be understood as synergistic but monergistic. God alone must take the initiative. He must impart spiritual life, replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (cf. Ez 36:26). Put plainly,

all men are conceived in sin, and born the children of wrath, indisposed to all-saving good, propense to evil, dead in sins, and the slaves of sin; and without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit, they neither are willing nor able to return to God, to correct their depraved nature, or to dispose themselves to the correction of it.[8]

Reflecting upon the human condition it was Cicero who said, “Man is a disaster.” In the historic Protestant understanding, salvation has always and only been a work of God’s wonderful, sovereign, and unmerited grace (cf. Eph 2:8-9).

THE *ORDO SALUTIS* BEGINS WITH GOD

Given man’s perilous condition, the *ordo salutis* must originate with God. “The cause... is not to be ascribed to the dignity (or worthiness) of one nation above another, or to the better use of the light of nature; but to the most free good pleasure and gratuitous love of God.”[9] He is the *efficient* cause.[10] “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots” (Jer 13:23)? Obviously not, therefore, “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn 6:44). The biblical refrain is that “salvation is of the Lord” (cf. Jonah 2:9). God initiates salvation, and he does so on the basis of his love. That is, his love is the *moving* or *impulsive* cause. It is solely to the grace, favor, mercy, good will, and “gratuitous love” of God in Christ that we owe our salvation.[11]

If God is the author of salvation, the Holy Spirit is the *agent* of salvation uniting us to the person of Christ and applying his work to us. “The activity of the Holy Spirit is therefore nothing but an applicatory one. The order of redemption is the application of salvation (*applicatio salutis*).”[12] Just as the Son came to glorify the Father, so the Holy Spirit in turn glorifies the Son, “and he does not stop his activity before he has made the fullness of Christ to dwell in his church and the church has reached ‘the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13).”[13]

The *instrumental* cause or means by which we know salvation is the gospel, the word of God. Salvation comes through the word. Though natural revelation teaches us about God, it alone is insufficient for saving faith (cf. Rom. 1-3). We must encounter Christ personally through his Word (special revelation) and place our trust in the objective promises of the gospel (cf. Rom. 10:14-17).

THE *ORDO SALUTIS* IS GROUNDED IN ELECTION FROM ETERNITY PAST[14]

Any discussion of the *ordo salutis* must deal first with the topic of election. Election is a biblical term, so the question is not “do we believe in election,” but what does the Bible mean by the term. First, the overwhelming evidence is that God has “elected” or “chosen” a people for himself. This is seen in the Old Testament, “To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set

his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today” (Deut 10:14-15; cf. Ps 33:12). God’s electing of persons is clearly taught by Jesus in the New Testament, “For many are invited, but few are chosen” (Matt 22:14), and “you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit” (Jn 15:16; cf. Lk 18:6-8).

Second, God’s election of individuals occurred before the foundation of the world. “For he [God] chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph 1:4-6).

This then prompts the question that continues to divide some Protestant circles - namely, is God’s election of individuals *conditional* or *unconditional*? Does God peer down the corridors of time and elect us on the basis of our foreseen faith (conditional), or is our election unconditional and granted to us apart from any foreseen faith or goodness in us? In the former, repentance and faith (i.e. conversion) are fruits of the human will (perhaps aided by prevenient grace) that lead to our election. In this scheme, God’s election of people ultimately hinges on what the individual does, not what God does. God makes *possible* the salvation of all men, but has actually guaranteed and secured the salvation of no man. In the unconditional scheme, God takes the initiative to elect us and declare us as his own. Apart from this, we have no hope.

The biblical evidence supports *unconditional* election. Who is Israel in the Old Testament? The people the Lord, “has chosen... for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6). God uniquely and specifically chose Israel out of all the nations to be his treasured possession. Why? Was it conditioned on the basis of Israel’s faithfulness, goodness, or strength? The following verse gives the answer: “it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you” (Deut 7:7-8ff). The reason given for Israel’s blessed relationship with God...is God. He chose to love. He chose to set his affection upon Israel “above all peoples” despite her weak and meritless condition (cf. Deut 10:14).

In the New Testament, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). We love because he first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). Contrary to human love that depends on the worthiness of the object, God’s choice was not based upon any faith or goodness in us, the objects of his love. Why was Jacob chosen over Esau? Paul writes, “though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call” (Rom 9:10-11). And if any doubt remained about the unconditional nature of election, we read of God “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (v.15-16).

Scripture simply never speaks of faith as the ground, or reason for God’s choosing us. All we know is that his choices, inscrutable as they often are, function to magnify his grace (cf. Rom 9:18, 2 Tim 1:8). Rightly understood, unconditional election in Scripture never leads to despair but encouragement for the believer (cf. Rom 8:28, Eph 1:11, 2 Thess 2:13). It is an overwhelmingly gracious act that highlights the goodness of God (Matt 1:25-30; Eph 1:3-11). Justice demands all die, but in the mercy of God he has chosen to do for men what he did not do for rebellious angels—electing and redeeming some to eternal life. In summary, election is unconditional, gracious, and grounded in eternity past. It is the foundation from which we are now able to discuss the work of redemption in human lives.

THE *ORDO SALUTIS* AND THE APPLICATION OF REDEMPTION

Calling

Logically, the application of Christ’s redeeming work begins with *calling*. This is first presented through the *gospel call*, which is “the offering of salvation in Christ to people, together with an invitation to accept Christ in repentance and faith, in order that they may receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.”[15] The gospel call is a general or universal call, for it is made equally to all. “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30; cf. Matt 22:1-14). It is also a genuine call seriously offered by God. Jesus sincerely weeps and mourns over Jerusalem’s stubborn rejection and refusal of his message (Matt 23:37). God truly desires that all come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9), so that they might receive rest (Matt 11:28; cf. Jn 1:11-12; Rev 3:20).

This raises the rather thorny question of why some believe, and others do not. “Ay, here’s the rub!” Hamlet would say. Synergistic systems teach that either individuals are inherently capable of producing initial faith (Roman Catholic view) to which God necessarily responds in grace, or that God provides all people with an enabling or prevenient grace (Arminian/Wesleyan) that overcomes the effects of the fall. Armed with this prevenient grace some then choose to respond in faith. In other words, prevenient grace is a sufficient grace that only becomes efficient when the sinner cooperates with it. We might say prevenient grace is really nothing more than “the democratization of saving grace.”[16] In either the Roman Catholic or Arminian system, the power to believe or not to believe finally rests with the individual.

Monergism sees God’s election of some as the explanation for why some believe, and others do not. “For many are called (the gospel call), but few are chosen” (Matt 22:14). In our fallen condition we are unwilling and unable to accept the gospel, “for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing” (1 Cor 1:8; cf. Rom 3, Eph 2:1-5). God therefore must work *effectually* in us, willing us to believe. Monergists, therefore, distinguish between a gospel call and an *effectual call*. In the effectual call the Spirit works through the Word to “confirm,” “attest,” and “make manifest” God’s election.[17] For the monergist, to say God’s call is conditionally effectual upon man’s exercise of faith is “tantamount to saying that it is intrinsically *ineffectual*.”[18] Yet in Scripture, the call of God is effectual upon the elect. “Those whom God called, he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom 8:30). “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me *draws* him” (Jn 6:44). It is an effectual call to salvation that brings us into fellowship with Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:9).

The teaching of an effectual call is not without opposition. First, if God’s call upon the elect is effectual and irresistible in that all who are called actually come, why bother with the outward preaching of the gospel call? This is a common objection, but the Bible reminds us that God ordains the means as well as the ends. God in his infinite wisdom and goodness has ordained that the gospel message, preached by human voices and accompanied by the Spirit, is to be the instrument of redeeming grace (cf. Rom 10).

Second, some ask, does not the teaching of an effectual call suggest that God relates to us in an impersonal way? If God is the “cause” or our salvation, and our faith is merely the byproduct or “effect,” in what sense is this relational? Process theology and open theism all level this charge against an effectual call. Love, they argue, does not operate by mere principles of cause and effect, as a matter of God unilaterally turning the will. Love must be mutual, reciprocal, and non-coercive. God must woo his people, not with causal power but with the power of love and persuasion. Though some in classical theism have drifted into a depersonalized Aristotelian Prime Mover conception of God, evangelical Protestants have steered clear. God may bend and determine the will, but never in any way that is incongruous with human nature. God “can and does draw them, by the powerful influence of his grace upon them to himself and to his Son, and this he does without forcing their wills; he sweetly allures, by his grace, to come to Christ and his ordinances; he powerfully persuades.”[19] Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully reminds us that God’s effectual call is one of both energy *and* information. It is not merely a causal but a *communicative* act. In the effectual call God communicates to us through Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. The effectual call is a *speech act*, and is thus deeply personal.[20]

Third, some argue that an effectual call contravenes human freedom. It is manipulative and coercive. Open theist John Sanders goes so far as to call it divine rape, for God forces his will upon the elect. Yet there is no biblical account of one being forced to accept the gospel against his will. No one is brought kicking and screaming into the kingdom. There is nothing violent when the ears of the deaf are miraculously opened so they can hear the sweet voice of the Savior calling them by name. To use another biblical metaphor, God graciously makes the blind see. Is this a malicious, violent act? It is the case that the one illumined is both passive *and* active. Being made to understand, an individual understands and lovingly *embraces* the truth. This embrace is hardly compatible with the notion of divine rape. In summary, “the application of salvation is and remains a work of the Spirit, and is therefore never coercive and violent but always spiritual, lovely, and gentle, treating humans not as a block of wood but as rational beings, illuminating, persuading, drawing, and bending them.”

Regeneration

Whereas calling, particularly effectual calling, is a *word image* of God’s re-creative activity, regeneration is a *renewal image*. In many respects, they are different metaphors for the same work of uniting dead men and women to a living relationship with Christ. Regeneration speaks to our need to be born again, to be renewed and restored. For only in being born again are we able to see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3). It is not optional, but the need of us all: “you must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). This birth is not physical, but a spiritual rebirth prophesied in the Old Testament that renews the inner man after God’s law (cf. Ez. 36).

Just as we are passive in our physical birth, so we are in our spiritual birth. In other words, regeneration is solely a work of God. John says the children of God are those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). Similarly, Peter writes, “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope” (1 Pet. 1:3). In regeneration God replaces our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh so that we who were spiritually dead become spiritually alive. It is obvious, then, that regeneration must precede conversion.[21]

The early Protestants beautifully summarized God’s radical, instantaneous, and supernatural regenerating work at the Synod of Dort.

When God performs his good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, he not only provides that the gospel should be outwardly preached to them, and that their mind should be powerfully illuminated by the Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand, and judge what are the things of the Spirit of God, but he also, by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, penetrates into the innermost recesses of the man, opens his closed heart, softens his obdurate heart, circumcises his uncircumcised heart, infuses new qualities into his will, makes that which had been dead alive.... And that this regeneration...a new creation...which God *without us* (that is, without our concurrence) worketh *in us*.... this by no means...remain in the power of man...regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted; but it is manifestly an operation supernatural, at the same time most powerful, and most sweet, wonderful, secret, and ineffable in its power...so that all those in whose hearts God works in this admirable manner, are certainly infallibly, and efficaciously regenerated, and in fact (*actu*) believe.[22]

Conversion

The result of God’s regenerating work is belief, shorthand for conversion, where the sinner repents of his wrong and turns to Christ in faith. Without regeneration, conversion would be impossible. Lydia’s conversion provides a prototypical example. “The Lord opened her heart” (regeneration), the result being that she believed the gospel (conversion), and was then baptized (Acts 16:14).

Though conversion is distinct from regeneration, the distinction is not so much chronological as logical. In Scripture, there is not a category for one who has been regenerated by the Spirit, and yet becomes converted some time in the future. The two happen effectively at the same time, and yet God’s work logically precedes our response to him in repentance and faith. “The relationship between regeneration, and let us say faith, is like that between turning on the light switch and flooding a room with light – the two actions are simultaneous.”[23] John Gill summarized it well:

“Regeneration is the sole act of God; conversion consists both of God’s act upon men, in turning them, and of acts done by men under the influence of converting grace; they turn, being turned. Regeneration is the motion of God towards and upon the heart of a sinner; conversion is the motion of a sinner towards God. In regeneration men are wholly passive, but by it become active.”[24]

IMPLICATIONS

First, we must keep the word as the focal point of our ministry. It is the divinely appointed means of salvation. It is through the proclamation of his word, not the size of our buildings or budgets, that the Spirit becomes active. Together, the word and the Spirit join in the effective work of salvation. To divorce the Spirit’s work from the word is to begin the aimless trek toward inclusivism and dead orthodoxy.

Second, we ought to be confident in our assurance of salvation “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). What is more comforting, to rest our salvation upon the power of our choice, decision, and faithfulness alone; or to rest it on the sacrificial work of Christ graciously applied to us by the Spirit? Synergistic systems “make everything wobbly and uncertain—even the victory of the good and the triumph of the kingdom of God—because it hangs everything on the incalculable arbitrariness of humans. Standing up for the rights of humankind, it tramples on the rights of God and for humans ends up with no more than the right to be fickle.”[26]

Third, we must make personal appeals! We are the God ordained messengers of salvation. In our appeals there always must be the three necessary components of: *presentation, invitation, and promise*. We must be clear on our presentation (God, man, Christ). We must boldly call for a personal response. And we must honestly hold out the promise of eternal life. In the promise we must always remember that the ground of our eternal life is found in Christ's work, not our decision or a prayer. Our confidence that his work has been applied to us is the evidence of spiritual fruit in our lives (cf. Jn. 15:8, 1 Jn. 2:3-6).

CONCLUSION

Humans always want to be their own saviors. But what distinguishes biblical Christianity from all other world religions is that Christianity is not autosoteric. In Islam, redemption is not a gift but an act. In Buddhism, it consists in mortifying the desire for existence, and "being your own light." Through prayers, sacrifices, ceremonies and right ethical conduct, Pharisaical Judaism and Catholicism present meritorious schemes whereby we earn God's favor.

Christianity knows of no such schemes. Salvation is of grace, from beginning to end. According to the good pleasure of God, the basis of Christ's work, the agency of the Spirit, and the instrumentality of the word, God elects, effectually calls, and regenerates. We are commanded to repent and believe, but this is all in vain if God does not first work in us. That is why faith itself is even called a gift of God (cf. Eph 2:8).

God helps those who help themselves? If so, we are to be pitied above all men. Never has heaven appeared so far away.

Endnotes:

¹ <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=66>

² Boxing fans may remember that Evander Holyfield proudly appealed to the biblical wisdom this statement in an interview after defeating former heavy-weight champion Mike Tyson. He actually went further and said God *can't* help you if you won't help yourself. <http://www.wie.org/j15/holyfield.asp?page=3>

³ <http://www.bartleby.com/17/1/61.html>

⁴ Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics – Vol 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 566-7.

⁵ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprinted 2000), 415-16.

⁶ Murray, John. *Redemption – Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 98-105.

⁷ Bavinck, 589.

⁸ Synod of Dort, 294.

⁹ Synod of Dort, 296.

¹⁰ Contra Demarest (46), this is certainly not an affirmation of hyper-Calvinism, but rather the recognition that if man is dead in trespasses and sins God must first work to effect our salvation.

¹¹ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, The Baptist Faith Series, Vol. 1 (Paris: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Reprint, 1839), 551.

¹² Bavinck, 572.

¹³ Bavinck, 572.

¹⁴ In the following sections, I am indebted to my former theology professor Dr. Stephen Wellum. My framework has been informed by his work, which itself is a reflection of thoughtful Protestants throughout the past centuries.

¹⁵ Hoekema, 68.

¹⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 103.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1559 Edition*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 932-47,

¹⁸ Vanhoozer, 104.

¹⁹ Gill, 550.

²⁰ For a thorough and enlightening discussion see Vanhoozer, "Effectual Call or Causal Effect?" in *First Theology*, 96-124.

²¹ See also Tom Schriener "Does Regeneration Necessarily Precede Conversion?" Accessed on 9Marks website at http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID314526|CHID598014|CIID1731702,00.html.

²² Synod of Dort, 299-300.

²³ Hoekema, Anthony. *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 14.

²⁴ Gill, 546,

²⁵Note Phil. 2:12 “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” follows the indicative of their existing union with Christ and the Spirit (2:1). But even there in v. 12 Paul goes on to ground the imperative by saying, “for it is God who works in you, both to will and work for his good pleasure.”

²⁶ Bavinck, 573.

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Book Review: *The Living Church: Convictions of a Life Long Pastor* By John Stott

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

IVP, 2007, \$17.00, 192 pages*

Reading John Stott's *The Living Church* is like having a conversation with a venerable and godly grandfather. There's no bold new vision. No young man's castles in the sky. You might not even agree with everything he says. Yet all of it commands respect. All of it evinces wisdom. Every single word, every single expression, feels permeated with the deep and calm virtue of a man who has, for more days than can be counted, found his refreshment lying beside the quiet waters of our Lord: Humility. Balance. Carefulness. Love. Tenderness. And somehow, despite the many reasons for cynicism age gives, a childlike Hope.

Overview

The nearly ninety-year-old Stott begins *The Living Church* by observing the phenomenon of postmodernism and the rise of the emerging church. He does not appear threatened by either but instead calls the traditional church to learn from the emerging church and the emerging to learn from the traditional. He also credits Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* as offering an overall vision similar to his own.

In chapter 1, he lists four essential marks of a church based off of Acts 2:42-47: churches should be characterized by learning, caring, worshipping, and evangelizing.

Chapters 2 through 8 then reflect and expand on these four essentials with chapters devoted, respectively, to worship, evangelism, ministry, fellowship, preaching, giving, and impact. He devotes the conclusion to calling for a new generation of Timothys.

And then three interesting historical appendices are included, including one called "Why I am still a member of the Church of England," which gives the answer he provides to anyone who asks him whether he has changed his mind since the famous 1966 debate with D. Martyn Lloyd Jones (his answer: no).

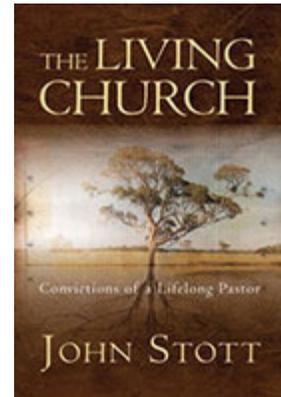
Balanced

Unlike some of the more imbalanced "missional church" formulations, Stott's vision of a living church is directed both upward and outward—toward worship and toward mission. The two wonderfully reinforce one another:

If we truly worship God, acknowledging and adoring his infinite worth, we find ourselves impelled to make him known to others, in order that they may worship him too. Thus worship leads to witness, and witness in its turn to worship, in a perpetual circle (52).

Stott is also mindful of the church's call to both inward and outward care. The chapter on giving presents an exposition of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, which calls Christians to give sacrificially to one another. The very next chapter on impact considers Jesus' call to be salt and light to the world around the church by doing good and bringing the values of the kingdom to bear in every domain of life.

If, in fact, I were to use one word to summarize *The Living Church*, it would be the word "balance." Stott continually looks to strike a balance between two extremes. For example,



- He wants neither the ingrown “religious club” nor the “secular mission (or religionless Christianity); he wants an “incarnational Christianity” that’s mindful of the church’s “double identity”—we’re called simultaneously out of the world and into the world (53-55).
- He encourages churches to articulate the gospel in a way that doesn’t fall into “total fixity,” that is, an over-reliance on certain words or formulae; nor into “total fluidity” by abandoning the gospel’s concrete truths. Rather, we should find the “middle way” that’s mindful of both “content and context, Scripture and culture, revelation and contextualization” (66-68).
- A kind of clericalism that puts preachers on a pedestal and an anti-clericalism that knocks them off (80).
- Even his reason for remaining within the church of England is explained as the middle way between the extremes of “separation or secession” and “compromise and even conformity,” the way he calls “comprehensiveness without compromise” (171-77).

Examples of this kind of dialectic can be found on almost every page. John Stott is clearly the *ultra moderate*, constantly in search of the synthesis. He even states in the preface that what evangelicals need are more “Radical Conservative churches”—radical in responding to culture and conservative in remaining moored to the unchanging truths of Scripture (17). In another place he calls for “holy worldliness” (55)!

And often, his non-threatened, non-strident balancing acts—that is, his ability to find good things from multiple perspectives—struck this young, often overly-strident reader as the wisdom which gracefully crowns the heads of only those who have walked with God for years.

Beyond this, there are countless places where Stott’s vision of the living church needs to be heard: true worship begins with hearing the word of God (36-37); churches should recover a vision of corporate worship and corporate witness (39-42; 51-52); and so on. He even tells Christians to bring their Bibles to church (37)!

Under Balanced?

If reading *The Living Church* is like having a conversation with a venerable and godly grandfather, offering any critiques about the book feels about the same. Both of my grandfathers were pastors and godly men, whom I respected to no end when they were living, even though both of them held to views that I do not embrace, as with the one grandfather who was a pastor with the Salvation Army. Critiquing such sages for our differences would almost seem irreverent.

Still, as with my grandfather who belonged to the Salvation Army, there are several places where I see things differently than the older and far wiser Stott. To note a few: I’m not sure it would be advisable for a larger city church to break itself into several homogeneous sub-churches through the week so that Christians can worship both with people like themselves and people different than themselves (42). I wouldn’t follow his attempt to “reconcile” the egalitarian and complementarian positions on female elders by seemingly allowing for them (81-82). I don’t believe “Small groups are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity” (93), and I wouldn’t want to ground the bulk of the church’s fellowship in and through them (ch. 5). And I’m not sure I understand his distinction between a “national church” like the Church of England and a “state church” like the Lutheran state churches on the Continent (169-170).

In fact, sometimes I found myself disagreeing because finding the right “middle way” presumes you have correctly painted the two extremes or two poles to begin with. But what if one end of the spectrum, which sometimes felt caricatured, is the balanced middle of the real and even larger spectrum? Wouldn’t the apparent balance then be an under balance? I wondered this a little bit with his picture of the “religious club” church, or with the “separation” position on the Church of England. The former especially felt a little caricatured.

The Exemplar Pastor-Theologian

Still, my purpose here is not to make much hay from these points of disagreement. Ultimately, I found myself deeply encouraged by the reflections of this life-long pastor, who has been such a clear gift to Christ’s church. Like either of my grandfathers, and probably more so, frankly, I can only beg the Lord to make me such a careful and balanced student of Scripture and such a wise, thoughtful, and loving pastor.

He is one of the exemplar pastor-theologians for our times—a theologian who writes pastorally and a pastor who writes about theology. We have much to learn from him.

Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications at 9Marks and an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

*Page numbers in this review refer to the British paperback version, not the hardback American version, which has 180 pages.

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Book Review: *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture*, By Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson

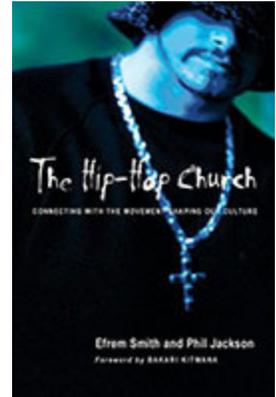
Reviewed by Thabiti Anyabwile

IVP, 2005, 227 pages, \$15.00

No one can dispute the rapid and worldwide expansion of hip hop culture over the last twenty years. It is a cultural phenomenon largely unanticipated, even frightening to some onlookers. Hip Hop culture exerts tremendous shaping influence on products ranging from apparel to automobiles, from fashion to films, and everything beyond.

Overview

Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson in *The Hip Hop Church* suggest that it is now time that hip hop shape the way we do church if we want to reach urban youth immersed in hip hop culture. The authors wish to "move the African American urban church further along in its heart for unchurched youth and young adults growing up in hip hop" (27). At present, the authors see the local church traveling a course to either collision (where the church pronounces anathema on hip hop and oppose it), compromise (where hip hop overruns the evangelistic effort of the church), or co-existence (where the church develops "a theology for engaging hip hop culture" and "models that use elements of hip hop culture to engage those who have been influenced by it"). The authors write with the hope of furthering the last option, co-existence.



The book is organized into three parts. Part 1 attempts to make the case for why the church should care about hip hop. Several reasons for engaging hip hop culture are given: (1) hip hop remains very influential as a worldwide phenomena; (2) the church largely underestimates the depths of this influence; (3) parents are ill-equipped to engage children immersed in the culture; and (4) many youth fail to grasp how deeply they are influenced by hip hop, so "its impact is often more directive than reflective" (p. 34). The authors move from these reasons for engagement to consider Acts 17 as a model for engaging people in hip hop culture.

Part 2 provides a primer for the hip hop novice. If you know little to nothing about hip hop, you'll find this a very easy introduction to digest. The authors write with both a familiarity with the genre and an ease that often expresses itself in personal testimony and anecdote. I found myself bobbing my head as they shared some of their own stories about rap and hip hop. The primer itself includes the definition of rap and hip hop (they're not the same), discussion of blues and spirituals as the seedbed for hip hop art forms, and the post-modern and liberationist underpinnings of hip hop.

Part 3 offers Smith and Jackson's take on bringing hip hop into the local church. The duo begins by recommending the use of "holy hip hop" as an entry point for churches to consider, and as a cultural expression which churches can help shape. They devote a chapter to exploring the links between traditional black sermonic style and the spoken word styles of emcees. They compare hip hop deejays to church worship leaders, and then they make specific suggestions for bringing hip hop into the church worship service.

I would recommend *The Hip Hop Church* to anyone wishing to gain a basic understanding of hip hop as a culture and anyone interested in dialoguing with young people about these themes. You'll find an easy-to-read-and-digest volume suitable as a primer.

Critiques

While Smith and Jackson do present a readable and friendly case for engaging hip hop culture, as pastor I would have three critiques for their approach and recommendations.

First, the book rests on a rather romantic view of hip hop as a whole. Without further definition, the authors claim that we must "entertain the possibility that certain elements of hip hop culture actually have biblical foundations" (p. 36)—an assertion that requires elucidation. Elsewhere the authors contend that hip hop "began to meet certain core needs of a generation before that generation could articulate the needs they had. Some needs in the lives of the urban African American community, in fact, are being met only by hip hop" (p. 80). The authors also claim that hip hop is relevant and real. They accept the authenticity of hip hop, which is only possible by overlooking or downplaying the crass materialism and fantasy lifestyles that the culture holds out as "the good life" to masses of people who don't live that life and will probably never come close. It's difficult to think carefully about appropriating elements of hip hop culture for service to the gospel when discernment seemed lacking.

Second, beyond "reaching youth in hip hop culture," the authors have not developed in the book a clear understanding of what it means to be a youth; nor have they articulated the church's goal in engaging young people. In places, the book seems to settle for simple inclusion of young people in church programs and some amount of youth control or influence over some church practices. For example, the authors maintain that typical adult-run programs "can keep youth from feeling that they have their own space and platform for expression within the church, coming from their own generational experience" (41). Is the end then merely to provide adolescents or youth with the opportunity for generational expression? Space and expression are surely worthy goods, but only in so far as they serve biblical goals for growth and maturity in Christ. The intergenerational activity in the church always aims at maturity in Christ (Titus 2), not the mere expression of generational desire or experience.

Readers would have been helped by a statement of what healthy adolescence looks like and what, then, adolescents are to become. In this age of perpetual adolescence (adult irresponsibility), engagement with youth must be clear-eyed about who adolescents are and the transition they are making to biblical manhood and womanhood. Hip hop culture—along with the rest of the culture—suffers serious confusions on these points, and leaving this unaddressed is a major limitation of the work.

Third, most critically, the authors start with a desire to hold fast to the gospel of Jesus Christ but lose any clear focus on the cross as the book develops. Phil's experience with some youth at a camp had a profound impact on him. The youth decided that some forms of music were hindering their walk and so independently agreed to rid themselves of the music. Reflecting on the event, Phil wrote:

The lesson I learned from the Lord on that day was that *he* changes hearts—I must be faithful to exalt him and teach about him and his ways, and he will do the rest. I learned on that day that I must teach Christ crucified as a lifestyle and not as an addition to anything else. As Christ is lifted up and love for him is cultivated, our appetite to serve and live for him will become unquenchable, and nothing will stand in the way of this hunger. (32)

That was a promising start. But in the end, the recommendations are less gospel-centered and more man-centered than one would hope.

For example, the authors tout a special Friday night service for youth where secular music is played and young people are allowed to slow dance as equivalent to Jesus conversing with the woman at the well in John 4. Jesus was certainly with sinners, but not sinning with them. Not that dancing in itself is sin, but two unmarried people lustfully groping and grinding on one another is. Far too often, strategies that begin with "look how close Jesus was to sinners" end up looking quite unlike Jesus—like youth lustfully slow dancing in a church basement.

In a section on "hip hop theology," the authors criticize "out of touch" pastors and Christians while simultaneously applauding the cultic emphases of members of the Five Percent Nation of Islam—some of whom are prominent hip hop artists. A book recommending major changes in the public worship of Christians must maintain theological discernment and clarity. As the authors moved toward application and recommendation of certain models and methods, regrettably, clarity and discernment were diminished.

Conclusion

The authors are most certainly correct in identifying hip hop as a major cultural force. And they express godly concern for reaching people immersed in this movement, calling the church to find points of contact that advance the gospel. And they do this, in part, by offering a good primer on hip hop for the uninitiated.

But those initiated in both hip hop culture and the church world will find themselves wanting more theological rigor and care when considering strategies for reaching the hip hop generation. Read the book to be more conversant with the young people of your congregations. But I would not recommend it for basic ecclesiological strategy.

Thabiti Anyabwile is the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands and is the author of the upcoming What Is a Healthy Church Member? (Crossway, June 2008).

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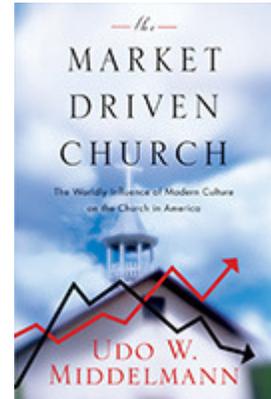
**Book Review: The Market-Driven Church: *The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture on the Church in America*
By Udo W. Middlemann**

Reviewed by Mike McKinley

Crossway, 2004, 208 pages, \$15.99

There's a certain genre of Christian writing that seeks to analyze the problems with American culture from the perspective of a friendly outsider and then observe the way the church has embraced or reflected those problems, like Os Guinness' *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* or David Wells' *No Place For Truth*. Udo Middleman's *The Market-Driven Church* fits more or less into this category.

Middlemann is the president of the Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation and a longtime worker at Swiss L'Abri, so you know that he's a sharp guy and well qualified to offer cultural criticism. In *The Market-Driven Church*, he attempts to give objective observations about the church in America and the state of Christianity in the nation in general. He bemoans the encroachment of marketing in the pulpit and the rise of individualism in the pews.



So, with the introducing out of the way, let's commence the reviewing.

Strengths

First, Middlemann says lots of true things and his take on the evangelical church seems spot-on. The things he doesn't like include:

- Christian trinkets such as mugs, bumper stickers, or T-shirts (44). Amen (although I think my aesthetic objections precede my theological objections). He rightly points out that these things seem to exist only because there is a market for them. They can make the message of the gospel seem familiar, safe, and tame. There is an "incredible lightness" to the church's proclamation of the gospel (67).
- The pragmatic utilitarianism that causes the church to lose interest in deep, meaningful questions (31). In the pursuit of gaudy conversion statistics (shudder), many churches do not encourage seekers to take the time necessary to ponder important questions, instead "questions and doubt as a way to advance and discover is considered suspect and a hindrance to faith and submission" (32).
- Sermons that resemble after-dinner speeches (142). As a result of the decline of faithful exposition of Scripture, most American Christians are "increasingly unfamiliar with the old questions of life and death, of justice and God's purposes for us as human beings... They rarely even know that these questions are part of human inquiry, history, and human obligation" (142).

Second, the book has eye-catching cover art and seems to have been printed by a professional printing house. At 208 pages, the book is substantial enough to make you feel like you're reading a real book, but not so long that you hesitate to begin.

Third, "Udo" is kind of a cool name. It's quirky but not "my parents are on drugs" weird. I'm actually considering it for my next kid.

Weaknesses

Disorganization. First, the book consists of eight chapters with no clear sense of progress or thematic connection. Anecdotes and illustrations are repeated without any indication that the author knows he's already used them. In short, it reads like a collection of essays, though I searched in vain for any indication that that was intentional.

Few constructive suggestions. Third, it's not too hard to criticize, and most of Middelmann's criticisms seem accurate. But the book offers very little in the way of constructive suggestions for change. Even the last chapter of the book (titled "Conclusions") offers little more than the same warmed-over criticisms. It would have been helpful if the author had used his considerable intellect to make a few practical suggestions for how pastors and laypeople could move towards change.

Snobbish. Fourth, maybe this is my problem, but I get tired of all the high-brow criticisms after a while. Some people are simple. That doesn't mean that they can't be faithful Christians or that all American Christians think in a shallow way. Not everyone has the capacity or background that would encourage them to consider the grave matters that consume the philosophers. I think that's okay.

Nothing new. Fifth, this is my biggest criticism of the book. There's simply nothing new or unusually insightful about it. You could easily find these same criticisms made years ago by Messrs. Wells and Guinness and a host of others. I'm not sure that this book adds anything new to the conversation.

Conclusion

The Market Driven Church is not terrible in a *Wild-At-Heart*-net-loss-for-the-gospel way, but it is a disappointment nonetheless. Skip it and go read something by David Wells.

Michael McKinley is the pastor of Guilford Baptist Church in Sterling, Virginia

Book Review: They Like Jesus But Not the Church: *Insights from Emerging Generations* By Dan Kimball

Reviewed by Kevin McFadden

Zondervan, 2007, 271 pages, \$18.99

I enjoyed this book, and I didn't think I would.

This review began as a challenge. While visiting an old friend, I discovered he had recently finished *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*. Our discussion raised some red flags in my mind (I hope it wasn't simply because the word "emerging" is like Pavlov's bell to a young, restless, and reformed seminary student like myself). So I challenged my friend to a book exchange—he would read D. A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, and I would read Dan Kimball's book.

As it turns out, the books are probably speaking past each other, since Carson spends more time challenging the theological and philosophical underpinnings of certain emerging leaders, while Kimball's book simply addresses various cultural stumbling blocks that often hinder our churches in reaching out to (and retaining) younger "emerging generations."

Kimball Argues That...

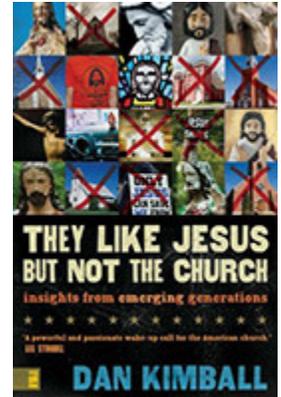
Kimball argues that our world has changed: "we are living in an increasingly "post-Christian" culture" (15). Being a Christian is no longer considered normal in our culture, so we need to think like missionaries—that is, we must listen first because we are on their turf (29–30). Non-Christians today are open to Jesus, although Kimball grants they may not know about his judgment and comments about sin (37). Christians, however, are caught in a social bubble (39–41), concerned about making the church better and our own lives more comfortable rather than caring for people outside the church (41). When Kimball found himself trapped in this bubble, he escaped by scheduling Wednesdays and Thursdays to work outside the church office, studying for his weekend sermon in coffeehouses to be around people and engage them in conversation (47–48).

The heart of the book begins with chapter four, where Kimball introduces us to several of the people he has befriended and interviewed to give us "insights from emerging generations" (Alicia, Duggan, Erika, Dustan, Penny, Gary and Erica, and Maya). Their ages range from late teens to early thirties, and all have different backgrounds, education, and church experience. All of them are open to Jesus, but they do not attend any church. Kimball quotes from them extensively through the book, and he forms his next six chapters around common misconceptions of the church which they all share: (1) They think the church is an organized religion with a political agenda. (2) They think the church is judgmental and negative. (3) They think the church is dominated by males and oppresses females. (4) They think the church is homophobic. (5) They think the church arrogantly claims all other religions are wrong. (6) They think the church is full of fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally.

Kimball suggests responses to these misconceptions throughout but saves a full response for the last few chapters. His most important point is made in chapter twelve, where he uses the familiar "bridge" illustration in which man and God are separated by the chasm of sin. Kimball argues that we have now created another chasm—namely, the Christian subculture (236).

Like I Said, I Enjoyed...

Like I said, I enjoyed the book. It is well-written and rooted in experience. Kimball was planting and pastoring a church when he wrote it, and he was actively involved in pursuing relationships with non-Christians, some of whom have now become Christians. His examples of befriending non-Christians have given me ideas for how I



should pursue similar efforts. Further, I appreciate Kimball's reliance on the Holy Spirit in conversion and his stress on the need for prayer.

That Said, I Think...

That said, I think the premise of this book is misleading. Kimball sets up the church (more specifically, the Christian sub-culture) as the problem, while suggesting that non-Christians actually like Jesus. But is this really the problem? Granted, misconceptions about the church may sometimes be a problem in evangelism, but the non-Christian's real problem is that he or she *actually doesn't like Jesus Christ*. As Paul says, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). John is even clearer: "Everyone who does evil hates the light [i.e., Jesus], and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:20).

Some Christians and pastors need to break out of the Christian bubble to speak with non-Christians about the gospel. Kimball's right about that. But they must understand that they won't be running into open arms, even if people seem open to talk about Jesus at first.

Some Christians should be encouraged to adopt Paul's attitude: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Kimball's right about that too. But in our efforts to reach out there is a fine line between dispelling *misconceptions* about the church that non-Christians don't like and watering down the true message of the church (the gospel) that non-Christians don't like.

For the most part, I don't think Kimball waters down that message, but there are a few places where it feels a little damp. For example, he deemphasizes God's judgment of sin throughout the book, arguing that we should leave judgment to God for those outside the church and instead tell non-Christians "about Jesus and his saving grace rather than judging and condemning them" (106). This is because "most people today have no problem admitting they sin" (238). I agree that most people admit they sin occasionally, and, no, we shouldn't judge and condemn them. However, the non-Christians I know would still say they are essentially good people, and they have little conception of the true nature of their sin—that it's a personal offence against God. Kimball's de-emphasis of sin seems to lead him into some practices in the church that likely mislead non-Christians from seeing the horrible nature of their sin before a holy God (for example, see 160–161). Like Jesus, we must tell non-Christians about their sin as *God* sees it and about *his* coming judgment— together with the hope of the cross. And, until the Spirit works, non-Christians will reject this message as foolishness, even after we've torn down any Christian sub-cultures and become their friends.

With These Caveats, I Still...

With these caveats in mind, I still found the book useful. I would recommend other books over this one for thinking about the practice of evangelism—namely, *Speaking of Jesus* (J. Mack Stiles, IVP) and *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Mark Dever, Crossway). But Kimball's book provides good insight into how some non-Christians think, and readers will be challenged by his excellent diagnostic questions at the end of each chapter. They will also be challenged to study and be ready to teach how the Bible addresses issues like homosexuality and the role women have or play in the church, key issues in our cultural context for presenting the gospel.

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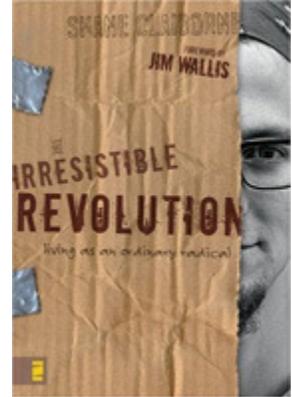
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Book Review: The Irresistible Revolution: *Living as an Ordinary Radical*, By Shane Claiborne

Reviewed by Shane Walker

Zondervan, 2006, 368 pages, \$12.99



Shane Claiborne, the author of *The Irresistible Revolution*, is a man of great moral clarity and bravery. He not only espouses and evangelizes for communal living, public protest, and pacifism, he lives it.

He's not just writing about an irresistible revolution, he's trying to lead one. And while he is not a complete stranger to the radical chic lifestyle, he's willing to poke fun at himself and others for resort conferences and self-absorbed navel gazing. He's articulate, passionate, well educated, and widely read. Quoting with appreciation Che Guevara, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mama T (a.k.a. Mother Teresa), Jim Wallis, Dorothy Day, Gandhi, John Yoder, Bono, Bonhoeffer, Rich Mullins, and the red-letter Christian brigade, he discloses his broad philosophical and theological influences. Tracing the potential trajectory of all these ideas is like observing a cognitive dissonance cluster bomb, and it led me to the conclusion that he truly believes what he teaches: that great social change can come through hokey street theater, the use of sidewalk chalk, and blowing bubbles at bemused police officers (189).

Moral Authority

After reading his report of funky antics as a "theological prankster" (281), it's tempting to pat him on the head and tell him to grow up and buy a shirt with buttons. But this misses how deadly serious he is: he has spent time in jail, risked his life protesting the war in Iraq, and makes every attempt to live his life as consistently around his confused ideals as possible. This alone gives him a great deal of moral authority.

And we must not miss the other reason for his moral authority. Much of his critique of the American evangelical church is accurate. In general, we are fat, insulated, and isolated from the poor and disenfranchised. We have compromised with our culture on the issue of civic religion. Our churches are characterized by the market's brand of statistically-driven pragmatism. And our theology and practice can be an incoherent mess. When our bright young people notice all this, they begin looking around for a way to follow Jesus that is less staid and less compromised, and Claiborne intends his autobiographical manifesto to be a how-to-guide for them.

The Major Problem

The major problem is the cluster bomb I mentioned above. His theology is an unbiblical and incoherent synthesis which might be described as popularized Christian anarchism for young, disaffected, middle-class Americans.

I don't say this to be mean spirited. Claiborne has asked to be critiqued from a theological perspective. He writes, "the answer to bad theology is not no theology but good theology. So rather than distancing ourselves from religious language and biblical study, let's dive into the Scripture together, correcting bad theology with good theology" (169). I agree. If he's accurately following Scripture, we should follow him. If he's not, then he needs to stop the "theatrics of counterterror" (188) and join us in a rather different task.

Warrior King Or Slaughtered Lamb?

To begin with, Claiborne calls Christians to correct our "distorted understandings of the warrior God by internalizing our allegiance to the slaughtered Lamb. . ." I am all for internalizing my allegiance to the warrior God, because he is the slaughtered Lamb. But that's not what Claiborne means, he means something like, don't understand Jesus Christ through the Old Testament's descriptions of an angry God, because Jesus was a pacifist

"Mediterranean peasant revolutionary" (112). This view squares badly with Revelation 6:15-17, where the kings, the generals, the poor, and the free all attempt to hide themselves from Jesus Christ while begging the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

The Bible teaches that Jesus came as the Suffering Servant the first time. When he returns the second time, he will come with his sword drawn as the Warrior God to tread "the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Rev. 19:15). In Claiborne's desire to correct one distortion, he introduces an opposite but equally distorted view. He wants us to exchange Christian militarism for Christian pacifism. But neither can bear the weight of the entire Word of God.

"SELL ALL" OR "HEALTH AND WEALTH"?

Claiborne also calls the church to correct "the health-and-wealth gospel by following the Homeless Rabbi." The "health-and-wealth gospel" is a pox on the church in all its variants. But Claiborne continues his theme by quoting Rich Mullins: "We do need to be born again, since Jesus said that to a guy named Nicodemus. But if you tell me I have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God, I can tell you that you have to sell everything you have and give it to the poor, because Jesus said that to one guy too" (98-99). A bit of head scratching is in due order when one reads such statements. How does one make the universal need of salvation identical to the particularized need of the rich young ruler? And how does one interpret the Gospels so that the redistribution of wealth is equated with salvation?

At some point while reading *The Irresistible Revolution*, the hermeneutic becomes clear: the Gospels, especially the Sermon on the Mount, are to be read "literally" (77) or radically—as long as they support modern liberalism. It's only a literal reading of any passages that lead to something like Christianized socialism with a dash of anarchism. The cure for the "health-and-wealth gospel" appears to be a gospel that confuses salvation by faith alone with the redistribution of wealth to the poor.

But there is a second layer to Claiborne's attempts to follow Jesus "literally." He believes that much if not most of Jesus' ministry can be summed up as prophetic street theater. In other words, Jesus wasn't crucified for claiming to be God, rather, "Jesus was crucified not for helping poor people but for joining them" (144). Jesus' example and actions were "like street theater at a protest" (f. 9, pg. 281) and the "dazzle of the resurrection" is described as the "theatrics of counterterror" (281-282).

Suddenly the bubbles and sidewalk chalk make sense. Shane Claiborne believes that he is literally following Jesus' example by his "prophetic" protests which often unfold as passing out spare change on Wall Street, getting arrested for minor civic violations in support of the homeless, and shilling on behalf of Saddam Hussein. The irresistible revolution at its silliest is outdoor drama with a fancy name; at its most theologically serious, it fails to make distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor (as required by 2 Thes. 3:10), between the megalomaniac dictators and the management of Taco Bell, between Christians and non-Christians.

NOT REALLY A RADICAL

Perhaps the most ironic issue is that Shane Claiborne has strait-jacketed himself into a theological paradigm that cannot escape the confines of popular Western culture. His avowed interest in the anti-establishment rock band Rage Against the Machine, with their two Grammy Awards and Sony corporation contract, may be entertaining, but it neither furthers the cause of Christ nor social justice. He might like to quote Che Guevara, but Che's contribution to Communist thought amounts to having an iconic photo taken of himself (by Alberto Korda) and being shot by the C.I.A. while wearing two Rolexes. Claiborne's moral earnestness and passion are exemplary, but street drama as theology hinders his ability to think carefully about complicated issues; instead he claims that Jesus' teaching on paying the temple tax in Matthew 17:24-27 is illuminated by the statement "when the emperor passes, the peasant bows. . .and farts" (185, n. 12).

Since Claiborne has accepted the *Christian Century* crowd's romanticism of popular leftists revolutionaries, he has missed the true radicals—like that Protestant scholastic who risked his life by sneaking into Catholic controlled Paris to share the true gospel with an arch-heretic; like the Covenanters who were burned at the stake for refusing to worship bits of bread during the masses that Claiborne enjoys attending (325); like Christian police

officers and soldiers who have the challenge of simultaneously "loving their enemies" while also loving the people they protect; like Christian business men who provide millions of people with jobs and the dignity of supporting their families through the creation-mandated activity of work, and doing so with honesty and integrity in a fallen world.

The fundamental issue is not that Claiborne is too radical or even rebellious. No, it's that he takes the easy way out. It's hard to spend your money in a godly way and to give it to the poor wisely, so he scatters it on the ground as a "jubilee" and abrogates a responsibility given to him by God. It's no fun to hold a job and legally purchase abandoned buildings for the homeless, so he "reclaims" them as a squatter. It's difficult to be patient under the current regime of sin and death, and so Claiborne pretends that swords can be pounded into plowshares and poverty can be eliminated without the return of Christ.

In Shane Claiborne's revolution, flatulence jokes become theological reflection, the crucifixion morphs to a lampoon, and prophetic preaching is reduced to heckling presidential candidates. It's not much of a revolution, but perhaps it's the revolution a compromised American Church deserves.

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