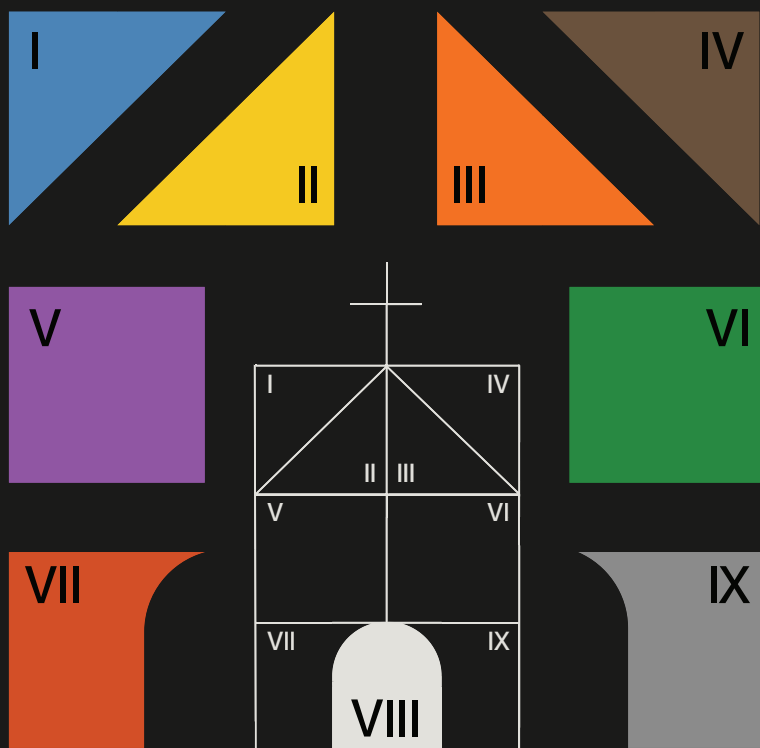


Healthy Churches: A Beginner's Guide



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Healthy Churches: A Beginner's Guide

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Introduction

For more than twenty-five years, 9Marks has been all about what we call nine marks of a healthy church. They are expositional preaching, gospel doctrine, conversion and evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, church leadership, prayer, and missions. To be sure, we aren't claiming these are the only marks for healthy churches. So why these nine? Because the Bible requires them. Because, sadly, too many evangelical churches have neglected or assumed them. And because churches best herald the gospel when they are characterized by them.

Some of you may be new to 9Marks. If so, think of this e-book as a beginner's guide. Here you will find brief descriptions and also some of our favorite past articles introducing you to the nine marks and what they have to do with church health. If you've been around for a while, this may be like a refresher course as well as a tool for you to encourage other church leaders with. In either case, we pray your church would benefit from considering these nine marks of a healthy church.

1. Expository Preaching

WHAT IS IT?

Expository preaching makes the main point of a passage of Scripture the main point of the sermon and then applies that point to the life of the congregation.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- According to Scripture, God accomplishes his purposes through speaking to his people (see Gen. 1:3, Isa. 55:10–11, Acts 12:24). This means that for sermons to be filled with God's power, preachers must preach God's Word.
- The Bible has many examples of expository preaching and teaching. Think of the Levitical priests who taught the Law (Deut. 33:10), Ezra and the Levites who read from the Law and gave the sense of it (Neh. 8:8), and Peter and the apostles who expounded Scripture and urged their hearers to respond with repentance and faith (Acts 2:14–41, 13:16–47).
- On the other hand, God condemns those who “speak of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord” (Jer. 23:16, 18, 21–22).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Expository preaching is important because God's Word is what convicts, gives new life, builds up, and sanctifies God's people (Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:23; 1 Thes. 2:13; John 17:17). What God's people need is not a preacher's wisdom, but God's wisdom.

The Preacher and the Text: What Is the Goal of the Message?

AARON MENIKOFF

“If you get the priority of the Word established, then you have in place the single most important aspect of the church’s life, and growing health is virtually assured, because God has decided to act by his Spirit through his Word.”¹

INTRODUCTION: THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE PREACHING OF THE WORD

In 2006 the Pew Charitable Trusts released its annual report on American journalism, “The State of the News Media.” The report charted everything from the rise of blogging to the declining circulation of print newspapers. The people from Pew asked some interesting questions. For example, they explored whether the public “trusts” the news. One pollster concluded it is the general perception “that news organizations act out of their own economic self-interest, and journalists themselves act to advance their own careers.”² No surprise there. When asked if the news media is primarily interested in informing the public or attracting bigger audiences, the vast

1 Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p.25

2 *The State of the News Media 2006*. Found at http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative_overview_publicattitudes.asp?cat=8&media=1. Accessed May 24, 2006.

majority concluded the media is most interested in increasing ratings.³ Of course, the fear is that the quality of journalism suffers when delivering the news becomes secondary to gaining viewers. When the goal is popularity, hard news inevitably becomes a thing of the past.

Sadly, the same phenomenon can take place in the local church. When the primary goal is numerical growth, the good news inevitably takes a backseat to entertainment. Consumerism twists the preacher's task, making him a servant of the pew instead of the Word. This begs the question, "When it comes to preaching, what is the goal?" I'm in agreement with John Piper who argued that the goal of preaching is the glory of God.⁴ The pastor's primary duty is to make much of the sovereign, holy, gracious, loving, unchanging Lord in everything he does and says. This is the ultimate goal in preaching.

But the glory of God is the goal of all of life, isn't it? Is there a goal in preaching that is unique to preaching? Is there a goal particularly crafted to help battle the temptation to consumerism that plagues most every preacher? I think there is. The goal of each message, week in and week out, is the very definition of expositional preaching: making sure that the point of your sermon is the point of the passage of Scripture from which you have chosen to preach.⁵ Indeed, God is glorified when His Word is clearly and faithfully proclaimed. That is the duty of a preacher and the goal of preaching. Let the chips fall where they may. Those called to preach have the responsibility of preaching each text faithfully, of making sure that each sermon captures the point of the text. This is expositional preaching in a nutshell—this is the preacher's job description distilled to its essence.

3 Ibid.

4 John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1990), 19.

5 Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 26.

1. EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

Several years ago, I worked as an assistant for my United States Senator from Oregon. Occasionally I would have the opportunity to represent him at a meeting and it was very clear in those meetings whose identity was important—not mine! My name did not really matter; all that mattered was that I brought a message from the Senator. When I first began to preach I remember having a similar impression. Although I was not unimportant—the Lord had, after all, called *me* to this task of studying and preaching the Word—I was simply there to deliver the point of the message as faithfully and earnestly as I could. I was not there by my own authority but by the authority of Jesus Christ. I was not there to grow a church or to win fans or to win favor—I was there to preach the Word of God—to make God’s point—the point of that text—the point of my sermon. I was there to preach the Word.

Recognizing the goal of preaching frees one from so many other distracting concerns. The preacher focused on preaching the point of the text need not worry about being the smartest or most articulate man in the room. No, these are not the concerns of an expositional preacher. The expositional preacher, instead, comes “in weakness and in fear and much trembling” with a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:3, 5). How is this possible? By taking the focus off of yourself (wisdom of men) and focusing on the text (power of God). Again, God is glorified when his Word is clearly proclaimed because such a proclamation is a repudiation of human wisdom and a demonstration of his power.

PAUL AND BARNABAS: SUCCESS AND THE DELIVERY OF THE WORD

In 1 Corinthians 2 the Apostle Paul describes relying on the power of God. In Acts 13 and 14 we see this lived out in his and Barnabas’s

ministry. Repeatedly, these apostles were given the opportunity to preach the Word. In Acts 13 they were in Pisidian Antioch where Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue. The gathering had just read from the Law and Prophets (13:15) and Paul was invited to offer a “word of exhortation for the people.” He proceeded to explain to both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles how the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ, “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus” (13:33). According to Luke, this message stirred up interest: “The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.” However, not all the interest was positive: “But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him” (13:45). Still, what did Paul speak, what did he preach? Did he preach the wisdom of men? Never. He delivered “the word of the Lord.” Though many rejoiced at this message, Paul and Barnabas were driven out of Pisidian Antioch. Were they discouraged? No. They “were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). They accomplished their task; they preached the Word.

They then headed for Iconium to continue their ministry. There the results were the same. Many believed—both Jews and Greeks—but they encountered hostile opposition (14:2). Again and again, Luke draws the attention of the reader to the *message* of Paul and Barnabas. What did they preach? In Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and then on the way back to Antioch in Pisidia, Pamphylia, and Perga they preached “the word of his grace” (14:3), the “gospel” (14:7, 15, 21), and the “Word” (14:25). Did Paul and Barnabas only preach the Word? Yes. They had no other message than this “Word of grace” which, as he wrote later, “is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (20:32).

1. EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

Was the preaching of Paul and Barnabas successful? There were certainly conversions in Iconium (14:1) and in Derbe (14:21). Furthermore, Luke records that through the preaching the souls of disciples were strengthened, they were encouraged to continue in the faith, and they were reminded to stay the course in the midst of tribulations (14:22). Leaders were raised up as well—further fruit from the preached Word. Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church” (14:23). In short, preaching the Word converted sinners, strengthened believers, and raised leaders. What an amazing ministry—the power of God’s Word at work. However, were Paul and Barnabas successful when their preaching raised enemies? They were stoned and forced to flee Iconium (14:5–6). In Lystra Paul was stoned again and left for dead (14:19). Were his words successful though they raised such opposition? Yes, he was successful, at least according to Jesus: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt. 5:11). Preach the Word and let the persecution come.

How does one account for Paul and Barnabas’s success? Was it because they were apostles able to perform signs and wonders? No, the signs and wonders did not produce faith. In fact, although some saw them perform miracles, they nonetheless refused to believe (14:4). Was it because Paul and Barnabas were popular—first century celebrities who gathered a following wherever they went? Hardly. Their success must be attributed to their preaching of the Word. In Acts 14:8–18 the Apostle Paul stood before a pagan audience that, like many twenty-first century congregations, would not have been well versed in the Scriptures. What did Paul do? He went to the Word. In a sermon that resembles the one given at the Areopagus in Acts 17, Paul cited Exodus 20:11 and reminded his listeners that the Lord God is the maker of “the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (14:15).

Though his listeners were tempted to worship Paul, Paul pointed them to the Word and called them to worship their Maker. There are no more apostles today, but Paul's example offers profound transferable lessons for those committed to the task of preaching.

First, faithful expositional preaching will be both attractive to some and repellant to others. It was the case with Paul and Barnabas and will be true with any preacher intent on making the point of the biblical text the point of his message. After all, if Paul was the aroma of life to those being saved but the aroma of death to the perishing the same is true of preachers today who are commissioned to speak God's truth. Those who love God will love his Word faithfully and earnestly preached; they will love getting to know him better as they get to know his Word better. On the other hand, those who do not love the Lord will not have an interest in his Word. They may be willing to come to a church one Sunday morning for a sermon on time management, but they will not be interested in the main point of John 4. What's the preacher to do? Preach John 4. A sermon on time management will neither convert the sinner nor edify the saint; a message from John 4 that presents Jesus as the living water will do both.

Second, faithful expositional preaching is always successful preaching. Some preachers are better than others, there is no doubt about that. We just have to accept the fact that the Lord has given some men unusual gifts. Nonetheless, as I look at Paul and Barnabas's ministry in Acts 13 and 14, and as I think about the goal of preaching—preaching the point of the text—I find myself hugely encouraged. Again, I don't have to be the best preacher to be a faithful preacher. My goal isn't to be the best. If that's my goal I'm doing the wrong thing with my life anyway; I'm pursuing human wisdom and not the cross of Christ! My goal has to be what Paul and Barnabas exemplified: constantly preaching the Word, the good news, the Word of grace, the gospel.

A HISTORICAL EXAMPLE: CHRYSOSTOM AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) became the bishop of Constantinople in 398. He is considered the greatest preacher in the early church (*chrysostomos* actually means, “golden-mouthed”). He was an expositional preacher in the tradition of Antioch—a tradition that focused on a literal interpretation of the text as opposed to the allegorical, fanciful interpretations associated with the Alexandrian tradition. While criticizing Chrysostom for some of his interpretations, especially of the Old Testament, the Baptist John A. Broadus nonetheless offers glowing praise, “Chrysostom has never had a superior, and it may be gravely doubted whether he has had an equal, in the history of preaching.”⁶

John was born in Antioch in Syria and was raised by his mother. He was baptized at the age of 21 and soon began to study the Bible under the bishop of Antioch. After several years of ministerial training he was ordained a presbyter in 386—this is when he began to preach regularly. Broadus notes that he started his preaching ministry rather late in life. “In our impatient age and country, when so many think time spent in preparation is time lost, it is well to remember that the two most celebrated preachers of the early Christian centuries began to preach, Chrysostom at thirty-nine, and Augustine at thirty-six.”⁷

Chrysostom took books of the Bible and he preached through them. During the introduction of one sermon, he reminded his congregation why he told them, in advance, of his sermon texts:

6 John A. Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004; reprint, New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1907), 77.

7 *Ibid.*, 76.

I often tell you many days in advance the subject of what I am going to say, in order that you may take up the book in the intervening days, go over the whole passage, learn both what is said and what is left out, and so make your understanding more ready to learn when you hear what I will say afterwards.⁸

Here is an example of a preacher who made Scripture the centerpiece of his ministry. He continues, “I also always entreat you, and do not cease entreating you, not only to pay attention here to what I say, but also when you are at home, to persevere continually in reading the divine Scriptures.”⁹ He trusted in the power of the Word of God to change lives and to equip believers to overcome temptation:

Therefore we have a continuous need for the full armor of the Scriptures . . . For example, the designs of the flesh attack more fiercely those who live in the midst of the world. A handsome face, a splendid body strikes us in the eyes; a shameful phrase weakens the tension of our soul. But why am I saying this? That which often seems the slightest of all these attacks, the scent of perfume falling from courtesans as they pass somewhere nearby has captured and taken us away as prisoners by mere accident. And there are many things like these which besiege our souls . . . We must thoroughly quench the darts of the devil and beat them off by the continual reading of the divine Scriptures.¹⁰

At this point in his sermon Chrysostom turned to the Scriptures, Luke 16. He read the Word of God and began to unfold the meaning of the text for the congregation. Chrysostom trusted in the

8 St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catherine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 58.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 59.

1. EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

power of the Word of God to change, feed, and grow the disciples entrusted into his care. He modeled the ministry exemplified by Paul and Barnabas—a ministry that depended upon the Word of God. Can the same be said of those of us who preach regularly today? Do we have the same faith that the Word of God can and will do its work?

CONCLUSION: THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE WORD

Christian theologians often refer to four characteristics of Scripture: its authority, clarity, necessity, and sufficiency. Obviously it is essential for a pastor to affirm each of these characteristics. With no authoritative Word there is no reason for the pastor to ever stand behind a pulpit. Because Scripture is clear, the preacher (and, for that matter, every Christian) can trust the Word can be understood. Scripture is necessary—the preacher *must* preach (Rom. 10:13–17). Finally, Scripture is sufficient. As Wayne Grudem puts it, “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.”¹¹

When I say I preach expositionally because I trust in the Word of God, I am affirming the sufficiency of Scripture. I am affirming that Genesis to Revelation holds everything that God’s people need to be sustained. What a comfort this is to me, that God’s Word has everything I need and everything my church needs. I don’t need to bring myself; I just need to bring the Word of God.

Can other types of preaching also affirm the sufficiency of the Word—topical preaching, for example, that expounds a biblical

11 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 127.

theme by synthesizing several biblical passages? Of course! Not only that; I think topical preaching can, at times, be helpful for a congregation. However, I don't think bringing a congregation to a preacher's synthesis is the same as bringing a people to the text. Expository preaching strives to bring the church to the text—that's what they need. They need to be able to see the text for themselves—to see it and believe it. As Grudem said, Scripture is sufficient for salvation, for trusting the Lord, for obeying him. So let's bring congregations as close to the text and as deep into the text as possible. Topical preaching is like a road that passes by the house. Expository preaching is like a driveway that takes you to the front door. As often as we can, by God's grace, let's drive the congregation right to that front door!

J.W. Alexander (1804–1859), son of Princeton's Archibald Alexander, was a professor and a pastor. In his work, *Thoughts on Preaching*, he encourages expository preaching, in part because it highlights the sufficiency of the Word and takes the spotlight off the preacher:

Such a mode of preaching is less adapted than its opposite to make the speaker a separate object of regard, and might be selected by many on this very account. It is now some years since we enjoyed the privilege of listening to the late pious and eloquent Summerfield, the charm of whose brilliant and pathetic discourses will never be forgotten by those who heard them. After having, on a certain occasion, delivered a deeply impressive sermon on Isaiah vi. 1–6, he remarked to the writer of these pages that, in consequence of having been pursued by multitudes of applauding hearers, he had been led to exercise himself more in the way of simple exposition, as that which most threw the preacher into the shade, and most illustriously displayed the pure truth of the Word.¹²

12 James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1988), 251–52.

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May those of us who preach be quite willing to be thrown into the shade that the truth of the Word might be illustriously displayed. This is the benefit of expositional preaching. God is glorified when the point of the text is faithfully and earnestly proclaimed.

Evangelistic Expository Preaching¹

MARK DEVER

Much has been written on evangelistic preaching. And much has been written on expositional preaching. Often, though, we tend to think of the two as mutually exclusive, rather than as normally inseparable. We think that the converted need Bible teaching and the unconverted need evangelistic addresses.

This article intends to question that conclusion. Instead, I want to suggest another way that we should think of our obligations in preaching to both Christians and non-Christians. We will proceed with the conviction that the converted and the unconverted need preaching in which the fullness of God's Word is exposed and the atoning work of Christ explored.

That a Christian sermon should both expound God's Word and declare his good news is not surprising. In fact, just in writing that sentence (without using the normal words expositional and evangelistic) it seems absurd to think otherwise.

But many do. Perhaps we ourselves sometimes wonder how we can be better expositors, but we never consider our presentation of the gospel in our sermons. Or perhaps we want to be better evangelists, but we cannot see how that has anything to do with our preaching. It is the goal of this article to make plain how those two concerns are vitally connected.

1 Editor's note: This article was originally published as a chapter in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, republished with permission from P&R Publishing.

1. EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

A BIBLICAL PATTERN

The gospel is the story of the Bible. If we are committed to preaching the Bible, we will find ourselves preaching the gospel. Graeme Goldsworthy puts it forcefully: “All preaching, to be true to the biblical perspective, must in some sense be gospel preaching. . . Expository, biblical preaching is always an exposition of the gospel and its implications.”²

Throughout the Old Testament, God’s Word is the fount and the focus of proclamation. In the New Testament, the fulfillment of his promises in Christ is at the center of the teaching.

The Lord Jesus’s ministry centered on teaching the truth about his own identity and mission. In Mark 2, we see Jesus appropriating scriptural themes from the Old Testament, explaining that their true meaning was found in their pointing to him. So he presents himself as the bridegroom come for his bride, as the Son of Man, as the Lord of the Sabbath. All of these titles were connected closely with God himself in the Old Testament. Now, Jesus announced that they were fulfilled in him.

Throughout the New Testament, we find a close connection between exposing the meaning of Scripture and pointing to God’s good news in Christ. In Luke 24, the risen Christ does an extraordinary Bible study with two of his disciples. We read in Luke 24:27: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” A little later in the same chapter, Christ came to be with “the eleven and those with them” (24:36) and said,

“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the

2 Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 95–96.

Prophets, and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (24:44–47).

The evangelistic sermons those disciples preached, recorded in the book of Acts, follow this same pattern—they arise from the text and they point to Christ. So Peter at Pentecost begins by quoting a passage from the prophet Joel and explaining it and current events in its light. Then he presses home the news about Jesus from various psalms.

Again in Acts 3, when Peter is presented with a crowd aware of a miraculous healing, he turns to the Lord’s prediction through Moses in Deuteronomy 18 about God’s raising up “a prophet like me” and announces that Jesus is that prophet. Peter then begins to make clear what their response to this should be. Throughout the Book of Acts this is the pattern we find:

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women (17:2–4).

Certainly, not every evangelistic address must be a straightforward exposition of one passage of Scripture. In Acts 17, in Athens, the center of Greek learning, Paul is drawn into a dispute with “a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.” Ten verses (17:22–31) record Paul’s words—none of which cite any Old Testament passages—to the meeting of the Areopagus.

1. EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

Today, ministers of the gospel may have similar opportunities in series of evangelistic or apologetic talks outside the regular assembly of a Christian church, for example, on college campuses or in other meetings expressly for this purpose. We can certainly proclaim the gospel of Christ outside our regular expositional ministry.

Our regular preaching of God's Word, however, should never fail to point to Christ. Whether we preach from the New Testament or the Old, the apostolic pattern is to declare God's Word to God's people, always pointing to the fulfillment of his promises in Christ.

This pattern is continued in the letters of the New Testament, a treasury of inspired Christian homilies. In his letters to the Galatian Christians and the Christians in Rome, Paul reasoned closely about the gospel from the Old Testament. His text of choice was often Genesis 15:6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." From this passage, in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, Paul carefully reasoned and passionately declared the hope that we have in Christ. With believing eyes, the writer to the Hebrews leads us through the Old Testament stories and the practices of the temple. He does this with great care, and all to show us Christ.

The biblical pattern is for a Christian preacher to proclaim and explain God's Word to God's people. And the heart of that Word is always Christ. So today, too, we need preaching that is both expositional and evangelistic. Let's consider those each briefly in turn.

THE NEED FOR ALL OF GOD'S WORD: EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

Expositional preaching is all about giving God's people God's Word. It is preaching in which the point of the biblical passage is the point of the preacher's message. This is what it means to preach expositionally—to expose God's Word.

Christians are obviously to be fed with God's Word. As our Lord said to the tempter: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). Even in his answer, Jesus demonstrated his utter dependence upon God's Word. He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, where the Lord, through Moses, instructed his people at the end of their wilderness wanderings that his most important provision for them was not manna, but his Word.

Non-Christians too, though, need God's Word. Those who do not yet believe the gospel need to be told of their hopelessness apart from Christ. They need to have God's Word presented to them; they need God's Spirit to convict them of their own sin and desperation. Being so liable to God's judgment, they need to hear of God's grace.

All this can happen through expositional preaching. Through such biblically faithful sermons, non-Christians can have Satan's lies exposed, God's truth revealed, their own hearts searched, and Christ's grace magnified to them.

In our day, we see evangelism as something usually brief and urgent, whereas the edification of believers is to be patiently and carefully done. In truth, real evangelism often needs to be every bit as patiently pursued and every bit as carefully done. It may be that the believers in your church need to be taught the truths in Genesis in order to understand more fully that the one who made them is holy, that this holy God is sovereign, or that they are to respond in repentance and faith to the mercies of God. But surely our non-Christian friends need this no less.

How often has God used the patient exposition of Genesis 1–3 or Mark's Gospel or the early chapters of Romans to lead someone to himself? Non-Christians around us have been steeped in sin and Satan's deception for a lifetime; are we surprised if God normally

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takes longer than a couple of minutes to undermine Satan's lies and bring the sinner under conviction as he lays out his creation intent for marriage and sexuality, for work and supreme allegiance to him, for repentance and faith? We have all joined in Adam's rebellion heartily (not reluctantly) and completely (not partially). We may need to be made thoroughly aware of the responsibilities to our Creator that we have ignored and even denied.

Through expositional preaching, non-Christians need to be instructed in the truth and taught how God views his world—including them. They need to be challenged to rethink their priorities, their work, their family, and most of all their own lives. They need to be rediagnosed by God's Word. Both Christians and non-Christians need to hear God's Word expounded.

THE NEED FOR THE GOOD NEWS: EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

The need for evangelistic preaching is obvious, too. The Apostle Paul's riveting argument in Romans 10 is founded on the notion that "faith comes from hearing the message" (10:17). Those who have not yet heard the gospel of Jesus Christ need to do so. This is straightforward. There are, however, some important matters to consider about evangelistic preaching that are not so straightforward.

What Is an Evangelistic Sermon?

For one thing, some people have a mistaken notion of what constitutes an evangelistic address. Some think that evangelistic sermons must be histrionic. Others assume quite the opposite—that, in fact, your whole goal in commending the gospel to your visitor determines that the evangelistic sermon must be seeker sensitive. Still others think that any good evangelistic message will be packed with the latest apologetic arguments. But evangelistic preaching is not

married to any certain style. Others feel that evangelistic sermons must be preached in the setting of a week-long mission, a revival, or a Sunday evening (as the tradition was in many evangelical churches in Britain in the twentieth century). But surely the setting does not determine what is truly an evangelistic sermon.

Still others feel that any sermon that is met with conversions must be an evangelistic sermon. And conversely, they may suggest, any that is not cannot have been truly evangelistic. But surely the results do not adequately evaluate whether we have been faithful. And still others may feel that if they intend a message to be evangelistic, then it must have been so. But, of course, messages are not truly evangelistic merely because the preacher's motive was that the sermons should be. Our intentions are not always realized in our sermons.

Whether a sermon is truly evangelistic is determined not by our motives or the results afterward or by the setting or the style, the time or the place. One thing and one thing alone determines whether a sermon can properly be said to be evangelistic, and that is its content. Is the evangel—the good news—present? Even better, is it presented forcefully and with heart to sinners in need? This question of content is above all the question that determines whether a sermon is truly evangelistic.

Who Needs to Hear Evangelistic Sermons?

Another matter that confuses us in our evangelistic efforts is that it is not always obvious who the non-Christians are. Sometimes it is not obvious to them. Perhaps one person is fairly moral, even religious. Perhaps they are even a member of the church. The great Puritan preacher William Perkins said that generally churches have “both believers and unbelievers. This is the typical situation in our congregations.”³ Such unregenerate members may never see

3 William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (1606; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 62.

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themselves as needing to hear the gospel declared and explained, and yet they may exist for years in the soundest of churches unconvicted of their sins and unconverted in their souls.

This confusion is compounded when even preachers of the Word do not realize the people's state. While those who are called to preach God's Word to God's people should be gifted with above average discernment, no pastor can look into the human heart as the Lord Jesus does. There may be those among the apparently committed in a congregation who are actually self-righteous or, as the Puritans used to name them, "gospel hypocrites."

The famous example in Puritan literature was created by John Bunyan in a character called "Mr. Badman." Bunyan's fictitious hypocrite lived an apparently virtuous life, knowing some involvement with his church, and he even died with a clear conscience! As Bunyan said at the end of the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, "I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction!" Preachers need to be confident of this and so realize that the gospel is always in need of being proclaimed.

Sound evangelistic preaching, however, is also helpful for Christians. Whose heart has yet fully appreciated the goodness of God to us in providing for our salvation in Christ? Who of those hearing the next sermon you preach has fully comprehended God's love for us in Christ? Whose gratitude is as full as it can be? Whose hope as sharp? Whose faith as strong? All of this can happen by searching presentations of the gospel through preaching that exposes God's Word. Passages that explore God's holiness, contemplate his rights, consider our purpose, trace out our sin, meditate on Christ, delineate various aspects of his work, tease out the nature of faith, or expose false repentance—all of these can be the subject of sermons

that, by exposing God's people to God's Word, not only hold out the gospel to those who never heard it, but build up those who have.

Expositional preaching should be, by its very nature, evangelistic and edifying. John Piper defines preaching itself simply as "the heralding of the good news by a messenger sent by God."⁴ Good evangelistic preaching should always edify God's people merely by carefully holding out God's gospel.

Such evangelistic preaching is important for Christians to hear because it helps us to better understand the gospel we claim to believe. And along with our head's understanding, our heart's appreciation grows and deepens. What believer would not profit from having a clearer grasp of God's holiness, his coming judgment, human purpose, our sin, Christ's person and work, or the required response of repentance and faith?

What results from such a growing gospel understanding among Christians? There are several results, but let me name just three.

First, a growing gospel understanding among Christians leads us to praise. God desires that we praise him. His Word is full of encouragements for us and even exhortations to us to praise him (Deut. 8:10; Ps. 33; Isa. 12:4; Acts 15:14; Rom. 9:17; 1 Pet. 2:9). Eternity will not be long enough for us to adequately thank God or to explore the fullness of the reasons we should praise him. Proclaiming his gospel displays his character to us at its most gracious and loving point. As Samuel Crossman's beautiful hymn declares:

My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.

4 John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 27.

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Crossman goes on to detail ways in which God loved us, none more poignant than this observation:

In life, no house, no home
My Lord on earth might have;
In death, no friendly tomb,
But what a stranger gave.
What may I say?
Heaven was his home;
But mine the tomb
Wherein he lay.

A growing understanding of our Savior's love for us causes us to praise God.

Another result of such gospel-oriented evangelistic preaching in the lives of Christian hearers should be an increasing integration of biblical knowledge with their everyday lives. As the gospel is explored and explained, as implications are drawn out and false conclusions confuted, the gospel becomes more woven into the warp and woof of our lives. It forms the filter through which we understand the world. It acts as a protection from sin and a guide to holiness.

A healthy appreciation for God's holiness causes us to grow in our respect for God and in our esteem for his abilities. We may defend the inerrancy of his Word not based upon a high conception of the human authors, but rather based upon a high conception of God and of his ability to create creatures who can understand what he reveals.

A growing understanding of our having been made in God's image may help us to understand how good can be produced by non-Christian artists or novelists or business owners or scientists, or how non-Christians can have good marriages and good homes. We are not baffled by that. We understand that we are made in the image of God.

Increased appreciation for the gospel may result in a deepened grasp of the offensiveness of sin to God and therefore in our living more holy lives. We could proceed through every head of theology as it flows from the gospel and consider how a greater understanding of each one of these causes the gospel to stand in more immediate connection with every thought we have during the day and with every aspect of our lives.

If this is the case, then a third result of such expositional preaching that faithfully points to the gospel is that our own personal evangelism should become more pervasive and more natural in our lives. If we clearly see the connection between the gospel and the worldview espoused in this movie or that editorial, this decision your child makes or that ethical dilemma your friend at work faces, then the gospel comes much more naturally into our conversations.

Instead of abruptly changing topics with a non-Christian friend, such equipped Christians can see how the gospel is the topic at the root of the matter being discussed. Certainly one could caricature such readiness with the gospel in conversation, but a congregation well-instructed in the gospel and its implications in our daily lives should be a congregation that evangelizes much more naturally and therefore regularly.

For all these reasons, and more, it is both biblically right and practically helpful for pastors regularly to preach expositional sermons evangelistically to their own congregations. Both Christians and non-Christians need to hear the gospel preached.

HOW TO PREACH EXPOSITIONAL SERMONS EVANGELISTICALLY

The question people may ask is, How can a sermon be both faithfully evangelistic and faithfully expositional? Perhaps the questioner would understand how that can be the case with certain passages

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as the text, but can every text of Scripture be expounded with the expectation that the gospel will be central to that exposition? It is the conviction of this author that the answer to that question is a definite yes!

Little has been written on preaching that is both evangelistic and expositional, but surely it is in the nature of good biblical preaching to be both. Expositional preaching can be the best evangelistic preaching. Who can have heard or read the preaching of James Montgomery Boice through the early chapters of Genesis or Romans or of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in Ephesians 2 and not agree with that sentiment?

Though the argument is not made in this article that exposition and evangelism are synonymous—nor even quite inseparable—it should be clear that they are normally deeply related and that great benefit should flow to the hearers when the message has both exposition and the gospel carefully integrated.

How precisely can we preach such biblical, evangelistic sermons? That is the topic of the remainder of this article. But before we turn to such practical matters that may help us to do this, we must first check our own understanding of what the message of the Bible is.

As those who handle the Word of God publicly, preachers and teachers must understand that the whole Bible is gospel-shaped. The stories in Genesis and Exodus, the wisdom of the Psalms, the warnings and prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the parables of Jesus, and the letters of Paul—all are gospel-shaped. They contain and convey the great themes of who God is, why he made us, how we failed, what God did in Christ, and the repentance and faith we are now called to in light of all this. In our preaching, we should not merely insert a gospel outline in an otherwise moralistic message from the Old Testament; rather, we need to understand how God's

law drives us to God's gospel. And we need to do that in the teaching of every passage of Scripture.

With that understanding of the Bible in place, expository sermons much more naturally become conduits for the gospel. Making sure we have that understanding is the first practical step we can make to bring our expositions and our evangelism together.

Assuming this gospel-shaped understanding of the Bible, there are a number of particular ways our own expository preaching ministry can be more faithfully evangelistic.

Accommodation

The main weekly Lord's Day gathering of a church is primarily for Christians, not non-Christians. Therefore we should deliberately set about to plan the service—including our preaching—with our primary end as the glorification of God through the edification of his church. Certainly evangelism can be a part of that—as I argue above—but it is never the main point. Our expository sermons are preached to feed the flock entrusted to our care.

Of course, when you preach well expositionally, you necessarily preach evangelistically. This is why we so often find the ministries of great expository preachers so blessed evangelistically. God honors the preaching of his Word. We realize that our Sunday morning congregations are not stationary Billy Graham rallies. They are not audiences to be lured and kept, but congregations to be shepherded and fed. And yet, as we preach God's Word faithfully, hypocrites will find the new birth. And non-Christians will see the change in their family and friends, and they, too, will, by God's grace, inevitably come.

Therefore it is appropriate for us to take into account the presence of non-Christians in our services. Our services can be properly sensitive and friendly to non-Christians without calibrating everything to the level of a first-time visitor. When we gather as a church,

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we gather as a family in need of sustenance. Part of what we do during that time will be quite naturally to pray for and preach to those who are not yet Christians. And in doing that we should use language they can understand.

We should remind people occasionally why we do what we do in the service. We should preach from a translation that people can understand. We may even explain from time-to-time what chapter and verse numbers are and other things that those of us who have been Christians for years take for granted. But no believer is ever hurt by having the truth explained to them briefly and simply, even as no unbeliever is hurt by having Scripture preached powerfully on points they do not fully understand. When the church all around is helped, they too will be helped.

Title

Even sermon titles can be provocative for drawing people to consider their lives and to consider coming to hear the sermon. Coaxing interest need not compromise content. You could entitle a series in Exodus “A New Start.” You could give the following names to a series through 1 John called “Basic Questions”:

- “What Do I Do with Sin?” (1 John 1:1–2:2)
- “How Can I Know That I Have Eternal Life?”
(1 John 2:3–27)
- “What Is True Love?” (1 John 2:28–3:24)
- “How Can I Face Judgment?” (1 John 4)
- “What Is Faith?” (1 John 5)

Such titles are both faithful to the content of the texts to be expounded and, at the same time, help to call attention to the relevance of the content for those who are not yet Christians. They should naturally be of interest to non-Christians and Christians alike. Just

because your non-Christian friend is not interested in a series of sermons advertised as being “on 1 John” does not mean he or she would not be interested in hearing sermons addressing the matters John addressed in those letters. That is what the titles listed above are intended to do—to expose the content of the text and to suggest something of the way it might intersect with their lives.

Even the events of our lives conspire to create interest in God’s Word. Titles can reflect such interest. Times of cultural interest in Christianity provided by crises (like the events of September 11, 2001), unusual events (like the new millennium), or regular seasons (Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s, Easter) can be well used for gospel ends. With a little thought, relevant and even provocative titles can be provided for advertisements.

Introductions

Our sermon introductions, too, can evidence the evangelistic intent that we have in expounding God’s Word. We can begin our sermons expectantly, but not wrongly presuming the interest of those gathered. Certainly the faithful members of the congregation should be interested, but they are not always. Some will be distracted, others hardened, others uninformed, and still others weary. All of these will be helped if they are first told why they should listen to the sermon before they are actually made to do it. Reminding ourselves of why and how the doctrinal center of our text is important is a useful exercise in an introduction.

And if introductions are so useful for our Christian hearers, they are certainly no less so for our non-Christian hearers. Introductions that highlight and seek to demonstrate the relevance, to carefully delineate the difficult points, to admit uncertainties on a popular topic, all serve to encourage hearers to give their careful attention to the sermon.

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Doctrinal Exposition

Good evangelistic expositions should clearly explain the gospel itself to people. While the whole Bible—and every text in it—is gospel-shaped, it is still useful to have some time in a sermon where the good news itself is clearly and simply stated. Paul did this at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15. We, too, can follow this practice. Consider having some simple explanation, like this one:

This holy Creator made us for himself. We have sinned and separated ourselves from him. But we will give an account to him. We may ignore him for a time; we will never avoid him forever. At that accounting, he will rightly judge us for our sins. His mercy that we've enjoyed to that time will end; his justice will begin. Our only hope is in what he has done in Christ. God became a man, lived a perfect life, and took on himself all the sins of all those who would ever turn from their sins and trust in him. In his death on the cross he bore the sins of all his people. Christ the plaintiff became the punished for us, the guilty people. He became our substitute. And he calls us now to recognize in his resurrection God's acceptance of this sacrifice, that his justice toward those in Christ is exhausted, and to repent of our sins and trust in Christ and so find forgiveness and new life.

Evangelistic expository sermons should include some simple statement like this, perhaps explaining one or more of these ideas at length, depending on the topic of the text being expounded. A clear summary can add luster to all the other aspects of the gospel brought out in the text. Like the rays of a beautiful sunset, they can go back over the territory covered in the sermon, causing us to review it all in the fresh, warm brilliance of God's self-giving and saving love for us in Christ. When we do this, we hold forth the good news.

When we hold forth the good news in our preaching, we should particularly beware of presenting this gospel as an option

to be exercised for the betterment of sinners' lives. After all, what would a carnal person consider better? Leading questions like "Are you scared of death?" or "Do you want happiness?" or "Would you like to know the meaning of your life?" are all well intentioned, and any of them may be used by God's Spirit to convict someone and to lead to their conversion. But such questions may also be answered by a simple no. To use such questions as if they are the starting point for those considering the gospel is to make it sound all too optional.

To speak personally for a moment, when I am in a situation in which I am called upon to preach, as Baxter said, "as a dying man to dying men," I do not care if my hearers are scared of death, wanting happiness, or searching for meaning in life; I know that they will die and stand before God to give an account of their lives. Furthermore, I know that they will fail in their attempt to justify themselves, and I know that God will therefore rightly condemn them to an eternal hell.

As one who shares their common weakness and depravity, my sympathy with them compels me to tell them the truth, and that is not dependent upon their passing interest or my ability to find the right marketing introduction to snag them. They are in fact accountable to God. He is their Creator, and he will just as certainly be their judge.

So I find verses like Mark 8:38 useful, where Jesus taught, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Or Paul's statement in Acts 17:31: God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Or again, Romans 3:19–20: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared

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righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” Or Hebrews 9:27: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.”

These verses underscore the inevitability of God’s judging us, regardless of our interest in God at any given point in our lives. This demand—rather than a marketer’s appeal—is to be the basis of the evangelistic call in our sermons. Our gospel sermons are not to sound like the solicitations of a sales representative, but the summons of a judge.

Illustration

Good evangelistic illustrations can fall short of containing the whole gospel in them. Existentialist literature well captures some of the emptiness and pointlessness of life without God. Popular novels, films, editorials, and political situations can expose hypocrisy, greed, shattered illusions, responsibility, and so many other themes nearly related to the gospel. Use of such material can help our non-Christian listener to consider what we are saying, just as the Greeks listened to Paul in Acts 17 as he quoted their own inscriptions and poets. We all tend to listen better to someone when we think they understand where we are coming from. Our non-Christian friends are no different in this.

One particularly appropriate kind of illustration of biblical truth is the personal testimony. Certainly a testimony of “what Jesus has done for me” may not include a clear presentation of the gospel; but just as certainly it may, and it will if we have that in view. Include in your sermons examples of gospel truths being brought home in people’s lives—whether at conversion or some later point. The vividness of such illustration can help a salient point to live on in someone’s mind. It can explain things by analogy in ways that no amount of close reasoning will do. God is glorified by testimonies of his grace. Illustrate it in your preaching.

Application

And, of course, our applications can be evangelistic in a number of ways. Even the very implications we draw out from the text can help to expose the shallow righteousness of this world and of human-made religious solutions. Expositions that expose the insufficiency of answers apart from Christ can be as useful in setting forth the gospel as a doctor's diagnosis can for compelling someone to take a prescribed medicine. As they say, "a good diagnosis is half the cure."

Christian preachers should be especially careful to speak the truth about sin. Our sermons are never to be negotiated finally by what we think our hearers can emotionally bear, let alone by what we think non-Christian hearers in our community would agree with. The goal of our sermons is not to enhance our hearer's self-esteem, but to see them inherit eternal salvation. Lovingly exposing sin is a necessary part of our call to truth telling. Such exposing will often be initially unpopular. A sinner in the flesh will never agree that he or she should be convicted until the Holy Spirit does his convincing and convicting work.

We should proclaim the truth about human sin, with the humility that is appropriate when one sinner speaks to others about such matters. We should proclaim the truth about human sin as surely as we hope our own doctors tell us the truth about our own health, particularly when the news is bad and most particularly when it is dire. As the ancient Greek proverb put it, the opposite of a friend is not an enemy, it is a flatterer. When we flatter our hearers we help no one, least of all those who most need it.

Exploring the truth about sin, tracing its ways in our hearts, and exposing the truth about God's verdict on it and its ruinous end is one of the most important functions Christian preaching has. We must commit ourselves to faithfully expounding the Word,

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especially in those places where it would correct or convict us. When we go wrong is when we most need to be put right. Politeness is a poor substitute for honesty. If that is true in passing human relationships, how much truer is it in our eternal relationship with God?

Furthermore, something in even the most depraved human heart witnesses to the truth of God's revelation of our sins. God's image in us, our conscience, cries out in every heart, even if its cry is often muted or inconsistent. We must go into our pulpits not trying to win our non-Christian friends' approval but their souls. God's Spirit will use the faithful proclamation of the truth to do that.

One method that I find helpful in preparing to apply Scriptures both carefully and evangelistically is to make a grid, with rows going across for each point of the sermon and with columns going down. The columns help me to consider, in turn, what is unique in salvation history in this text, what the application of the text is to the non-Christian and for our public lives in society, how it is fulfilled in Christ, what the application is to the individual Christian and for us as a local church.

While there is rarely time to work out all these applications for each point in any one sermon, the exercise of carefully considering implications and applications across the board like this has the effect of helping me to hear the Scripture as a non-Christian friend might hear it and so to pray about which parts to lean on and to press home in the sermon. It is always good before preaching to review the sermon notes prayerfully in order to consider where the gospel points of human need and divine provision might best be pressed home.

Yet in evangelistic expositional preaching, the gospel should be presented not merely by means of some slender connection I happen to notice (e.g., an imagined connection between the scarlet cord in Joshua 2 and 6 and the color of Christ's blood) but by the structure

of the story itself (e.g., Rahab believes the truth of God's Word told to her by the spies and so effectively repents and believes and is thus incorporated savingly into the people of God).

In this way, the non-Christian is helped to see the unified testimony of God's Word and saving actions across the centuries, all pointing to the non-Christian's need and to God's provision in Christ. The thoroughness of pressing home a passage, along with its implications for several different areas of life, exposes the shallowness of life without Christ and the richness of the life that God calls us to. We must apply the text evangelistically.

Invitation

No exposition of God's Word should ever be given without an invitation to respond. More than an invitation, really a demand should come in the sermon that all those listening submit themselves to God, confess their sins and his lordship, repent from their sins, and trust in Christ for salvation.

In this age, words from our holy Creator to sinful creatures like us must always include the imperatives repent and believe. How else can we faithfully represent any portion of Scripture if we do not reflect the saving purposes of God?

Part of our inviting people to respond can be an offer to speak with them after the service at some designated place or time. It could be encouraging them to speak to those around them or to some Christian friends. We can offer them literature or a series of Bible studies.

It is best to avoid any kind of invitation that would lead them to think that in responding to our invitation they have responded savingly to Christ. The confusion and carnality that reigns in so many evangelical churches today shows the disaster that such well-intentioned mistakes work in people's lives.

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Nevertheless, with cautions duly noted, we must call people earnestly and urgently to respond to the gospel. To do anything less is to default on the very call that God has given his ministers to proclaim his Word.

Here it must be said that if we do not in our normal, everyday lives have a heart for the lost, there is little chance that our sermons will burn with the evangelistic passion that so becomes the gospel. We must be impassioned by the gospel that has called us and that we are now called to proclaim.

CONCLUSION

These then are some of the elements that will help us to preach our expositional sermons with evangelism in view.

We should understand the gospel-centeredness of the whole Bible. We should take account of the presence of non-Christians—known or unknown to us—among us. We can announce that we will preach on topics that might interest them (even when the sermons themselves are straightforward expositions of Hebrews or Malachi). We can introduce the sermons themselves in ways that help to show the relevance of the Scriptures to common concerns. We can clearly state the gospel, illustrate it movingly and personally, pray to apply it searchingly, and clearly and earnestly call for a response.

In all of these ways our expositional sermons can hold forth the gospel.

One reason I can be so confident of the power of evangelistic expositional sermons is a series of messages I heard one summer when I was in college. I was at the camp of a college fellowship, and James Montgomery Boice preached expositionally through the first few chapters of Genesis and then through the first few chapters of Romans. The messages were some of the most powerful expositions I had yet heard. The Word was unfolded, and the very clarity of its

presentation made the already-glorious truths more glorious still. The darkness of our sins and the depth of God's mercy had never been more obvious to me.

At the same time, these messages were some of the clearest explanations of the gospel I had ever been given. The cross of Christ and the necessity of repentance and faith could not have been clearer. There, in the middle of those thick Bible expositions were some of the most powerful evangelistic sermons that my Southern Baptist, revival-going ears had ever heard. God's grace was clearly magnificent. The intervening decades have not dimmed my memory of the happy marriage of evangelism and exposition in those sermons.

And, in God's good providence, I have many other times been blessed by hearing sermons that are both evangelistic and expositional. I would like to think that with his help that is how I, too, have preached. And, if you are still reading this article, my guess is that you, too, may have done the same. If we do not preach as well as the giants, we can at least preach the same message and to the same end—that God may be glorified in the salvation of sinners and in the edifying of his church.

If you are a preacher that still has questions about this, the next time you try to preach evangelistically without preaching expositionally, consider how your message might be strengthened, your points illustrated, your passions stoked, your framework deepened by preaching to the same group from one passage of Scripture. Would a particular text be useful for your hearers to try to come to grips with, to understand, and to remember? Would such expositional preaching be an enhancement of your evangelism?

And even more, the next time you preach expositionally, consider what it might be like to do it without preaching evangelistically. Can you really explore the themes of the law in the Old Testament

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without going to the gospel? Can you understand David's delight in God and his Word apart from Christ? Can you present Isaiah's hope or Ezekiel's vision without an understanding of what God would do in Christ? Can you expound the teaching of Jesus or the letters of John without clearly talking of God's holiness, our sin, Christ's sacrifice, and our needed response of repentance and faith?

Often, to evangelize well will entail carefully expounding God's Word. Carefully expounding God's Word will always entail evangelizing. Neither can be neglected; both must be done in our preaching if we are to preach God's Word to God's people. While one could point to many books on preaching, let me suggest three: Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961; repr. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1979); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); and John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

A Biblical Case for Expositional Preaching

MIKE BULLMORE

What is expositional preaching? A sermon is expositional if its content and intent are *controlled* by the content and intent of a particular passage of Scripture. The preacher says what the passage says, and he intends for his sermon to accomplish in his listeners exactly what God is seeking to accomplish through the chosen passage of his Word.

Preacher, imagine God sitting in the congregation as you preach. What will be the expression on his face? Will it say, “That’s not at all what I was getting at with that passage.” Or will it say, “Yes, that’s exactly what I intended.”

The biblical case for expositional preaching starts with the connection between the gift the ascended Christ has given to the church in pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11) and the biblical injunction for pastors-teachers to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). Those who preach should preach their Bibles.

Perhaps the best place to begin demonstrating the legitimacy of identifying preaching and preaching the word is the book of Acts. In Acts, the phrase “the Word of God” is regular shorthand for the substance of the apostolic preaching. In Acts 6:2, for example, the apostles say, “It is not right that we should give up the preaching of the word of God” (see also Acts 12:24; 13:5, 46; 17:13; 18:11.) The phrase also frequently appears as “the Word of the Lord” (8:25, 13:44; 15:35-36; et. al.) and not infrequently it is shortened to “the word” (cf. 4:29; 8:4; 11:19). In the book of Acts, there is a clear and

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consistent identification between the apostolic preaching and the phrase “the Word of God.”

While the substance of the apostolic preaching was the good news of reconciliation with God through Christ Jesus, that message was delivered and explained almost invariably by means of an exposition of Old Testament Scripture. So preaching in New Testament times involved the preaching of “the Word of God,” and an essential component of such preaching was the exposition of the Old Testament. This in turn leads us to the conclusion that the Old Testament Scriptures must be included in our conception of “the Word” to be preached, a conclusion confirmed by both the direct (e.g., 2 Tim 3:16; Rom. 3:2) and indirect claims (e.g., Rom. 15:4) of the New Testament.

So this “Word” is the Word about Jesus, as anticipated in the Old Testament and now explained in the apostolic preaching. This is the word that is “spoken” (Acts 4:29), “proclaimed” (13:5), and to be “received” (17:11) as “the Word of God.” This same identification is maintained throughout Paul’s letters. Without hesitation, he calls the message he proclaims “the Word of God” (2 Cor. 2:17, 4:2; 1 Thes. 2:13) or simply “the Word” (Gal. 6:6).

Even in the context of Paul’s charge to Timothy to “preach the Word” there is confirmation of this identification between preaching and preaching the Word of God. Timothy would have known immediately what “Word” Paul meant. As Timothy’s biography highlights, it surely included both the “sacred writings” and the apostolic message—“what you have learned and have firmly believed knowing from whom you learned it” (2 Tim. 3:10–17).

The conclusion we are to draw from all of this is that the “word” we are to preach is the body of truth consisting of the Old Testament Scriptures and the apostolic teaching regarding Christ—i.e.

the New Testament. Thus, identifying the “Word” with our Bibles is appropriate. *This is what those commissioned as “pastor-teachers” are to teach.* Our job is to proclaim “the Word” which God has spoken, preserved in Scripture, and entrusted to us. The spiritual life of God’s people depends on this Word (Deut. 8:3). That is why a young pastor is charged to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). If this charge makes any claim on us today, and it does, then the source of our preaching is to be entirely coextensive with our Bibles.

What will this look like? In our sermon preparation, it will look like taking defined passages of God’s Word and studying them carefully so that we “rightly handle the Word of truth.” In the pulpit, it will look like the picture we see in Nehemiah 8:8: “They read from the book . . . clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” God has both purposed and promised to use this kind of preaching to accomplish one of his great aims—the gathering and building up of his people.

2. Gospel Doctrine

WHAT IS IT?

Gospel doctrine addresses who God is, who we are as sinners, and what God has done to save those who repent of their sin and trust in him.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- The Bible teaches that God created the world, and that he is holy, faithful, loving, and sovereign (Gen. 1:1; Lev. 21:8; Ex. 34:6–7; John 5:20; 1 John 4:10, 19; Isa. 45:7–9; Eph. 1:11).
- The Bible also teaches that man was made in God's image in order to obey God's commands and enjoy perfect fellowship forever (Gen. 1:26–27, 2:17; Psalm 19:7–9; Rev. 2:7).
- Rather than obey God, however, man sinned, death entered the world, and all came under condemnation before God (Rom. 5:12–14).
- Yet the Bible makes clear that God loved a sinful people and sent his only Son to live, die, and rise in order to forgive any who repent of their sin and trust in him (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 5:1–2; 2 Cor. 5:21).
- The entire Bible and all its doctrine points to the person and work of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44–47; John 5:39–40).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Gospel doctrine is important because there is no other way for man to be forgiven of his sins and receive eternal life but through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Jesus Cared About Doctrine

SAMUEL PARKISON

There are few things that make me grumpier than a false dichotomy. They put a queasy feeling in my stomach; they make me groan with vexation. Examples of cringe-worthy false dichotomies are all too often tolerated in evangelical circles: *Should we revel in the grace of Christ or pursue personal holiness? Should we tell the truth or practice compassion? Are pastors called to feed the sheep or fend off wolves? Should pastors teach on biblical headship in marriage or protect the abused in their flocks?*

We could, of course, go on, but I shall spare you the assault of a longer list, lest I trigger you with the same spiritual indigestion these examples give me. There is, however, one particular false dichotomy I wish to address, and it is by far one of the worst. Of all the examples to make my countenance fall, none have the potential to ruin my day like this old chestnut: *Should we care about doctrine or should we simply follow Christ?* Another way to put this silly false choice—and, sadly, one that has the veneer of scholarly respectability—is: *should we base our Christianity around Christ and the Gospels or Paul and the epistles?*

The assumption behind this choice feeds on a kind of Hegelian view of historical evolution: the Gospels present a simple Christ, who taught a simple message, who led a simple band of simple disciples. At some point, the water was muddied by Paul, who complicated an elementary way of living with heady doctrine and polluted a pure

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religion with philosophical hair-splitting. Paul, so the myth goes, turned a street-smart carpenter into God. And while this narrative is rightly rejected on its nose by most evangelicals, some still assume a lite version of it when they pit the theology of Paul against the practical instructions of Jesus.

The problem, of course, is that such a conception is false on both accounts; Paul is imminently practical, and the words of Christ are doctrinally deep to a breath-taking degree. It is the latter point that I pick up here. And while it's tempting to simply say, "Every word of Scripture is a red-letter word in the sense that Christ speaks to his Bride—and reveals the glory of the Trinity—through the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture, including *Paul*," and rest my case there, I shall assume nothing and will gladly pick up the challenge. If we restrict ourselves simply to the words and actions of Christ found in the Gospels, do we see the Lord Jesus enforcing a concern for doctrine?

The answer is *yes*. Now let me explain.

JESUS INSTRUCTS THE DOCTRINALLY IGNORANT AND CORRECTS THE DOCTRINALLY MISLED

That Jesus most certainly *did* concern himself with sound doctrine is well evidenced by the many times we see him instructing the doctrinally ignorant and correcting the doctrinally misled. Consider, for example, Christ's teaching in the Gospel of John. With his many "truly, truly" statements, Christ reveals that he is the divine doctrinal instructor (John 1:51; 3:3–5; 3:11; 5:19, 24; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20–21, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18). Perhaps the most iconic example of Jesus in this role is found in Christ's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1–21. Whatever you make of this conversation, one of the striking details is found

in Jesus's exasperated question, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (3:10) Admittedly, it may not have been easy doctrinal work for Nicodemus to connect the dots between Israel's Scriptures (specifically, Ezekiel 36:25–27) and all this talk of the new birth, but then again, if anyone could have been expected to pick up on Jesus's teaching here, surely it would have been *"the"* teacher of Israel, Nicodemus himself. And yet here we see Nicodemus, the teacher, being taught. Were we to accept the assumption that Jesus cared little for doctrinal instruction, we would have to insist on the same for Nicodemus—whose *vocation* was, I hasten to remind you, doctrinal instruction.

When we turn to the next page of John's Gospel, we see Jesus *still* instructing the doctrinally ignorant. In this case, the student is the Samaritan woman at the well, and the topic is, among other things, fitting worship. He says, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Many contemporary expositors take Jesus to be speaking purely about the internal disposition of the worshiper and the epochal change that was taking place. The Samaritans and the Jews were disputing over the proper location of worship, and Jesus comes *as* the presence of God. The time of restricting worship to geographical location was forever changed when the Word tabernacled with man (cf., John 1:14), and so now the time has come wherein worshipers worship in "spirit and truth"—or, in sincerity and knowledge. On the surface, I think this is right, and is by itself *doctrinal* instruction. But even here, the witness of the great tradition of Christianity would call us to hear in Jesus's words an invitation to even deeper dogmatic contemplation. After all,

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“Spirit” and “Truth” are both names Scripture elsewhere (indeed, even in this very same *Gospel*) attributes to the second and third persons of the Trinity. Basil the Great writes,

If we say that worship offered *in* the Son (the truth) is worship offered *in* the Father’s image, we can say the same about worship offered *in* the Spirit since the Spirit in himself reveals the divinity of the Lord. The Holy Spirit cannot be divided from the Father and the Son in worship. If you remain outside the Spirit, you cannot worship at all, and if you are *in* him you cannot separate him from God. Light cannot be separated from what it makes visible, and it is impossible for you to recognize Christ, the image of the invisible God, unless the Spirit enlightens you.¹

If there is anything to Basil’s insights here, then what Jesus offers in John 4 is more than doctrinal instructions to a Samaritan woman regarding the proper location of worship. He also offers all of us doctrinal instructions about communion with the Trinity and the Trinity’s inseparable operations.

Another favorite example of Christ’s doctrinal correction is when Jesus utters to the Sadducees the Pauline-like blunt verdict: “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29). Now, throughout the Gospels we see Jesus identifying many problems with the Sadducees, but at least one major problem was doctrinal. The context of this rebuke has everything to do with an intermural intellectual debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. If we accept the false dichotomy of caring about doctrine or following the teachings of Jesus, we would expect our Lord to sidestep the hypothetical question the Sadducees ask about marriage and the resurrection, and simply offer some sort of “practical” advice. But instead, he tells them in no uncertain

1 Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 26.64.

terms that they are doctrinally misled, and he situates his teaching about the resurrection within the overarching, heavily loaded dogmatic confession: “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:32).

Even Christ’s ethical injunctions are laced through with significant doctrinal instruction. Consider, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. It is, of course, fitting to go to Matthew 5–7 to glean instructions on right practice, but such instructions must never be abstracted from their theological context. What we find here is a description of Kingdom-living, uttered by Israel’s King who was in the process of inaugurating *his* kingdom. These ethical instructions are couched within one massive doctrinal instruction about Jesus himself: he is founding Yahweh’s kingdom on earth. Those of us who struggle to see this imposing subtext suffer from deficient imaginations; that we can read Christ’s words in Matthew 5:11–12 and not be struck by wonder bespeaks a dullness we would do well to shake ourselves from. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on *my* account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets before.” Just who is this one for whom we suffer persecution? Jesus’s answer is: “the same person for whom the *prophets* suffered persecution—*me*.”

“On my account,” says Jesus, “you will be persecuted, and on *my* account, so were the prophets.” Yet were we to travel back in time and ask the prophets themselves, “on *whose* account do you suffer persecution?” they would undoubtedly answer, “Yahweh; the one God over heaven and earth.” Do we really think Jesus expects for us to unroll this logic a-doctrinally? Right from the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ offers significant doctrinal instruction regarding Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament

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prophets: Yahweh has assumed flesh and now speaks authoritatively in the beatitudes.

The doctrinal instruction in the Sermon on the Mount doesn't stop there. Jesus goes on to assure his listeners that *he* came not to “abolish the Law or the Prophets” but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17–20), and this creates an inseparable bond between Israel's Scriptures and the life and ministry of Christ. To create such a bond without commenting on a doctrine of special revelation is quite impossible—God began to speak through the Law and the Prophets, and according to Jesus, that very same message is completed *in him* (cf., Heb. 1:1–2). Jesus is also making an explicit Christological claim here: if Yahweh makes a promise, and Christ takes it upon himself to keep that promise, he cannot but be claiming the divine name for himself.

And this is just a tiny sampling of the doctrinal instruction spilling out of the Sermon on the Mount, to say nothing of the theology proper we learn from taking God the Son's speech as our own to address “*our* Father” in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), or Christ's lesson on God's exhaustive providence—even over the birds of the air and the flowers of the field (Matt. 6:25–34)—or his lesson on the Father's paternal character to delight to give good gifts to his children (Matt. 7:7–11), or his lesson on cosmic judgment (Matt. 7:15–20)—which apparently hinges on *Christ himself* knowing or not knowing individuals (Matt. 7:21–23). I could keep going. But make no mistake: Jesus does not shy away from instructing his people on doctrinal matters.

JESUS IS THEOLOGY

We have to peer deeper, however, because it is not simply that Christ instructs his disciples on the importance of doctrinal instruction. Astonishingly, it is also the case that *Christ himself* is the content of this doctrinal instruction! *He* is the Word made flesh.

When the “Word became flesh,” he assumed the role of “exegete of the Father.” Jesus was not speaking hyperbolically insisting to Philip that to see Christ is to see the Father (John 14:9). Gregory of Nazianzus makes this point when he describes the “Word” as the “definition” of the Father:

He is “Word,” because he is related to the Father as word is to mind, not only by reason of the undisturbed character of his birth, but also through the connection and declaratory function involved in the relationship. One could say too, perhaps, that his relationship is that of definition to term defined, since “word” has the meaning in Greek of “definition.” He who has known the Son (“seen” means “known” in that context) has known the Father.²

Importantly, the entire event of the incarnation—from Christ’s spiritual conception to his ascension—is revelatory. This point is often missed when Christ’s divine and human natures are pitted against one another. But the point of Christ’s *human* nature and his role as revealer of the divine nature are not incommensurate. We ought to insist on the entire unity of Christ’s person and work “in the flesh” as a revelation of divine glory. It is not simply the case that Christ revealed the glory of God when he performed the miraculous. The entirety of his enfleshed state was doctrinal revelation. This is a point that Christ himself makes.

When the disciples wrote about Christ with doctrinal precision throughout the New Testament, they did nothing else but follow Christ’s lead. It was Christ himself who insisted that rendering honor to the Father and rendering honor to the Son were inseparably tied (John 5:22–23). It was Christ himself who plunged his listeners—and later, John’s readers—into an ocean of theological

2 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 30.20.

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contemplation regarding the doctrine of eternal generation when he made the breathtaking claim, “For as the Father has life *in himself*, so he has granted the Son also to have life *in himself*” (John 5:26).

The notion that Christ is the theological content of Holy Scripture was not the invention of overactive imaginations in the apostles or anyone else. Christ himself makes this claim in no uncertain terms (Luke 24:27; John 5:39). It was not for nothing that the Jews attempted to stone Jesus for claiming equality with God; they understood him perfectly well when he claimed the divine name of Yahweh (John 8:58), or when he said in stark fashion, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Throughout his discourse in John 14–16, Jesus offers unparalleled theological instruction regarding the Triune relations of the Father, Son, and Spirit. And then, if this weren’t enough, he allows his disciples to eavesdrop on an inter-trinitarian dialogue, wherein he reveals, among other things, that the man Christ Jesus, by virtue of his divine nature, shares an eternal glory with the Father, a glory which predates *the world* (John 17:24).

CONCLUSION

The doctrine we read about later in the New Testament is an elaboration on the doctrine Jesus teaches (and the doctrine Jesus *is*) in the Gospels. *He* is their content, in a way that is completely harmonious with him being his own content during his earthly ministry. That is, the doctrinal emphasis in the rest of the New Testament is an unfolding of what Christ himself promises in John 16:4b–15. Here, he promises the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who will “guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13). The Spirit will glorify Jesus when he takes what is Jesus’s and declares it to his disciples (John 16:14).

So, what is this content of Christ's that the Spirit will declare? What makes up this Christ-glorifying information that the Spirit will communicate upon his arrival? *What* exactly is Christ's "mine" here? Answer: "all that the Father has" (John 16:15). Any attempt to make sense of such loaded statements without doctrine is a fool's errand. Jesus *wants* us to think hard about the divine essence he shares with the Father and the Spirit here in this passage and elsewhere. He *wants* us to be a doctrinal people.

When the Spirit inspired the apostles to write their many Christ-exalting, doctrinally-heavy epistles, Christ was making good on this very promise in John 16. This means that when we pit doctrine against devotion to Christ, we pit Christ against himself. Any contrast we see between the "simple" teachings of Jesus and the doctrinal teachings of Paul is more imagined than real. In truth, the teachings of Christ cannot but eventuate in the teachings of Paul, and the teachings of Paul are nothing without the teachings of Christ. What God has joined together, let not man separate.

What Is the Gospel?

GREG GILBERT

There has been much conversation in evangelicalism recently about how Christians should define the gospel—whether we should say that the gospel is purely the message that sinners can be forgiven of sin through repentance and faith in the crucified Christ, or whether it is something broader.

The conversation has gotten pointed, if not heated, at times, with those in one camp saying that those in the other camp are being “reductionistic” about the gospel, and those in that camp retorting that their accusers are actually diluting the gospel and distracting the church from its God-given mission.

It seems to me that we can untangle some of the confusion by making some careful observations. I believe the two major camps in this conversation—those who say the gospel is the good news that God is reconciling sinners to himself through the substitutionary death of Jesus (call them “A”) and those who say the gospel is the good news that God is going to renew and remake the whole world through Christ (“B”)—are largely talking past one another.

In other words, I don’t think the As and the Bs are answering the same question. Of course both camps say they’re answering the question “What is the gospel?” and thus the tension between the two different answers. But if we pay close attention, I think we’ll see that they are actually answering two very different and equally biblical questions.

Those two questions are these:

1. **What is the gospel? In other words, what is the message a person must believe to be saved?**
2. **What is the gospel? In other words, what is the whole good news of Christianity?**

When an A-person hears the question “What is the gospel?” he understands it to mean “What is the message a person must believe to be saved?” and he answers it by talking about the death of Christ in the place of sinners and the call to repent and believe.

When a B-person hears the question “What is the gospel?” he understands it to mean “What is the whole good news of Christianity?” and he answers by talking about God’s purpose to renew the world through Christ.

You can understand why there would be tension between the two. If you answer question (1) by talking about the new creation, people are understandably going to say that your answer is too broad and that you are pushing the cross out of its central place. When people in Scripture asked the question “What must I do to be saved?” the answer they received was to repent of sin and believe in Jesus—not something about the coming new creation.

Yet it’s also true that the Bible sometimes (even often) talks about “the gospel” in terms of the new creation. So to answer question (2) by *only* talking about Christ’s death in the place of sinners and to say that everything else is by definition not-gospel (but merely implication) is indeed too narrow. That would be to say that promises such as the resurrection of the body, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, the new heavens and new earth, and many others are somehow not part of what the Bible holds out as the “good news” of Christianity.

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What we need to understand is that neither of these two questions is wrong and neither is more biblical than the other. The Bible asks and answers both of them. Let me show now from Scripture why I think both these questions I mentioned are legitimate and biblical.

As I read it, the Bible seems to use the word “gospel” in two different but highly related ways. Sometimes it uses “gospel” in a very broad way, that is, to describe *all* the promises that God intends to fulfill in Christ, including not only forgiveness of sin, but also everything else that flows from it—the establishment of the kingdom, the new heavens and new earth, etc. There are other times, though, where it uses “gospel” in a very narrow way, that is, to describe *specifically* the forgiveness of sins through the substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ. In those places, the broader promises don’t seem to be so much in view.

Here are some of the clearest places, I think, where the Bible uses the word “gospel” in the narrow sense:

1. Acts 10:36–43: “As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), . . . To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Peter says that the gospel he preaches is that of “peace through Jesus Christ,” by which he means specifically the good news “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

2. Romans 1:16–17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

Paul defines the gospel in terms of “salvation” and the righteousness of God being revealed through faith. It becomes clear through the rest of the book that he’s talking here about forgiveness of sins (justification) being through faith, not works. His focus in Romans is not on the coming kingdom, but on how one becomes a part of it. And that he calls “gospel.”

3. 1 Corinthians 1:17–18: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” The gospel Paul is sent to preach is “the word of the cross.”

4. 1 Corinthians 15:1–5: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”

The gospel Paul preached to them and which they received was that “Christ died for our sins . . . was buried . . . [and] was raised.” The continuing references to the appearances shouldn’t be taken as part of “the gospel,” as if we have to tell someone that Jesus appeared to Peter, the Twelve, and James or we’re not telling them the gospel. Those references are meant to establish the resurrection as real and historical.

And here are some of the clearest places, I think, where it is used in the broad sense:

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1. Matthew 4:23: “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”

This is the first mention of the word “gospel” in Matthew’s account, so we should expect some contours to be given to the term. To fill in the content of the “gospel of the kingdom” which Jesus preached, we look back to verse 17, the first mention of “kingdom.” There, Jesus is recorded as preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

The gospel of the kingdom that Jesus preached was the message that a) the kingdom had dawned, and b) those who repent could enter it.

2. Mark 1:14-15: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

With the exception of the very first verse, this is the first use of the word in Mark’s account. The “gospel of God” which Jesus proclaimed was: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

The gospel of God is the message that a) the kingdom has dawned, and b) those who repent and believe can enter it.

3. Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. . .”

This is the OT passage from which Jesus launches his public ministry. The word “good news,” as it’s used in Isaiah 61, is I think referring to the full-orbed establishment of God’s kingdom-rule.

4. Acts 13:32: “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus. . .”

Verse 38 is very clear that the good news Paul brought was that forgiveness of sin comes through “this man.” But also, in verse 32 the “good news” is said to be “that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled . . . by raising Jesus.” Surely God’s promises to the fathers, now fulfilled in Jesus, included but were not limited to forgiveness of sins?

So looking carefully into the New Testament, it seems to me that the word “gospel” is used in both a broad way and in a narrower way. Broadly, as in Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 4, and Acts 13, it refers to all the promises made to us through the work of Jesus—not only forgiveness of sins, but also resurrection, reconciliation with both God and others, sanctification, glorification, coming Kingdom, new heavens and new earth, and so forth.

You might say that in those cases, “gospel” refers to the whole complex of God’s promises secured through the life and work of Christ. We might call this broader sense the gospel of the kingdom. In the narrow sense, such as we see in Acts 10, the whole book of Romans, 1 Corinthians 1 and 1 Corinthians 15, “gospel” refers specifically to the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus and the call to all people to repent and believe in him. We might call this narrower sense the gospel of the cross.

Now let me make two other things explicit.

First, the broad use of the word “gospel” *necessarily* includes the narrow. Look at those examples from Matthew and Mark. Jesus does not just proclaim the onset of the kingdom, as many have said. He proclaims the onset of the kingdom *and* he proclaims the means of entering it. Look closely: Jesus did not preach the gospel saying,

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“The kingdom of heaven has come!” He preached the gospel saying, “The kingdom of heaven has come. *Therefore repent and believe!*”

This is crucial, the difference indeed between gospel and not-gospel:

To proclaim the inauguration of the kingdom and the new creation and all the rest without proclaiming how people can enter it—by repenting and being forgiven of their sins through faith in Christ and his atoning death—is to preach a non-gospel.

Indeed, it is to preach bad news, since you give people no hope of being included in that new creation. The gospel of the kingdom is not merely the proclamation of the kingdom. It is the proclamation of the kingdom *together with* the proclamation that people may enter it by repentance and faith in Christ.

Second, it’s worth noting explicitly, again, the fact that the New Testament calls the specific, narrow message of forgiveness of sins through Christ “the gospel.” Therefore, those who would argue something like, “If you’re just preaching the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and not God’s intention to remake the world, you’re not preaching the gospel,” are wrong. Both Paul and Peter (just to mention names from the above examples) seem quite happy to say that they have preached “the gospel” if they have told people about the forgiveness of sins through the substitutionary death of Jesus, full stop.

If it is true that the New Testament uses the word “gospel” in both a broad and a narrow sense, how are we to understand the relationship between those two senses, between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the cross? That’s the next question, and once we answer it, I think it will help us to be clearer in our own minds about some really important questions.

So how do the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the cross relate? I already have argued that the gospel of the kingdom *necessarily* includes the gospel of the cross.

But more specifically, is the gospel of the cross merely a *part* of the gospel of the kingdom, or something more? Is it central to it, peripheral to it, the heart of it, or something else? And for that matter, why are the New Testament writers willing to apply the word “gospel” to the particular promise of forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ, and not to other particular promises that are included in the broad gospel? Why do we never see Paul saying, “And that’s my gospel: that humans can be reconciled to each other!”?

I think we can get at an answer to all those questions by realizing that the gospel of the cross is not just any part of the gospel of the kingdom. Rather, the gospel of the cross is the gateway, the fountainhead, even the seed, so to speak, of the gospel of the kingdom. Read the whole New Testament, and you quickly realize that its univocal message is that a person cannot get to those broad blessings of the kingdom except by being forgiven of sin through the death of Christ. That is the fountain from which all the rest springs.

That, I think, is why it is perfectly appropriate for the biblical authors to call that fountainhead “the gospel” even as they also call the whole package—including forgiveness, justification, resurrection, new creation and all the rest—“the gospel.” Because the broad blessings of the gospel are attained *only* by means of the narrow (atonement, forgiveness, faith and repentance), and because those blessings are attained *infallibly* by means of the narrow, it’s entirely appropriate for the New Testament writers to call that gateway/seed/fountainhead promise “the gospel.”

It’s also perfectly appropriate for the New Testament to call that fountainhead “the gospel” and at the same time *not* call any

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other particular blessing of the broader package “the gospel.” So we don’t call human reconciliation “the gospel.” Nor do we even call the new heavens and new earth “the gospel.” But we do call forgiveness through atonement “the gospel” because it is the fountainhead of and gateway to all the rest.

There are some important implications that flow from this.

First, it is worth saying again: Those who argue that “the gospel” is the declaration of the kingdom are simply wrong. The gospel is not the declaration of the kingdom; it is (in the broad sense) the declaration of the kingdom *together with* the means of entering it.

Second, to say that the gospel of the cross is somehow not the gospel, or less than the gospel, is wrong. So long as the question is, “What is the message a person must believe to be saved,” the gospel of the cross *is* the gospel. Jesus, Paul, and Peter say so.¹

Third, to say that the gospel of the kingdom is somehow gospel-plus, or a distraction from the real gospel, is also wrong. So long as the question is “What is the whole good news of Christianity,” the gospel of the kingdom is not gospel-plus; it *is* the gospel. Jesus, Paul, and Peter say so.

Fourth, it is wrong to call a person a Christian simply because they are doing good things and “following Jesus’s example.” To be a Christian, to be a partaker of the blessings of the Kingdom, requires one first to go through the gate—that is, to come to Christ in faith and be forgiven of sin and atoned for.

Bunyan tells the story in *Pilgrim’s Progress* about the characters Mr. Formalist and Mr. Hypocrisy whom Christian meets on the

1 Jesus very clearly preaches the gospel of the cross (in Mark 10:45, for instance) even if he doesn’t explicitly tie the word “gospel” to it in his recorded words. On a more general note, even as we recognize the benefit of word-studies, we should not tie our definition of the gospel and our identification of it in the text *too* tightly to occurrences of the word “gospel.” Otherwise, we’d have to say that John never talks about it, for he never uses the word in all his New Testament writings.

path to the Celestial City. After a moment's conversation, however, Christian realizes that they had jumped the wall to the path rather than going through the Wicket Gate. The upshot: These two are not Christians, regardless of how well they are now navigating the path.

To change the characters a bit, there are many people out there who must realize that Mr. Jesus-Follower and Mrs. Kingdom-Life-Liver are *not* Christians—not unless they have come to the crucified Jesus in repentance and faith for the forgiveness of their sins. A person can “live like Jesus lived” all he wants to, but unless he goes through the Wicket Gate of atonement, faith and repentance, he's not really come to Christ. He's simply jumped the wall.

Fifth, I believe it is wrong ever to say that non-Christians are doing “kingdom work.” A non-Christian working for human reconciliation or justice is doing a good thing, but that is not kingdom work because it is not done in the name of the King. C.S. Lewis was wrong; you cannot do good things in the name of Tash and expect Aslan to be happy about it.

Sixth, the ultimate goal of any mercy ministry—whether done by an individual Christian or a church—has to be to point the world back to the gate. Much could be said here, but I think understanding all this rightly can provide a powerful missionary motive and a penetrating witness to the world.

When you renovate a barber shop in the name of Jesus, for instance, you need to tell the owner (to put it sharply for brevity's sake), “Look, I'm doing this because I serve a God who cares about things like beauty and order and peace. In fact, the Bible says and I believe that God is one day going to recreate this world and inaugurate a kingdom where paint won't peel and trees won't die. But [and here we get to the point] *I don't think you're going to be a part of that.* Because of your sin. Unless you repent and believe in Christ.” And

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then you tell him the good news of the cross. If you just renovate the barber shop and proclaim the coming kingdom, you've fallen short of proclaiming the gospel. The gospel of the kingdom is the declaration of the kingdom *together with* the means of getting into it.

Seventh, as I've argued before, I believe that many in the so-called emergent church—for all their insistence about how astonishing and surprising their gospel is—have missed entirely what really *is* astonishing about the gospel.

That Jesus is King and has inaugurated a kingdom of love and compassion is not really all that astonishing at all. Every Jew knew that was going to happen someday. What is truly astonishing about the gospel is that the Messianic King *dies* to save his people—that the divine Son of Man in Daniel, the Davidic Messiah, and the Suffering Servant in Isaiah turn out to be the same man. That, moreover, is ultimately how we tie together the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the cross. Jesus is not just King, but Crucified King. Next to that, what many in the emergent church are holding out as an astonishing gospel is not astonishing at all. It's just boring.

Eighth, everything we've said so far drives toward the conclusion that evangelistic, missiological, and pastoral emphasis in this age belongs on the gospel of the cross—on the fountainhead, the gateway of the broader gospel of the kingdom. That is because all the rest is unattainable and indeed *bad* news unless we point people there. Not only so, but this is the age in which God's overarching command to every human in the world is "Repent and believe."

There's only one command that is actually included in the gospel itself (whether broad or narrow): Repent and believe. That is the primary obligation on human beings in this age, and therefore it must be our primary emphasis in our preaching, too.

Gospel-Centrality: A Warning and a Recommendation

BOBBY JAMIESON

How do you move beyond the gospel without moving on from the gospel? On the other hand, if the gospel is so all-important, do we need to “move beyond” the gospel in any sense at all?

Those are two of the questions which are raised by this increasingly audible gospel-centrality movement among evangelicals.

A while back, I looked at one possible objection to this movement. In this post I’ll tackle these two questions. One yields a recommendation, the other a warning.

First, I should say that I think evangelicals’ apparently increasing focus on the gospel is a wonderful trend. These many voices are right to tell us that the gospel is central to sanctification, that the indicative grounds the imperative, and that we don’t move beyond the gospel but deeper into the gospel. These are all deeply biblical arguments.

TWO EVANGELICAL “ISMS”: ESSENTIALISM AND REDUCTIONISM

But, someone might say, “If the gospel is so all-important, do we need to ‘move beyond’ it in any sense at all?”

Evangelicals are deeply essentialist. For a variety of historically conditioned reasons, we like to boil things down to their road-ready minimum and get on with life. As I’ve often heard it said, we tend to have two speeds, essential and unimportant.

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One danger with this new movement, then, is that if the gospel occupies the “essential” category (and it should!), then everything else will be consigned to the “unimportant” bin.

Once in a while I’ll hear little hints of this in warnings not to let anything eclipse or overshadow or marginalize the gospel in our lives and churches. Such warnings are necessary and on the mark, but if we don’t carve out a third space between essential and unimportant, the gospel itself will be in danger. You can’t preserve the gospel merely by focusing on the gospel. There are all kinds of God-given doctrines and practices which are necessary to that end, and we neglect them to our own peril.

For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is inseparable from the gospel. Father, Son, and Spirit each fulfill distinct roles in salvation, which means that any distortion of the Trinity is a distortion of the gospel as well.

Another example: the truthfulness of Scripture presents a firm epistemological foundation for the gospel. Our trust in Christ is grounded in the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God’s Word.

As to gospel-protecting practices, consider church membership and church discipline. As Jonathan Leeman has said, church membership¹ shows the world who represents Jesus and church discipline² protects the name of Jesus.

Church membership marks off the body of people who belong to the gospel. It shows the world, “This is who the gospel people are. This is the new people which the gospel creates.”

1 Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), <https://www.9marks.org/books/church-membership/>.

2 Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), <https://www.9marks.org/books/church-discipline-how-the-church-protects-the-name-of-jesus/>.

And church discipline guards the image of the gospel which the church displays to the world. It keeps the church from presenting a false picture of the gospel to the watching nations. It does this by saying what a Christian isn't: "This is not the life which flows from the gospel."

Further, as someone has said, church discipline is the gospel in action.³ In Christ, God doesn't leave us in our sin. Nor should we leave our fellow church members in their sin. Instead, we should move toward them with loving rebuke and Christ's free offer of forgiveness.

These doctrines and practices, along with many more, are closely related to the gospel. They're organically connected to it. We can't neglect them without doing some kind of harm to our understanding of, and witness to, the gospel.

So now my warning: don't let your gospel-centrality become gospel essentialism, which leads to gospel reductionism. Yes, make the gospel the center of your life, and your church's life. But don't make it sound as if the gospel is the only thing that matters.

CONNECT THE DOTS

On to the first question: how then do we move beyond the gospel without moving on from the gospel? In other words, how do we preach and practice these things without leaving the gospel behind?

Here's my recommendation: we do this by constantly connecting the dots between the gospel and our doctrine and practice.

We've done that already in this article. The Trinity, biblical authority, church membership, and church discipline are organically connected to the gospel. And so are dozens of other crucial doctrines and practices.

3 Bobby Jamieson, "Church Discipline Is Not a Dirty Chore," 9Marks, August 21, 2014, <https://www.9marks.org/article/church-discipline-is-not-a-dirty-chore/>.

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The way for a church leader to move beyond the gospel without moving on from the gospel is to make those organic links explicit in your preaching and teaching. The way to focus on other matters without losing our focus on the gospel is by tracing out their relationship to the gospel.

So teach about church elders and parenting and eschatology and dating and baptism in light of the gospel, and in a way that shows how each of these things link to the gospel. That way, other doctrines and practices won't compete with the gospel. Instead, they'll link arms with it.

Don't let your gospel-centrality become gospel reductionism. Instead, connect the dots between the gospel and everything else, including the structure and corporate life of the local church.

3. Conversion and Evangelism

WHAT IS IT?

Conversion is the radical change of heart and life which God brings about in his people by his Spirit. Evangelism is one person telling others about how to be reconciled to God through faith in Christ. Evangelism is often the means by which God converts people.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- From the Law, the prophets, and Jesus and the Apostles' teaching we learn that man is in desperate need of a new heart (Deut. 31:14–23, Ezek. 3:7; Mark 7:20–23; Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:10).
- In the Old Testament, God promised to change his people's hearts himself by sending a Messiah who would redeem them from their failures and sins (Isa. 53:4–5; Jer. 31:33–34).
- Through the work of Jesus, the promised Messiah, and God's Holy Spirit, everyone who God calls to himself is converted—that is, they repent, believe, and are saved (John 3:5–13, 6:37–40). This conversion cannot be accomplished in man's heart without God performing the work (John 6:44).
- God commands that everyone who has been converted to go and share the good news of Jesus with the world in order that they too may be saved (Matt. 28:19–20; Rom. 10:14–15; 2 Cor. 5:19). This is the work of evangelism, and evangelism is God's ordinary means to bring about conversion.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Conversion is important because we were created to find ultimate joy in dwelling with God, and we must be converted to know and be with him. Evangelism is important because God calls and uses us to share the good news with others so that they might be saved.

How Should We Define Evangelism?¹

J. MACK STILES

I don't think Christian people set out to write books on evangelism based on unbiblical principles. But it happens. It happens because there are wrong ideas about the critical components of evangelism. Usually, these wrong ideas are based on marketing principles or on human understandings about how to argue someone into the kingdom. It has more to do with results and effect, which is the realm of the Holy Spirit, rather than faithfulness in proclaiming the truth, which is our job description. If we don't have biblical evangelism nailed down, we tend to spend much time doing things we call evangelism but may not be evangelism at all.

For example, a housewife meeting with a friend over coffee may be evangelizing, while a brilliant Christian apologist speaking to thousands in a church sanctuary may not be. Few see it this way, but that's because we have false understandings of what evangelism is. Defending the faith is a fine thing to do, but it is easy to give apologetics for Christianity without explaining the gospel—and we cannot evangelize without the gospel.

1 *Editor's Note: This article is a lightly adapted excerpt from Mack's book from the 9Marks Building Healthy Churches series: Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus (Crossway, 2013). It's the first of three excerpts. The second is "Definitions: Gospel and Persuade." The third is "The Problem with Evangelistic Programs."*

We need to know what we're talking about when we say "evangelism," "conversion," or even "gospel." Those words raise different definitions in people's minds and often come with question marks. If Christians don't understand these basic concepts, we will quickly spin out of biblical orbit. So, we define evangelism in a biblical way to help align our evangelistic practice with the Scriptures. Here's a definition that has served me well for many years:

Evangelism is teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade.

Sort of dinky, huh? I bet most people would expect much more from such an important theological word. But this definition, small as it is, offers a far better balance in which to weigh our evangelistic practice than looking at how many people have responded to an appeal.

Here is how the Amplified Bible might have expanded my definition:

Evangelism is teaching (heralding, proclaiming, preaching) the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim (hope, desire, goal) to persuade (convince, convert).

Notice the definition doesn't require an immediate outward response. Walking an aisle, raising a hand, or even praying a prayer may tell us that evangelism has happened, but such actions are not what evangelism is. Notice, too, that if any of the four components (Teaching, Gospel, Aim, or Persuade) are missing, we are probably doing something other than evangelism. Let's look at two of these: teaching and aim.

TEACHING

Many of us think of preaching when we think of evangelism, as we should. I, for one, want any sermon I give to contain the gospel. Certainly Paul did his share of evangelistic preaching. But often when Paul describes his ministry, he says it is a teaching ministry (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). J. I. Packer, in his survey of Paul's

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evangelistic practice, says that Paul's method of evangelism was primarily a teaching method.

This is good news for those of us who don't get to preach every Sunday. Not all of us can be preachers, but we can all teach the gospel as opportunity comes. I often wonder whether more people come to faith over lunch when someone asks, "What did you think about the sermon today?" than during the sermon itself. Great things happen when we can teach the gospel.

AIM

An "aim to persuade" also reminds us that people need more than a data transfer. Some who think of evangelism as only teaching do a good job of explaining, expanding, and answering questions, as we all should. All Christians should apply themselves to think through reasons for the hope we have in Christ, reasons that sweep aside the objections and questions. But as we set out the facts of the gospel, remembering evangelism's aim helps us to be compassionate, understanding, and loving (1 Pet. 3:15).

Having an aim helps us keep perspective on what we're doing. It steers us toward an end. Our aim helps us remember that much is at stake: to see people moved from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom. Aiming for something bigger helps us know which fights to pick and which to avoid.

One of the Dirtiest Words Today: C-----n

BRAD WHEELER

I was recently called in for my semi-annual performance review where I work as a financial advisor. My regional manager was dutifully engaging me in pleasantries about life and family when I casually mentioned that I would be preaching at my local church the following Sunday.

As if on cue, my manager smiled, leaned back into the folds of his leather chair, and launched into a monologue about how preachers can be wonderful financial advisors because they have a “way with words and with people.” Preachers are “the best story-tellers,” and so on.

With sadness I noted his conception of preachers as “story-tellers,” but I politely nodded and genuinely appreciated his desire to connect with me. He then lamented the poor “preachers” he has heard in his Reform Jewish context. Yet, he proceeded to say, he felt confident that I did a better job in “motivating others to be better people,” since “that’s really what it’s all about.”

Not wanting to lose an opportunity for the gospel (and perhaps dispel the notion of preachers as mere story-tellers), I tried, albeit poorly, to draw an analogy between what I aim to do in preaching and what I aim to do in financial advising. In advising, I review a person’s financial status, assess the dangers and potential pitfalls of his current position, and then attempt to direct him down a path of financial security. “The task of preaching can be similar,” I noted. “I

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help them know something about God and their precarious position apart from him, and I then point them toward the good news of the gospel in Jesus Christ.”

My analogy didn’t have the intended effect, or perhaps it did, for he quickly retorted, “You’re not actually trying to *convert* people, are you?”

I could tell from his response that I had just crossed the line and confirmed his greatest fear: I was one of *those* Christians. You know, the kind who doesn’t respect other people’s personal beliefs, who insensitively interfere in other people’s business, and who arrogantly presume that you must think like them—or else.

He did not say as much, but it was written all over his face. With a smile I said, “Sure I am. Does that surprise you?”

He didn’t know quite how to respond, and so in the ensuing minutes I tried to help him understand that the gospel is not merely about making people behave better outwardly but being born again from within (John 3). A Christian is one who *repents* of their sin and *believes* in Christ (cf. Mark 1:15). Sadly, what my Jewish friend found so obnoxious was not Christ’s claim upon his life that he repent and believe, but that I actually preached this message of conversion to others.

CONVERSION—A DIRTY WORD?

What’s the point of the story? Conversion is a dirty word. It’s scandalous in today’s pluralistic and relativistic world to contend for one religious truth over and against another. It smacks of pride, arrogance, disrespect, perhaps hatred, maybe even violence.

This is the consensus among many of the secular elite. Popular television personality Bill Maher believes Christianity can only be

explained as a “neurological disorder.”¹ Only the most unenlightened, uneducated, and uncouth Neanderthal would both believe and contend for a conversion to religious faith, especially Christianity. It’s absolutely what the modern man does *not* need.

And Maher simply represents what secular humanism as a movement has been saying all along. To quote from their own manifesto, “traditional theism . . . and salvationism . . . based on mere affirmation is harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival.”² Reasonable minds . . . you can hear the condescension dripping from the pen.

Some go further, of course. They say such attempts at diversion (i.e. conversion) actually breed violence. In a publicized letter to the Pope John Paul II, Hindu scholar Swami Dayananda Saraswati argued that “religious conversion destroys centuries-old communities and incites communal violence. It is violence and it breeds violence.”

There is a sense in which I agree with Saraswati. Forced conversion at the edge of a sword—be it in modern day Islam or ninth-century “Christianity” under Charlemagne—will incite violence. But of course for Saraswati and the liberal academic establishment, it is no less violent, demeaning, and contemptible to simply say the words out loud, “Hell does exist, and people will consciously suffer for eternity on account of their sins.” Such is the confused world we live in.

1 The broader context is as follows. “We are a nation that is unenlightened because of religion. I do believe that. I think that religion stops people from thinking. I think it justifies crazies. I think flying planes into buildings was a faith-based initiative. I think religion is a neurological disorder.” In the interview Maher goes on to say, “I don’t hate America. I love America. I am just embarrassed that it has been taken over by people like evangelicals, by people who do not believe in science and rationality. It is the 21st century. And I will tell you, my friend. The future does not belong to evangelicals.”

2 See <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html>.

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Of course, a Christian should not be too surprised when the world scorns and derides his or her message (though neither should we erect needless opposition to the gospel and then glory in our persecution as a Christian badge of honor). We are promised that the message of the cross is nothing other than foolishness to those who are perishing (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18). And yet there is a sense of embarrassment in some ostensibly Christian circles for “conversionist” theology. Ashamed of their heritage, these self-professed Christians attempt to blaze a new (i.e. better) and more respectable path forward.

Just in recent months the Vatican and World Council of Churches—which includes more than 350 mainline Protestant, Orthodox, and related churches—began working on a “common code for religious conversions.” Input is also being solicited from Muslim leaders.

The fact that the various constituencies within this group hold to differing gospels ought to make us immediately suspect. Nonetheless, their hope is to “distinguish between witness and proselytism, making respect for freedom of thought, conscience and the religion of others a primary concern in any encounter between people of different faiths.”

The specific findings and recommendations of this commission will not be complete for another few years, but a few things are patently clear. For starters, “respect” is cherished and prized above everything, including truth. And the way to show respect to others is to not proselytize them (seek their conversion), but to bear witness to one’s own truth while appreciating their truth.

In short, what used to be understood as the radical need for regeneration and conversion has been eviscerated. We might say that this common code for religious conversion is really just a common code for *non-conversion*.

Yet it seems that conversion is even under attack among some professed evangelicals. This ought to strike us as nonsensical. Our English word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word for “good news.” What is this good news? It is that we, who are at enmity with God in our sin, can now be reconciled to him on account of Christ’s death and resurrection, when we repent of our sin and believe upon Christ. Conversion from our former way of life and thinking to Christianity is required. This much should be blatantly obvious.

Nonetheless, Brian MacLaren, perhaps the most prominent leader within the emerging church movement, calls for a reconsideration of conversion, if not an outright rejection of it. He writes in *A Generous Orthodoxy*,

I must add, though, that I don’t believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (though not all) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts. This will be hard, you say, and I agree. But frankly, it’s not at all easy to be a follower of Jesus in many ‘Christian’ religious contexts, either.³

We are told to embrace other faiths “willingly, not begrudgingly.” To be fair, McLaren asserts the uniqueness of Christianity apart from other religions.⁴ And yet his belief in “a gospel that is universally efficacious for the whole earth,” his unwillingness to “set limits on the saving power of God” in reference to the unevangelized, and his belief that we must continually expect to “rediscover the gospel”

3 Brian MacLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004 Paperback), 293.

4 Ibid, 283 and 295.

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as we encounter other religious traditions, “leading to that new place where none of us has ever been before,” raises significant and serious questions.⁵ Frankly, I have difficulty seeing how he is recommending anything Christian, let alone orthodox. In the end, his proposals are eerily similar to those being set forth by the Vatican and the WCC.

CONVERSION—A BIBLICAL IDEA?

Given how narrow-minded and bigoted conversion appears to the modern mind, must we contend for it as Christians? In other words, is a doctrine of conversion biblically required?

Absolutely. Although, the word is rare in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 23:15; Acts 6:5; 15:3; 1 Tim. 3:6), the idea of conversion is central to the storyline of Scripture.

The common words in Hebrew (*shub*) and Greek (*epistrephō*) that picture conversion are regularly translated “turn,” “turn back,” “return,” or “restore” in our English text. We read in Ezekiel 33:11, ‘Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they *turn* from their ways and live. *Turn! Turn* from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’

Similarly in Isaiah 55:7: “Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him *turn* to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

In the New Testament, Paul says that Christ sent him to the Gentiles in order to “open their eyes and *turn* them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive

5 Ibid, 124, 294, 293. Additionally, when asked about the exclusivity of the gospel (which would necessitate a conversion to Christ in contrast to an “inclusive” or “universal” gospel that offers hope to all, including the unconverted in this life), McLaren simply says such questions are “weapons of mass distraction.” He dismisses the question and refuses to answer. Sadly, this non-answer is an answer. See *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 42.

forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18). He also recounts how the church in Thessalonica “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thes. 1:9).

Luke says of John the Baptist, “Many of the people of Israel will he *bring back* to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16).

This picture of conversion as “turning” or “returning” is also seen in Christ’s regular call to “follow me,” as when he says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and *follow me*” (cf. Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Or, “anyone who does not take his cross and *follow me* is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38). Following Christ is costly. Taking up one’s cross means forsaking everything. To the individual enslaved to his wealth, for instance, Jesus says, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, *follow me*” (Mark 10:21). To the disciple who wants to bury his father, Jesus commands, “*Follow me*, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22).

CONVERSION—WHAT IT IS AND ISN’T

So what exactly is conversion? Can we sum it up?

Repentance and Faith

First, this picture of conversion as turning from self and humbly following after God can be captured in two words—*repentance* and *faith*. Conversion equals repentance and faith. In conversion, we turn our minds, emotions, and wills from the service of an idol (namely, self) to another (God). By faith we then trust in God and his Word, believing like Abraham and all of God’s saints that he who promised is faithful. In this sense, conversion and repentance are inextricably linked. As one writer helpfully puts it,

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Repentance, the forsaking of sin and the cultivating of a new hope, and *faith*, turning to Christ in belief and trust, are related to one another as two sides of a coin. The two are *interdependent* responses, each incomplete without the other. Thus conversion involves both a believing repentance and a penitent faith.⁶

Radical and Costly

Second, the call to conversion is both *radical* and *costly*. It is costly because it necessitates the denial of self. To follow Christ is to subjugate all earthly pleasures and desires before his will. We ourselves, even our family, all take backstage before this unyielding commitment to our king.

It is radical because it exchanges darkness for light, dead idols for the living God, the passing wealth of this life for the enduring riches of heaven. The radical nature of conversion is also witnessed in some of the more extraordinary conversion accounts recorded in the book of Acts (cf. Paul in ch. 9; Cornelius in ch. 10; Philippian jailer in ch. 16). Even if the process is slow and we can't point to a moment in time when the Lord brought us out of the realm of darkness and into the realm of light, this doesn't mean the change is any less dramatic and distinct. One is no longer a child of the devil but has been adopted as a child of God (cf. 1 John 3:10).

Not Mere Dialogue

Third, conversion is *not mere dialogue* or conversation. Sadly, this is commonly misunderstood. Dialogue is often presented almost as an end itself. I share my Christian experiences, you share your Buddhist

6 Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 263-4.

experiences, and we're both the better for it, since "we're all recipients of the same mercy, sharing in the same mystery."⁷

But dialogue is not the end, conversion is. Of course, no conversion can take place without respectful dialogue, and no conversion is possible unless God initiates supernatural change in the heart. Nonetheless, we do not walk away from a dialogue happy if our friend still rejects Christ. Rather, like the prophets of the Old Testament, Christ, and Paul, we weep and mourn for those who remain in their sin and refuse to follow after God (cf. Matt. 23:37).

Not Just a Journey

Fourth, conversion is *not a journey*. In a journey one may wander, but never arrive. He may learn, but never comes to any conclusion. Many today say that the journey (merely learning) is itself sufficient.

But journeying is not enough. We must enter into God's kingdom. We must reach the final destination, for there will come a time when the bridegroom will come and those that are not with him will be shut out of the wedding feast (Matt. 25:10).

Not Optional

Fifth, the call to conversion is *neither optional nor negotiable*. The biblical writers do not merely encourage but command in the most unequivocal terms that all must turn and follow after God in Christ. Notice how many of the commands above are accompanied with a corresponding warning. Failure to repent and turn to God is no minor matter. It forfeits life for death, judgment, and hell.

And yet the call to conversion is never accompanied with physical force, manipulation, or coercion. Christians should persuade and reason with words, no more (2 Cor. 4:1–2). Their only "sword" is

7 Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 291.

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the Word of God and the witness of their lives. Nothing could be sharper or more effective (cf. Heb. 4:12).

So just how biblically necessary is conversion? When Paul and Barnabas were at Lystra and Derbe, the people witnessed their miracles and confused them for the Greek gods of Zeus and Hermes. Paul and Barnabas' response is instructive:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them" (Acts 14:14–15).

There would be no syncretism, no amalgamation of the Christian gospel and Greek mythology (or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or anything else for that matter). Paul and Barnabas insisted that all turn from these worthless false gods to the living God. They insisted on nothing short of a wholehearted, radical conversion.

BENEFITS FOR BELIEVERS

Conversion lies at the very heart of Christianity. To sacrifice it is to sacrifice nothing other than the gospel and the good news it promises to all. This is surely reason enough to defend a clear and robust understanding of biblical conversion. Lord willing, we'll think more about the theological doctrine and its implications in our next piece.

But do we need to say anything more? Here are just two reasons why a proper understanding of conversion is important not only to God and the unconverted in our midst, but to our own spiritual well-being as believers.

Humility

First, a proper understanding of conversion promotes humility and makes grace meaningful. Paul writes, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:21–22ff).

Or consider Peter, “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet. 3:18).

What were we? Before conversion, we were unrighteous, alienated, and enemies of God. And this is not figurative language or hyperbole. We concern ourselves with terror attacks, invest in costly alarm systems for our homes, and fret over whether our cars have side air bags—all in an attempt to feel safe and secure. But imagine for a moment what it would be like to have the God of the universe as *your* enemy. The Bible says we really were at enmity with God, and more to the point, he with us (cf. Jas. 4:4)!

How else can we explain the pain, agony, and wrath of the cross, if not that God was propitiating his own anger towards us, enemies of his holiness and justice?

If conversion is not necessary, neither is the cross.

We must preach the gospel to ourselves again and again, remembering in all humility what we deserved, and then rejoicing at the tremendous grace God has shown in reconciling us through the cross of Christ.

Missions

Second, a proper understanding of conversion fuels our missionary endeavors. The world is in danger. There is a spiritual battle for the souls of men. Satan would like nothing more than to see today’s church lulled into complacency by suggesting that a radical

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conversion to Christianity isn't finally necessary. "Sure," the voices of inclusivism or universalism say, "it might be preferable to call for conversion, but is it really necessary? A first-class airline seat may be preferable to a coach ticket, but both finally arrive at the same destination, right? So let people remain where they are." By definition, both inclusivism (which says that some "anonymous Christian" may be saved through Christ, even though they haven't consciously repented and believed in him) and universalism (which says that all humanity will be saved) destroy the biblical witness and our impetus for world missions.

We do well to remember these words of Christ instead:

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:47–50).

Only in Christ are all made alive and reconciled to God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:22). Thus, it is absolutely incumbent upon any Christian to preach this call to conversion, imploring all to be reconciled to God through Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17–21).

CONCLUSION: ONE OF *THOSE* CHRISTIANS

"You're not actually trying to convert people, are you?" That moment with my boss was uncomfortable. No one wants to share the gospel only to receive the look of death and horror that cries, "you honestly believe that . . . about God . . . about me? How could you?!"

I don't enjoy being divisive any more than the next guy. And yet the gospel presents two dialectically opposed ways to live. We are either saved or unsaved, converted or unconverted, a sheep or a goat, a God-worshipper or an idolater, a son of God or a son of the devil, on the narrow path or on the broad path, in the realm of light or darkness, destined for heaven or condemned to hell. We neglect or reject this doctrine at our own peril.

Robert Duncan Culver said it well:

Conversion is as important to the experience and ministry of every minister of the Word and genuine Christian witness as birth to a baby or oxygen to a fire. Without it we are nothing in the kingdom of God and, Jesus said, destined to be cast out of it and, like weeds in the wheat field at harvest time, to be removed from the field and burned in the fire where 'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 13:36–42).⁸

Don't be apologetic. Be one of *those* Christians. Conversion may be a dirty word, but if so it is the one dirty word the Christian must preach with all boldness and passion.

Besides, what's the alternative? Telling people that this world is enough? That their selfish, vain, addiction-ridden, and futile lives are just fine the way they are? That being renewed in the image of God is not all that it's cracked up to be?

I can't imagine anything more discouraging—and damning!

8 Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology*, (Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 700.

The Corporate Component of Conversion

JONATHAN LEEMAN

If your doctrine of conversion is missing the corporate element, it's missing an essential piece of the whole. A covenant head comes with a covenant people.

VERTICAL FIRST,
HORIZONTAL INSEPARABLY SECOND

That's not to say we should put the corporate element out front. One might think of N. T. Wright's well-known line about justification being "not so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119). This is a clear example, in Douglas Moo's almost-as-well-known line, of backgrounding what the New Testament foregrounds, and foregrounding what the New Testament backgrounds (cited in D. A. Carson, "'Faith' and 'Faithfulness'"¹).

There can be no true reconciliation between humans until individual sinners first reconcile with God. The horizontal necessarily follows the vertical. Ecclesiology necessarily follows soteriology. Which is to say, the corporate element must not come first, lest we lose the whole thing.

1 D.A. Carson, "Faith and Faithfulness," *Ligonier Ministries*, <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/faith-and-faithfulness>.

But it must come. Indeed, the corporate component must remain within the structure of the doctrine of conversion itself. Our corporate unity in Christ is not just an implication of conversion, it's part of the very thing. Being reconciled to God's people is *distinct from* but *inseparable from* being reconciled to God.

Sometimes this gets lost in our emphasis on the *mechanics* of conversion, as when our doctrinal discussions about conversion don't move beyond the relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility or the necessity of repentance and faith. However, a full-orbed understanding of conversion should also include an account of what we're moving *from* and *to*. To be converted involves moving from death to life, from the domain of darkness to the domain of light. *And* it involves moving from people-less-ness to belonging to a people, from being a stray sheep to belonging to the flock, from being something that's dismembered to being a member of the body.

Notice Peter's parallel statements: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:10).

Receiving mercy (vertical reconciliation) is simultaneous to becoming a people (horizontal reconciliation). God has mercy on us by forgiving our sins, and a necessary consequence of that is inclusion in his people.

CORPORATE NATURE OF THE COVENANTS

Indeed, the corporate element of our conversion can be seen by looking no further than the covenantal structure of the Bible. It's true that all the Old Testament covenants find their fulfillment in the seed (singular) of Abraham. Jesus is the new Israel. Yet it's also true that everyone united to Christ through the new covenant

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also becomes the Israel of God and the seed (plural) of Abraham (Gal. 3:29; 6:16).

In other words, a covenantal head by definition brings with him a covenantal people (see Rom. 5:12ff.). To belong to the new covenant, then, is to belong to a people.

Not surprisingly, the Old Testament promises of a new covenant are therefore promised to a people: “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34). The new covenant promises forgiveness (vertical), and it promises a community of brothers (horizontal).

VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL IN EPHESIANS 2

The entire story is put on display wonderfully in Ephesians 2. Verses 1 to 10 explain forgiveness and our vertical reconciliation with God: “By grace you have been saved.” Verses 11 to 20 then present the horizontal: “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14).

Notice that the activity of verse 14 is in the past tense. Christ has *already made* Jew and Gentile one. There is no imperative here. Paul is not commanding his readers to pursue unity. Instead, he’s speaking in the indicative. It’s what they *are* because God has done it, and God *did* it in precisely the same place he accomplished the vertical reconciliation—in the cross of Christ (see also the relationship between indicative and imperative in Eph. 4:1–6).

By virtue of Christ’s new covenant, corporate unity belongs to the indicative of conversion. To be converted is to be made a member of Christ’s body. Our new identity contains an ecclesial element. Christ has made us ecclesial persons.

Here's an easy way to see it. When mom and dad go down to the orphanage to adopt a son, they bring him home and place him at the family dinner table with a new set of brothers and sisters. To be a son is not the same thing as being a brother. And sonship comes first. But brotherhood follows necessarily.

That is to say, conversion signs you up for a family photo.

PERSONAL APPLICATION: JOIN A CHURCH

What's the application for our lives? Simple: join a church!

You've been made righteous, so be righteous. You've been made a member of his body, so join an actual body. You've been made one, so be one with an actual group of Christians.

CORPORATE APPLICATION: GET THE MECHANICS RIGHT

What does this mean for our churches? It means that getting the aforementioned mechanics of conversion right in our doctrine is hugely important. We want strong conceptions of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, both repentance and faith. Imbalances here will lead to an imbalanced and messed up church. What you put into the pot of conversion will become the soup of the church.

If your doctrine of conversion lacks a strong conception of *God's sovereignty*, your preaching and evangelism will risk becoming manipulative and man-pleasing. Your approach to leadership is more likely to become pragmatic. You will risk burning out yourself and your congregation with an over-burdened schedule. Your membership practices will become entitlement or benefits based (like a country club). Your practices of accountability and discipline will mostly vanish. You will put holiness at risk. The list goes on.

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If your doctrine of conversion lacks a strong conception of *human responsibility*, you are more likely to poorly steward your own gifts, as well as your people's gifts. You will more likely be tempted toward complacency in evangelism and sermon preparation. You may be less likely to communicate love and compassion toward those who are hurting. You might come across to others as severe or pat. You might suffer from a weak prayer life, and so forfeit all the blessings that could be yours. You will put love at risk. The list goes on.

If your doctrine of conversion lacks a strong conception of *repentance*, you will be quick to offer assurance of salvation and slow to ask people to count the cost of following Christ. You will more likely tolerate worldliness and divisiveness in the church, and your church members just might tolerate these things because many of them will remain in the shallows of the faith. Nominalism will also be more common because grace will come cheap. In general, the church will like to sing about Christ as Savior, but not much about Christ as Lord, and it won't look much different than the world.

If your doctrine of conversion lacks a strong conception of *faith*, you will have a church filled with anxious, self-righteous, man-pleasing legalists. The more self-disciplined members of the church will feel self-deceivingly good about themselves, while the less-disciplined members will quietly hide away their secret sin and steadily learn to condemn themselves and resent others. Transparency will be rare, hypocrisy common. Outsiders and prodigals will not feel the warmth and compassion of true grace. Cultural preferences will be confused with law. The church will like to sing about the marching orders of Christ the King, but not so much about a blood-stained Lamb, a Lamb slain for them.

I'm broad-stroking, of course. Things don't fall out quite this neatly. But the basic idea in all of these examples trades on the tight connection between conversion and the church. If conversion necessarily involves a corporate element, or, more concretely, if individual conversions necessarily produce a united people, then everything else that you stick into your doctrine of conversion will dramatically affect what kind of church you get.

Do you want a healthy church? Then work on your doctrine of conversion and teach all sides of it to your people. Make sure, furthermore, that the structures and programs of your church cohere with this multi-faceted and powerful doctrine.

Connecting Evangelism and Church

JONATHAN LEEMAN

Is evangelism an individual sport or a team sport? Really, it's both.

Think of fishing. There are times you might saunter down to the dock by your lonesome, dangle your feet off the side, and cast in a line. But ask the men on an ocean trawler what it takes to haul a ton of wriggling mackerel out of writhing seawaters. They desperately need one another.

The fishing analogy does not say everything we would want to say about the relationship between evangelism and the local church, but it's biblical, and it's a start. Jesus told the disciples to follow him, that he would make them fishers of men, and then he sent them out two by two to preach that people should repent (Mark 1:17; 6:7, 13). Like fishermen on a trawler, we need the church to do the work of evangelism.

Yet there's a bigger picture to see in relating evangelism and the church. Think of the first chapters of Acts, where the apostles proclaimed the resurrection, and behind them was the church, living together and sharing everything in common, "praising God and enjoying the favor of the people" (2:47; also 5:13). Somehow, the life of the church, sitting there as a backdrop to the proclamation of the gospel, served as a witness to the gospel. It caused many in Jerusalem to view the saints with favor, and it seemed to lead to more conversions.

Was it these early days in Jerusalem that Peter had in mind when he later described the church as a people, a priesthood, and a

nation “that you may declare the praises of him” who called us out of darkness, and to live such good lives that pagans would see our good deeds “and glorify God?” (1 Pet. 2:9, 12)

In both the early chapters of Acts and 1 Peter 2, one gets the feel of the church as a beehive, a buzzing ball of honey-making sweetness, swarming with the comings and goings of busy worker bees. The hive is essential to the individual bee’s work, and part of the work. What might all this say about the relationship between evangelism and a church?

No analogy goes all the way and captures everything. Let’s see if we might sum up the relationship between the church and evangelism in the Bible in four systematic statements, and then ask what practical lessons follow for churches.

1. EVANGELISM POINTS TO GOD, NOT THE CHURCH

If you were trying to convince someone to join your club, you would point to all the benefits of the club: the fun members have with one another, the annual table tennis tournament, and so forth. This is *not* how it works with evangelism and the church.

Evangelism points to God, not to the church. That’s the first statement.

Paul tells the Corinthians that Christ had given him (and them) a “ministry of reconciliation” and a “message of reconciliation.” He (and they) were “Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” And this message of reconciliation is simple: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:18–21).

The evangelist’s good news is not, “Be reconciled to other people,” even though the good news will lead to being so reconciled. Rather, the evangelist’s good news is how a person can be reconciled to God. Everything else flows from this.

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2. THE CHURCH IS THE OUTCOME OF EVANGELISM

By the same token, the first hoped for outcome of evangelism is reconciliation with God. But there is a second hoped for outcome: reconciliation with the people of God, the church.

If your doctrine of conversion is missing the corporate element, it's missing an essential piece of the whole. A covenant head must have a covenant people. Our corporate unity in Christ is not just an implication of conversion, it's part of the very thing. Being reconciled to God's people is *distinct from* but *inseparable from* being reconciled to God (see my article "The Corporate Component of Conversion").¹

All this is put on display wonderfully in Ephesians 2. Verses 1 to 10 explain forgiveness and our vertical reconciliation with God: "By grace you have been saved." Verses 11 to 22 then present the horizontal: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (v. 14). Notice that the activity of verse 14 is in the past tense. Christ has *already made* Jew and Gentile one. It's what they *are* because God has done it, and God *did* it in precisely the same place he accomplished the vertical reconciliation—in the cross of Christ (see also Eph. 4:1–6).

In short, we are saved into a people.

The early chapters of Acts demonstrate what this looks like in practice: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41; see also 2:47; 4:4; 6:7). People trust in Christ and are added to "the number" of the church in Jerusalem. They are counted. Their name gets added. If they had had cameras, a photo no doubt would have gone into the church directory!

The converted life is congregationally shaped. Christians belong in churches, and so this is where the evangelist will send people.

1 Jonathan Leeman, "A Corporate Component to Conversion," 9Marks Journal, June 1, 2012, <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalcorporate-component-conversion/>.

3. EVANGELISM IS THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

Third, evangelism is the work of the church. Once a person is reconciled to God and (therefore) to God's people, he or she gains a new job: sharing the gospel with others. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men," said Jesus (Mark 1:17; also, Matt. 28:19). Every Christian and church member, in other words, is charged with sharing the gospel (see Timothy Beougher, "Must Every Christian Evangelize?"²).

The first chapters of Acts emphasize the preaching of the Apostles, but when persecution broke out in Jerusalem and the church scattered, "Those who had been scattered preached the gospel wherever they went" (Acts 8:4).

Local churches exist to worship God and share the good news of Jesus Christ. This is why the teachers teach and the members learn. In fact, Jesus gives the so-called evangelists, pastors, and teachers to the church to equip *them* to do ministry (Eph. 4:11f), a ministry that surely includes evangelism.

We work together to haul in the fish.

4. THE CHURCH IS AN APOLOGETIC FOR EVANGELISM

The life of a converted people, grouped together in congregations, should also commend the gospel that saved them. "Gospel doctrine," Ray Ortlund has written, "creates a gospel culture." And that culture, embodied in our churches, should be attractive to outsiders, at least to some (see 2 Cor. 2:15–16).

This brings us back to the picture of the church as a humming, honey-filled beehive. We see this in Acts and 1 Peter 2. We also see it

2 Tim Beougher, "Must Every Christian Evangelize?" *9Marks*, <https://www.9marks.org/article/must-every-christian-evangelize/>.

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in Matthew 5, when Jesus talks about the church being salt and light (vv. 13–16). And it’s remarkably pictured in John 13, where Jesus observes, “Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (vv. 34–35).

Our good deeds toward outsiders and our love for our fellow church members points neighbors and colleagues to Jesus!

All that to say, the local church is an apologetic in evangelism. The life of the church *argues* for the gospel. Believers living with one another *testifies* to the power of God in salvation. As we sit under the preaching of God’s Word week after week, and as the Spirit conforms us to the image of the Son little by little, we *exemplify* what the gospel can do to us as individuals and as a people.

Slowly, we are becoming the new humanity, following after the one who is the firstborn of the new creation (Col. 1:15). And this new humanity serves as a wonderful backdrop or billboard in our evangelism. It offers a contrast culture to the cultures of this world.

PRACTICAL TAKE-AWAYS

What are some practical lessons we can take from these four systematic principles? Often, pastors try to strengthen a church’s evangelistic ministry by exhorting people to share the gospel. Surely that’s one piece. But it’s also critical to grow the church as a contrast culture, which acts as this attractive backdrop for evangelism.

1) Evangelism should lead to baptism and membership.

Churches should not evangelize and then leave new converts out on their own. Nor should they evangelize, baptize, and then, maybe, someday, get around to bringing someone into church membership. Except for exceptional circumstances (e.g., Ethiopian eunuch), churches should do what the church in Jerusalem did: baptize people into their

number (Acts 2:41). Baptism, after all, is the corporate and authorized sign by which a church formally affirms a person as a believer. That affirmation should then be protected and nurtured by the ongoing oversight given through membership and the Lord's Supper. We don't leave new hatchlings outside of the nest but bring them inside.

2) Teach members to integrate their lives with one another.

In order to strengthen a church's apologetic power, members should constantly be reminded through the teaching of the word and the celebration of the Lord's Supper that we are one body (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:16–17; 1 Cor. 12). Hardly a Sunday should go by when members are not reminded to build relationships with one another so that they might encourage, build up, strengthen, speak truth, warn, and love one another (e.g. Rom. 12:9–13; Eph. 4:11–32). They should be exhorted to show hospitality (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9). All this creates an attractive witness for the gospel.

3) Teach members to sacrifice for one another.

Even more specifically, Christians should think about how they might better sacrifice for one another, financially and otherwise (e.g. Acts 2:42–46; 2 Cor. 8–9; 1 Pet. 4:10). In a consumeristic nation, especially, the example of shared generosity among believers presents a powerful contrast culture. Remember, Jesus told Christians to love one another *as he has loved us* (John 13:34)—a sacrificial love if there ever was one.

4) Practice church discipline.

Christian hypocrites and heretics in our midst compromise the witness of the church. When the church members in a community are known as liars, backbiters, and adulterers, that church's evangelistic

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work will not go so well. That's not to say that a church should discipline every saint who still struggles with sinning in their midst. Then there would be no church left. Rather, churches should confront and discipline unrepentant sin. This serves, ironically, to evangelize the unrepentant member (see 1 Cor. 5:4–5), as well as a church's city more broadly (see 1 Cor. 5:1-2).

5) Equip members to share the gospel.

Church leaders should look for various ways to make sure every member can explain the basics of the faith. This can be done from the pulpit, the Sunday School classroom, the membership interview, and elsewhere (see Kevin McKay, “Overcoming Objections to Evangelism”).³

6) Encourage members to live lives that bless outsiders.

Church members, hopefully, are known as kind, friendly, and quick to lend a hand. We should be quick to jump in with a rake to help clear the neighbor's leaves, quick to offer help to an office-mate, quick to defend a victim of abuse, quick to work hard at preserving the jobs of hard-working employees in difficult times, quick to bless in all sorts of ways. Good deeds should adorn our evangelistic words.

7) Invite people into formal and informal gatherings of the church.

Countless stories could be given of how non-believers heard the gospel and then watched the church in motion, both in formal or informal gatherings, and then came to faith. The church's life together compelled them. It pointed to something they had never known in their family, school, or workplace. In other words, inviting outsiders into the life of the church surely must constitute one part of our evangelism.

3 Kevin McKay, “Overcoming Objections to Evangelism,” 9Marks Journal, <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalovercoming-objections-evangelism/>.

8) Set the example in evangelism.

Wherever a church's elders are known for their evangelism, you can expect to find an evangelistic church. Where the elders don't, you won't.

9) Feature evangelism and conversion stories.

Church leaders should pepper stories of evangelistic encounters into their sermons and lessons. Church members should share prayer requests for evangelistic opportunities. Baptismal candidates should be given the chance to share their conversion experience. Things like these all help to make evangelism a “normal” part of the Christian life and the church experience.

10) Brag about your church.

The apostle Paul sometimes boasted about his churches as a way of boasting about Christ (see 2 Cor. 9:2; 2 Thes. 1:4; cf. Phil. 2:16). Christians, likewise, should look for ways to speak positively and gratefully—not obnoxiously or pridefully—about their churches around non-Christian friends. When a colleague asks about the weekend, mention how your church gave your wife a wonderful baby shower. Mention something encouraging the preacher said on Sunday. Mention the work your congregation is doing at the shelter when the subject of homelessness comes up. Doing this well, no doubt, takes practice.

CONCLUSION

Rightly relating church and evangelism in our understanding and practice requires more than exhorting people to evangelize. It requires attending to matters of polity and governance, membership and discipline. It requires building a healthy church that sits under God's preached Word and knows what God has tasked the church to do.

It requires godly leaders who teach and set the example. And it requires members who love Jesus and increasingly can't help but sing the praises of him who brought them from death to life—inside and outside the church building.

The Problem with Evangelistic Programs¹

J. MACK STILES

It doesn't take much effort to convince most Christians that evangelism with community is the way to go. It's not even hard to find people pulling together to accomplish an evangelistic task.

But usually when we think of evangelism in community, we think of evangelistic programs, which is not the same. By "program," I mean the occasional big event with a well-known speaker or exciting topic. At some point during the event, there is a presentation of the gospel. Or maybe the program is low-key, geared for seekers, such as a service project or a sports program, with the hope that it might open a door for a spiritual conversation.

God can use programs. I know people who have come to faith at evangelistic events. For the record, I often promote and speak at evangelistic programs. But I don't think programs are the most effective, or even the primary, way we should do evangelism.

So, when you take a cold, hard look at programs, things just don't add up. For one, there is an inverse economic bang for the buck: the more money spent on the programs, the less fruit from evangelism. So, for example, when people under 21 (when most people come to faith) were asked how they came to be born again,

1 Editor's Note: This article is a lightly adapted excerpt from Mack's book from the *9Marks Building Healthy Churches* series: (Crossway, 2013). It's the third of three excerpts. The first is "How Should We Define Evangelism?" The second is "Definitions: Gospel and Persuade."

only one percent said it was through TV or other media, while a whopping 43 percent said they came to faith through a friend or family member. Just think of the cost comparison between a cup of coffee and TV programming. Or think of the effect: moms lead more people to Jesus than programs.

Oddly, it seems evangelistic programs do other things better than evangelism: they produce community among Christians who take part in them, they encourage believers to take a stand for Christ, and they can enable churches to break into new places of ministry.

Yet we seem to have an insatiable hunger for programs to accomplish evangelism. Why? Programs are like sugar. They're tasty, even addictive. However, it takes away a desire for more healthy food. Though it provides a quick burst of energy, over time it makes you flabby, and a steady diet will kill you.

A strict diet of evangelistic programs produces malnourished evangelism. Just as eating sugar can make us feel as if we've eaten when we haven't, programs can often make us feel as if we've done evangelism when we haven't. So we should have a healthy unease with programs. We should use them strategically but in moderation, remembering that God did not send an event, he sent his Son.

What should we do? We want to have evangelism in community. We long to have friends alongside us when we share our faith. But at the same time, we see the limits, even the dangers, of programs. Is there some alternative?

I would like to make a case for something completely different, something that is both communal and personal: a culture of evangelism centered in the local church.

THE CHURCH AND EVANGELISM

Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). A little later, during the

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same time with his disciples, he prayed that they would be unified, “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–21). Understand this: Jesus says the love we have for one another in the church is a statement that we are truly converted. And when we are unified in the body, we show to the world that Jesus is the Son of God. Love confirms our discipleship. Unity confirms Christ’s deity. What a powerful witness!

There are many passages that instruct and shape our evangelistic efforts, but these verses are the biblical foundation that show us that the church is to be a culture of evangelism.

This means that the local church is the gospel made visible. If we are to picture the gospel in our love for one another, that needs to take place in a local congregation of people who have covenanted together in love to be a church. It’s not abstract love but love for real people in the real world. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard from non-Christians that the church was strange to them, but what drew them into the fellowship was the love among the members.

But the gospel is pictured not just in our love. Have you ever thought of how many biblical instructions God has built into the fabric of the church that, if done correctly, serve as proclamations of the gospel?

In pursuing a healthy culture of evangelism, we don’t remake the church for evangelism. Instead, we allow the things that God has already built into the church to proclaim the gospel. Jesus did not forget the gospel when he built the church.

For instance, baptism pictures the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It shows how his death is our death and his life our life. The Lord’s Supper proclaims the death of Christ until he returns and prompts us to confess our sins and experience forgiveness anew. When we pray, we pray the truths of God. When we sing, we sing

the great things God has done for us through the gospel. When we give financially, we're giving to advance the gospel message. And of course the preaching of the Word brings the gospel.

In fact, the preaching of the Word is what forms the church to begin with. And, once formed, the church is given the task of making disciples, who then are sent to preach the gospel to form new churches. This cycle has been happening since Jesus ascended into heaven and will continue until he returns.

A culture of evangelism is grassroots, not top-down. In a culture of evangelism, people understand that the main task of the church is to be the church. We can see that church practices are a witness in and of themselves, and certainly the church supports and prays for outreach and evangelistic opportunities, but the church's role is not to run programs. The church should cultivate a culture of evangelism. The members are sent out from the church to do evangelism. I know this may seem a bit picky, but it's really important. If you don't get this right, you can subvert the church—and be wrongly angry with church leadership.

So, in a healthy culture of evangelism, it's understood that there is a different priority for the church and for the individual. We need churches that live out the gospel in the way the Bible describes, and we need seeker-friendly Christians, not the other way around. That means that something you should do in evangelism personally might not be the best thing for the church to do as a whole.

In a culture of evangelism, the goal is for everyone to share, pray, and take opportunities as they come—not just the pastor and elders. Our responsibility is to be faithful witnesses—together.

I believe that if members spent half the time they had spent on programs in friendly evangelistic conversations with neighbors, co-workers, or fellow students, they would see a better response to

3. CONVERSION AND EVANGELISM

the gospel and reach even more people. If you think about it, there is no way you could ever fit into your church sanctuary all the non-Christians with whom the members of your church are in contact weekly—no matter how big the sanctuary.

The fact is, most people come to faith through the influence of family members, small-group Bible studies, or a conversation with a friend after a church service: Christians intentionally talking about the gospel.

4. Church Membership

WHAT IS IT?

According to the Bible, church membership is a commitment every Christian should make to attend, love, serve, and submit to a local church.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- ✦ Throughout the Old Testament, God made a clear distinction between his people and the world. The New Testament Apostles then insist on this same distinction (Lev. 13:46, Num. 5:3, Deut. 7:3; 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1).
- ✦ Jesus taught that entering the kingdom of God involves being bound to the church “on earth,” which is the local church (Matt. 16:16–19; 18:17–19).
- ✦ The first church began at Pentecost when people were baptized and “added to their number” (Acts 2:41). After baptism, participation in the Lord’s Supper then indicates who belongs to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17).
- ✦ Most of the epistles are then written to known quantities of people, such as “to the church of God that is in Corinth” and “to the churches of Galatia.” These are not random crowds but identified and marked off groups of individuals who would identify as those churches.
- ✦ The New Testament explicitly refers to some people being “inside” the church and others being “outside” the church. It also speaks of “removing” people from the church and a punishment by the majority (1 Cor. 5:2, 12–13; 2 Cor. 2:6).
- ✦ The New Testament contains dozens of “one another” commands which fill out our understanding of what church membership should practically look like.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Biblical church membership is important because it is through the church that God testifies of himself and displays his glory to the world. In the church's membership, then, non-Christians should see in the lives of God's changed people that God is holy and gracious and that his gospel is powerful to save and transform sinners.

Church Membership Is an Office and a Job¹

JONATHAN LEEMAN

Christians have a long tradition of referring to elders and deacons as church “officers.” The nomenclature rightly recognizes the role and responsibilities that Scripture gives to our leaders. It also points to the honor due to pastors (1 Tim. 5:17). People show respect to officers, right?

I don’t want to downplay any of this.

But . . . church membership is an office, too. It’s a job that comes with authority and responsibility. We can call a lieutenant an “officer” without diminishing the honor due to a general.

What’s at stake here is not just academic, but pastoral and biblical. Too many Christians today view their relationship with the local church consumeristically—as if churches were gas stations. You drive around once a week looking to fill your tank spiritually. You find the station with the lowest prices and the car wash option. Maybe you join the rewards program. Church membership is that rewards program. Loyalty to their brand brings extra benefits.

People often say “Church membership is not in the Bible” because they have something programmatic like this in mind. And they’re half right: this isn’t in the Bible. But they miss what is in the Bible. There, church membership is a job. You’re expected to show up for work

1 Author’s note: To think further on this topic, see the very short *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority* (B&H). For a more thorough academic treatment, see *Don’t Fire Your Church Members* (B&H Academic).

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(Heb. 10:24–25). You have authority to exercise, tasks to complete, privileges to enjoy, a corporate reputation to protect, risks to endure, and profits to share. If anything, we need to think less like consumers and more like owners. You’ve bought in. You have a vested stake.

WHAT’S AN OFFICE

The Presbyterian Charles Hodge defined an office like this:

The ministry is properly an office, because it is something which cannot be assumed at pleasure by any and every one. A man must be appointed thereto by some competent authority. It involves not only the right, but the obligation to exercise certain functions, or to discharge certain duties; and it confers certain powers or prerogatives, which other men are bound to recognize and respect.²

So it is with every church member. Not everyone can be a church member. Only the repenting and believing and baptized can be.

No person possesses the authority to make him or herself a member. The church itself must.

And no member is without functions, duties, powers, or prerogatives. Every member possesses them, which others must recognize and respect.

WHERE DID THIS OFFICE COME FROM?

Here’s the biblically interesting part: the office of church member is the new covenant version of Adam’s everyman office, assigned to us by Christ.

God put Adam to work as a priest-king and tasked him with watching over and working the garden. “Expand the Garden, Adam.

2 Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (1878; repr., New York: Westminster Publishing House, 2001), 346.

Obey my words. And keep lying serpents out, since the Garden is where I, the Lord, dwell.”

When Adam failed, the job of priest-king went to Noah, then Abraham, and eventually the nation of Israel. The mom-and-pop shop went corporate as a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6). At the same time, God separated out a class of priests and a class of kings to make their respective responsibilities clear. The priest’s job, like Adam’s in the garden, was to “work” and “watch over” the tabernacle/temple, keeping it consecrated to the Lord (Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). They were charged with naming things as clean and unclean, holy and unholy. The king’s work, meanwhile, was to establish order and dominion while following God’s law (see Deut. 17:14–20).

When Israel failed in its corporate job and the kings and priests in their individual jobs, the prophets promised the special mediatory offices of priest and king would be “democratized” once more (Jer. 31:33–34). Christ would come as the perfect priest and king, the second federal Adam, and through the new covenant of his blood reassign a new covenant people with being:

- ✦ A chosen race—new Adams
- ✦ A royal priesthood—a democracy of priest-kings
- ✦ A holy nation—a new Israel
- ✦ A people for God’s own possession (1 Pet. 2:9)

These priests should offer sacrifices of obedience in all of life, their daily activities serving as a mediating witness to the world (see Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Pet. 2:5). Yet they also constitute the temple where God dwells, just as he dwelt in the Garden and the tabernacle (1 Cor. 3:16–17), which means they possess a priestly obligation to one another: to make sure they’re not unequally yoked, to come out and be separate, and to touch no unclean thing, so that holiness

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comes to completion (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). To this end, they employ the keys of the kingdom in priestly fashion. This enables them to keep the line between the inside and the outside of God’s people clear (Matt. 16:19; 18:15–20).

Meanwhile, every member of the church has been given a kingly task: to make disciples and be ambassadors of reconciliation, bringing the territory of hearts into subjugation to God (Matt. 28:18–20; 2 Cor. 5:18–20).

What is church membership? It’s undertaking Adam’s job, thanks to our inclusion in Christ. It’s the public recognition that we have stepped into the office of priest-king. “Expand the church, church member. Obey my words. Give witness to me in all of life. And do not recognize lying serpents as members, since the church is where I, the Lord, dwell.”

Irenaeus put it succinctly one hundred years after the New Testament was written: “For all the righteous possess the priestly order [*sacerdotali ordinem*]” (*Against Heresies*).

Almost two millennia later Herman Bavinck said something similar: “And just as all believers have a gift, so also they all hold an office. Not only in the church as organism but also in the church as institution, they have a calling and a task laid on them by the Lord” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.375).

WHAT’S THE MEMBER’S JOB?

That’s the biblical-theological backdrop. Concretely, then, what is the authority and work of every church member? Our work is to share and protect the gospel, and it’s to affirm and oversee gospel professors—church members.

Think about Paul’s “amazement” in Galatians 1: “I am amazed that you are so quickly . . . turning to a different gospel” (v. 6). He rebukes not the pastors, but the members, and tells them to reject

even apostles or angels who teach a false gospel. They were supposed to have protected the gospel.

Or think of Paul's astonishment in 1 Corinthians 5: the Corinthians were accepting sin "not tolerated even among pagans" (v. 1). "You are to remove the one who has done this thing," he says to the whole church (1 Cor. 5:2). He even describes how this should happen—not on Thursday evening behind the closed doors of an elders meeting, but when the whole church gathered and could act together: "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, with my spirit present and with the power of the Lord Jesus, hand this man over to Satan so that his spirit may be saved" (vv. 4–5). The power of the Lord Jesus is actually there when they're assembled in his name. With that power, they were supposed to have protected the gospel by removing the man from membership.

Every member of a church should recognize, "It's my responsibility to protect the gospel, and it's my responsibility to receive and dismiss members. Jesus has given it to me." To use the business lingo again, we're all owners. We all have a share in the losses and the profits.

Therefore, pastors who fire church members from this job, whether by formal church structure or by turning them into consumers, undermine the members' sense of inclusion and ownership. They cultivate complacency, nominalism, and eventually theological liberalism. Kill church membership today and you can expect biblical compromises tomorrow.

Of course, the job here is bigger than showing up at members' meetings and voting on new members. The church member's job lasts all seven days. Ours is the work of representing Jesus and protecting his gospel in each other's lives every day.

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So we must study and work to know the gospel better and better. We must study the gospel's implications and consider how they relate to repentance. Further, we must work to know and be known by our fellow members seven days a week. We cannot affirm and give oversight to a people we don't know, not with integrity anyhow. We try to start including more of our fellow members into the regular rhythm of our lives. This is not a gas station rewards program: fill out a form and drive away.

WHAT'S THE PASTOR'S JOB?

What then shall we say about the pastor's office? What's his job?

Ephesians 4 says it's the job of the pastors to equip the saints for the ministry of building up the church (vv. 11–16). Notice the two jobs in this passage. Job one is the pastors': equip the saints. Job two is the members': the ministry of building up the body of Christ.

The weekly church gathering, then, is a time of job training. It's when those in the office of pastor equip those in the office of member to know the gospel, to live by the gospel, to protect the church's gospel witness, and to extend the gospel's reach into one another's lives and among outsiders. If Jesus tasks members with affirming and building up one another in the gospel, he tasks pastors with training them to do this. If the pastors don't do their jobs very well, neither will the members.

When you put the pastor's office together with the member's office, what do you get? Jesus's discipleship program.

CONCLUSION

When someone wants to join the church where I pastor, I'll say something like the following in the membership interview:

Church Membership Is an Office and a Job

Friend, by joining this church, you will become jointly responsible for whether or not this congregation continues to faithfully proclaim the gospel. That means you will become jointly responsible both for what this church teaches, as well as whether or not its members' lives remain faithful. And one day you will stand before God and give an account for how you fulfilled this responsibility. We need more hands for the harvest, so we hope you'll join us in that work.

The membership interview is a job interview after all. I want to make sure they know this. I want to make sure they're up for the task.

Meaningful Membership & Shepherding the Saints

JASON SEVILLE

Let's begin with a parable:

A man had a hundred sheep, and one of them had gone astray. As he sat out to leave the ninety-nine in search of the one he paused and thought for a moment. *Wait, maybe I had ninety-nine to begin with.* He turned back and went about his business. The End.

Meaningful church membership is essential for shepherding because it gives shape to the flock and lets pastors know who they're responsible to care for. Church membership isn't just a useful tool in the pastoral tool belt; it's the tool belt itself. In other words, meaningful membership doesn't exist *alongside* things like prayer, accountability, sermon application, and discipleship as a way to shepherd; rather, meaningful membership is what makes all of those other things possible.

Consider these ten ways meaningful membership has enabled the elders at my church to shepherd our congregation.

1. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP IDENTIFIES WHOM WE'RE RESPONSIBLE TO SHEPHERD

You can't shepherd a nebulous mass of humanity. You might argue that you can shepherd *some* of that mass. But, there will surely be people on the fringes who go unnoticed and uncared for. Meaningful

membership helps us shepherd by delineating exactly who it is we're meant to be overseeing, so that God's sheep receive the care they need.

Meaningful membership makes pastoring a *personal* task. A list of names on a paper doesn't make membership meaningful. The import for shepherding comes from what we know about each one of those names. As people become members we hear conversion stories and we come to know where they've struggled and what repentance has looked like in their lives; we regularly receive prayer requests and check in to see how they're doing. Our shepherding has been greatly helped by knowing which specific sheep we're meant to shepherd and by knowing specific things about those sheep.

2. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP PROVIDES A PRAYER LIST

Pastors should understand that one of their primary responsibilities is praying for their congregation. Of course, we pray more widely—for visitors, for non-Christians who attend our church, for other churches in our city, and so on—but we have the unique responsibility and privilege to pray for those under our care.

A defined membership allows us to regularly and systematically pray through our entire membership. My pastoral assistant collects prayer requests from the next section of our membership directory, and we pray for each person one by one. This practice mutually encourages both elders and church members alike. It reveals to the elders where there are needs, joys, struggles, and opportunities to serve. It reminds our members that we care, we're praying, and we're available to help.

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3. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP FOCUSES OUR DISCIPLESHIP EFFORTS

While we can proclaim the Word of God to and pray broadly for all who attend our Sunday service, we can't intentionally disciple everyone. Meaningful membership, however, focuses our discipleship efforts so that our elders aren't expending all their energies with folks who may just be passing through. That's not to say we never counsel or invest in someone who isn't a member. But membership enables us to pour resources into equipping the saints who are truly covenanted with our local church.

4. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP REVEALS THOSE WHO MIGHT BE IN DANGER

As the parable above illustrates, without meaningful membership, it's far easier for someone to wander off into trouble. If someone visits my church and then disappears, I assume that they're in another church or they were temporary tourists in our city. Or maybe they were just curious non-Christians popping in for a week. But if a member disappears, it shows up on our radar pretty quickly and we're able to check in and see how they're doing. With meaningful membership, it's clear when someone begins to neglect the gathering. (Heb. 10:25)

5. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP REMINDS US THAT ASSURANCE IS COMMUNAL

The fact that we have membership at all reinforces the reality to our church that the Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation. We need each other. And none of us has the authority—or distance from the deceitfulness of sin—to declare ourselves to be walking in a manner worthy of the calling with which we've been called (Eph. 4:1). Our security will come as we're exhorted by brothers and

sisters every day until glory (Heb. 3:13). Shepherding is enhanced and sustained as the church does its communal work of assurance.

6. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP SHAPES SERMON APPLICATION

Knowing who “we” are has the very practical shepherding benefit of directing sermon application toward a specific group of people. Shepherding can’t be *limited* to pulpit ministry, but neither can it be conceived of apart from the preaching of God’s Word. As pastors, we write our sermons with our membership directory open, considering ways a particular text will interact with our particular people.

7. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP SUPPORTS SERVICE IN THE CHURCH

Church members bear the privilege and responsibility of serving in the church. Thus, meaningful membership encourages people to serve and gives our deacons and other leaders a pool from which to recruit help. The shepherding that takes place through small groups, children’s ministry, hospitality, discipleship, and so on is all aided by meaningful membership.

8. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP DIFFUSES THE WORK OF SHEPHERDING

All of our members have publicly declared their faith in Christ through baptism, given a testimony to how they came to saving faith in Christ, and clearly articulated their understanding of the gospel and its power in their lives. Thus, when someone on a Sunday morning wants to know more about Jesus, or be prayed for, or wants to talk about how the gospel impacts their life, I can point them to just about any member of our church with great confidence.

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As pastors, we don't have to be "the answer men" who bear gospel ministry alone. No, it's *the church* that is equipped to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:1–16). Ensuring that our members understand the gospel and have a credible profession of faith greatly (and rightly) eases the burden on the elders by letting the church do the ministry it's meant to do.

9. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP AIDS FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Church members bear the responsibility and privilege of financially supporting the work of the local church where the Word of God is ministered to them. If a Christian is never challenged to join a specific local church, where should she give her money? If a Christian jumps from church to church, which elders should he consider worthy of double honor? And if a church allows people to come and go as they please with no formal commitment, then how should the elders and deacons go about setting a budget for the operation and mission of the church?

All of this impacts shepherding more than you might think. Adequate meeting space can be purchased or rented for worship, counsel, classes, and pastoral study. Pastors can receive salaries so that they can give their attention to the ministry of the Word and prayer. Money can be allocated to help those who are in need. Such financial stewardship—and the shepherding capacity that comes with it—is weakened in a church without meaningful membership.

10. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP EXTENDS PASTORAL CARE TO DEPARTING SHEEP

Intentional covenant membership at our church helps us walk with church members as they leave our church—whether that's in the unfortunate case of church discipline, the bittersweet case of

relocation, or the exciting case of missions or church planting. First, we know they're going out *from us* because we knew they were *of us*. You can't shepherd someone into a new season if you never knew they considered themselves a part of your church. Second, we can shepherd someone by proclaiming the gospel and lovingly calling for repentance, as in cases of church discipline, or by praying for and helping the relocating member find another gospel-preaching church where they're going, as in cases of relocation.

We could say more. These ten ways just scratch the surface of the great blessing meaningful membership has been to me and my fellow elders. I pray you'll experience these same benefits at your local church.

5. Church Discipline

WHAT IS IT?

- ✦ Church discipline is the work of correcting sin in the life of the body.
- ✦ This can be done privately and informally. On rare occasion, it can also include a final step of excluding a professing Christian from membership in the church and participation in the Lord's Supper because of serious unrepentant sin (see Matt. 18:15–20, 1 Cor. 5:1–13).

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- ✦ The New Testament commands corrective discipline in passages like Matthew 18:15–17, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, 2 Corinthians 2:6, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15.
- ✦ The New Testament also details formative discipline (our efforts to grow in holiness together) in countless passages which speak of pursuing holiness and building one another up in the faith, such as Ephesians 4:11–32 and Philippians 2:1–18.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Discipline is like the stake that helps a tree grow upright, the extra set of wheels on the bicycle, or the musician's endless hours of practice. Without discipline, we won't grow as God wants us to. With discipline, we will, by God's grace, bear peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:5–11).

A Church Discipline Primer

JONATHAN LEEMAN

What would you think of a coach who instructs his players but never drills them? Or a math teacher who explains the lesson but never corrects her students' mistakes? Or a doctor who talks about health but ignores cancer?

You would probably say that all of them are doing half their job. Athletic training requires instructing *and* drilling. Teaching requires explaining *and* correcting. Doctoring requires encouraging health *and* fighting disease. Right?

Okay, what would you think about a church that teaches and disciples but doesn't practice church discipline? Does that make sense to you? I assume it makes sense to many churches, because every church teaches and disciples, but so few practice church discipline. The problem is making disciples without discipline makes as much sense as a doctor who ignores tumors.

I understand the reluctance to practice church discipline. It's a difficult matter for any number of reasons. Still, this reluctance to practice church discipline, a reluctance that many of us probably feel, may suggest that we believe ourselves to be wiser and more loving than God. God, after all, "disciplines those he loves"; and "he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:6). Do we know better than God?

God disciplines his children for the sake of their life, growth, and health: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Yes, it's painful, but it pays off: "No

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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). A harvest of righteousness and peace! That’s a beautiful picture.

Church discipline ultimately leads to church growth, just as pruning a rose bush leads to more roses. Said another way, church discipline is one aspect of Christian discipleship. Notice that the words “disciple” and “discipline” are etymological cousins. Both words are taken from the realm of education, which involves teaching *and* correction. Not surprisingly, there’s a centuries-old practice of referring to “formative discipline” and “corrective discipline.”

My goal in this primer is to introduce the reader to the basics of corrective church discipline—the “what,” the “when,” the “how,” and a few more words on the “why.”

WHAT IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

What is corrective church discipline? Church discipline is the process of correcting sin in the life of the congregation and its members. This can mean correcting sin through a private word of admonition. And it can mean correcting sin by formally removing an individual from membership. Church discipline can be done in any number of ways, but the goal is always to correct transgressions of God’s law among God’s people.

Not Retributive, but Remedial, Prophetic, and Proleptic

This correction of sin is not a retributive action; it’s not enacting God’s justice, per se. Rather, it’s remedial, prophetic, and proleptic. By *remedial*, I mean it’s meant to help the individual Christian and the congregation grow in godliness—in God-likeness. If a member of the church is given to gossip or slander, another member should correct the sin so that the gossipier will stop gossiping and speak

words of love instead. God does not use his words to wrongfully harm; neither should his people.

By saying that church discipline is *prophetic*, I mean it shines the light of God's truth onto error and sin. It exposes cancer in an individual's or the body's life, so that the cancer might be cut out. Sin is a master of disguise. Gossip, for instance, likes to wear the mask of "pious concern." The gossip might think that his words are reasonable, even caring. Yet church discipline exposes the sin for what it is. It exposes the sin both to the sinner and to everyone involved, so that all may learn and benefit.

By saying that church discipline is *proleptic*, I mean it's a small picture of judgment in the present that warns of an even greater judgment to come (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:5). Such a warning is nothing if not gracious. Suppose a classroom teacher gave passing grades to a student's failing tests throughout the semester for fear of discouraging the student, only to fail her at the end of the semester. That would not be gracious! In the same way, church discipline is a loving way to say to an individual caught in sin, "Careful, an even greater penalty will result if you continue on this path. Please turn back now."

It's not surprising that people don't like discipline. It's hard. But how merciful God is to warn his people of the great judgment to come in comparatively small ways now!

Biblical-Theological Foundations

Behind church discipline is one of the grand projects of redemptive history—the project of restoring God's fallen people to the place where they will once more image God as they extend his benevolent and life-producing rule throughout creation (Gen. 1:26–28; 3:1–6).

Adam and Eve were to image God. So was the kingdom of Israel. Yet Adam and Eve's failure to represent God's rule, prompted by the desire to rule on their own terms, resulted in their exile from

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God's place, the Garden. Israel's same failure to keep God's law and reflect God's character to the nations also resulted in an exile.

As creatures made in God's image, our actions intrinsically speak about him, like mirrors representing the object which they face. The problem is, fallen humanity distorts the image of God, like wavy carnival mirrors. Since fallen humanity speaks lies, for instance, the world has concluded that God's own words cannot be trusted. He, too, must be a liar. As goes a creature, so must go its creator.

Gratefully, one son of Adam, one son of Israel, did keep God's law perfectly, the same one whom Paul would describe as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Now, those who are united to this one Son are called to bear that same "image," which we learn to do through the life of the church "from one degree of glory to the next" (see 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 3:9–10).

Local churches should be those places on earth where the nations can go to find humans who increasingly image God truly and honestly. As the world beholds the holiness, love, and unity of local churches, they will better know what God is like and will give him praise (e.g. Matt. 5:14–16; John 13:34–35; 1 Pet. 2:12). Church discipline, then, is the church's response when one of its own fails to represent God's holiness, love, or unity by being disobedient to God. It's an attempt to correct false images as they rise up within the life of Christ's body, almost like polishing smudges of dirt out of a mirror.

Specific Texts

Jesus grants local congregations the authority to discipline their own in Matthew 16:16–19 and 18:15–20. The power of the keys for binding and loosing on earth, first mentioned in Matthew 16:19, are handed to the local congregation in Matthew 18:15–20, which we'll consider more carefully below.

Paul describes the processes of church discipline in a number of places, including 1^o Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:6, Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 5:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, 1 Timothy 5:19–20, 2 Timothy 3:5, and Titus 3:9–11.

John refers to a kind of discipline in 2 John 10. Jude seems to have it in mind in Jude 22 and 23. More examples could be mentioned. Really, church discipline is what Jesus and the biblical authors have in mind every time they tell their listeners to correct sin in their lives together.

WHEN SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

When should a church practice discipline? The short answer is when someone sins. But the answer might differ depending on whether we're talking about informal or formal church discipline, to use Jay Adams' distinction between private confrontations and public church-wide confrontations.

Any sin, whether of a serious or non-serious nature, might elicit a private rebuke between two brothers or sisters in the faith. That's not to say we should rebuke every single sin that a fellow church member commits. It's simply to say that every sin, no matter how small, falls into the realm of what two Christians *may* lovingly raise with one another in a private setting, prudence depending.

When we turn to the question of which sins require formal or church-wide corrective discipline, we need to tread a little more carefully.

Biblical Lists

Some of the older theologies presented lists of when it's appropriate to conduct formal discipline. For instance, the Congregationalist minister John Angell James said that five kinds of offenses should be disciplined: (i) all scandalous vices and immoralities (e.g.,

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1 Cor. 5:11–13); (ii) the denial of Christian doctrine (e.g. Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:17–21; 1 Tim. 6:3–5; 2 John 10f); (iii) the stirring up of division (Titus 3:10); (iv) the failure to provide for one's near relatives when they are in need (e.g. 1 Tim. 5:8); (v) and unreconciled enmity (e.g. Matt. 18:7).¹

These types of biblical lists can be helpful to a point. Notice that each of the sins described are both serious and have an outward manifestation. They're not just inward sins of the heart; they can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. And in that outward manifestation they mislead both the world and other sheep about Christianity.

Yet what such lists fail to do is account for the vast multitude of sins which the Scriptures never address (what about abortion?). Plus, texts on church discipline may only mention one particular sin, such as 1 Corinthians 5 which discusses the sin of sleeping with a father's wife; but surely Paul doesn't mean for churches to only discipline *that* sin. How should churches extrapolate out from such examples to other sins?

Outward, Serious, and Unrepentant

One way to summarize the biblical data is to say that that formal church discipline is required in cases of outward, serious, and unrepentant sin. A sin must have an *outward* manifestation. It must be something that can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears. Churches should not quickly throw the red flag of ejection every time they suspect greed or pride in someone's heart. It's not that sins of the heart are not serious. It's that the Lord knows we cannot see

1 John Angell James, *Church Fellowship or The Church Member's Guide*, excerpted from volume XI of the 10th edition of the *Works of John Angell James*, 53.

one another's hearts and that real heart problems will eventually rise to the surface anyway (1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 7:17f; Mark 7:21).

Second, a sin must be *serious*. For instance, I might observe a brother exaggerate the details of a story and then privately confront him over the matter. But even if he denies it, I probably wouldn't draw him in front of the church. Why not? First, something like the sin of embellishing stories is rooted in far more significant and unseen sins like idolatry and self-justification. Those are the sins I want to spend personal time discussing with him. Second, pursuing every tiny sin in a church's life will probably induce paranoia and propel the congregation toward legalism. Third, there clearly needs to be a place for love to "cover a multitude of sins" in a congregation's life (1 Pet. 4:8). Not every sin should be pursued to the utmost. Thankfully, God has not done so with us.

Finally, formal church discipline is the appropriate course of action when sin is *unrepentant*. The person involved in serious sin has been privately confronted with God's commands in Scripture, but he or she refuses to let go of the sin. From all appearances, the person prizes the sin more than Jesus. There may be one kind of exception to this, which we'll consider below.

All three factors were in play in my first experience with corrective church discipline. The person in question happened to be a good friend and running partner. Yet both I and the church were oblivious to the fact that he was engaged in a lifestyle of sexual sin, at least until he told me one day over lunch. Immediately I asked him whether he knew what the Bible said about such activity, which he did. Yet he said that he had made his peace with God. I urged him to repent. Others eventually did as well. But he said the same thing to all of us: "God is okay with it." After several months of such conversations, the church formally removed him from its fellowship. His sin was

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serious, unrepentant, and had a clear outward manifestation. It would mislead others both inside and outside the church about what it means to be a Christian. The church spent several months pursuing this man. We loved him. We wanted him to turn away from his sin and to know that Jesus is more valuable than anything this world affords. Still, it was clear almost immediately that he had no intention of turning away. He was resolute. Given a choice between his sin and the Word of God, he chose sin. So the church formally acted.

HOW SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

How should a church practice church discipline? Jesus provides the basic outline in Matthew 18:15–17. He says to his disciples,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Notice here that the offense starts between two brothers, and the response should extend no further than it needs to go in order to produce reconciliation. Jesus describes the process in four steps.

Four Basic Steps

1. If a sin problem can be resolved between the two people by themselves, then the case is closed.

2. If it cannot be resolved, then the offended brother should bring two or three others so “that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Matt. 18:16). Jesus takes

this phrase from Deuteronomy 19, which in context is meant to protect people against false accusations. Deuteronomy in fact calls for a “thorough investigation” whenever there’s any doubt about the crime (Deut. 19:18). I take it that Jesus, likewise, means for Christians to be concerned with truth and justice, which may require due diligence. The two or three witnesses need to be able to confirm that, indeed, there is a serious and outward offense and, indeed, the offender is unrepentant. Hopefully, involving other people will either bring the offender to his senses *or* help the offended see that he should not be so offended. Both this step and the prior step may occur over several meetings, whatever the parties think is prudent.

3. If the intervention of the two or three does not admit of a solution, the offended party is then instructed to tell it to the church (Matt. 18:17a). In my own congregation, this is typically done through the elders since the Lord has given the church elders to provide oversight in all the church’s affairs (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2). The elders will announce the name of the party charged with outward, serious, and unrepentant sin. They will provide a very brief description of the sin, a description adjudged to not cause others to stumble or to bring undue embarrassment on any family members. And, typically, they will then give the congregation two months to seek out the sinner and call him or her to repentance.

4. The final step of church discipline is exclusion from the fellowship or membership of the church, which essentially means exclusion from the Lord’s Table: “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17b). He is to be treated as someone outside of God’s covenant people, someone who should not partake of Christ’s covenant meal (though he will probably be encouraged to continue attending the church’s gatherings; see discussion below). Our own

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congregation will take this step once the two months have expired and the individual has refused to let go of the sin. Two months is an arbitrary number, of course; it simply presents a basic timeline to correspond with our church's regularly scheduled members meetings. In any given situation, the church might deem it necessary to speed up that timeline or slow it down.

Why Slow Down or Speed Up the Process?

Sometimes the processes of discipline should move quite slowly. This is the case, for instance, when a sinner shows at least some interest in fighting against his sin. It's not just the nature of the sin which needs to be considered, it's the nature of the sinner himself. Different sinners, to put it bluntly, require different strategies. As Paul instructs, "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thes. 5:14). Sometimes it's not immediately apparent whether people are idle or indifferent toward their sin or if they're genuinely weak.

I remember working with one brother involved in one kind of addiction, and for a time I wasn't sure if he was just making excuses for his moral lapses or if his soul was truly weakened and malformed by years of sinning, making it that much harder for him to stop sinning. The answer to those kinds of questions should affect how quickly the processes of discipline move.

Sometimes the processes of discipline need to speed up, which might mean skipping one or two of the steps described by Jesus in Matthew 18. Two clear biblical warrants for speeding up the processes of discipline are (i) division in the church and (ii) public scandal (i.e., sin that will misrepresent Christ in the community beyond the church). Regarding the first category, Paul says, "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him" (Titus 3:10). It's not entirely

clear what kind of process Paul has in mind here. But his words do suggest that the church should respond quickly and decisively to division-makers for the sake of the body.

An even faster process is presented in 1 Corinthians 5, in which Paul calls upon the church to immediately remove an individual known to be engaged in a publicly scandalous sin, that is, a sin of which even the non-Christian community disapproves. In fact, Paul doesn't even tell the church to warn the man in case he might be brought to repentance. He simply tells them to "deliver this man to Satan" (v. 5a).

Why skip over the question of repentance and not give the man a second chance? It's not that Paul is uninterested in repentance or second chances. Rather, he tells the church to remove the man so that the man's "spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (v. 5b). Surely, Paul is open to the man eventually rejoining the church should he indeed prove repentant (see 2 Cor. 2:5–8). But the point is, his sin is publicly known and makes a public statement about Christ. Therefore, the church should respond with an equally public statement before the world: "Not acceptable! Christians don't do this!"

Having said that, it's worth observing in 1 Corinthians 5 that there was no question about whether or not the man was engaged in sin. It was an uncontested fact. However, if there is a question about whether or not a sin has occurred, even if it's a scandalous sin, the church should pause long enough to conduct a thorough investigation, as Jesus requires in Matthew 18. For instance, a church doesn't want to discipline someone for embezzlement (a publicly scandalous sin) based on hearsay, only to have the secular courts throw out the case three months later because of insufficient evidence.

What then are the two considerations that might cause a church to speed up the processes of discipline? A church might deem it wise

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to move more quickly when (i) there's an immediate threat to the unity of the church body or (ii) there's a sin which could bring great harm to the name of Christ in the community. There is no precise formula for establishing when one of these lines is crossed, and a church does well to appoint a plurality of godly elders to give oversight to such difficult matters.

Attendance and Restoration

Church members often wonder whether a person who has been excluded from membership and the Lord's Table can continue attending the church's weekly gatherings, as well as how they should interact with him or her throughout the week. The New Testament addresses this matter in a number of places (1 Cor. 5:9, 11; 2 Thes. 3:6, 14–15; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10), and different circumstances may well require different responses. But the instruction given by the elders in my own church generally falls under two points:

- Except for situations in which the unrepentant party's presence is a physical threat to the congregation, a church should welcome the person's attendance in the weekly gathering. There's no better place for the person to be than sitting under the preaching of God's Word.
- Though the family members of a disciplined individual should certainly continue to fulfill the biblical obligations of family life (e.g. Eph. 6:1–3; 1 Tim. 5:8; 1 Pet. 3:1–2), the tenor of church members' relationships with the disciplined individual should markedly change. Interactions should not be characterized by casualness or friendliness but by deliberate conversations about repentance.

Restoration to the fellowship of the church occurs when there are signs of true repentance. What true repentance looks like depends on the nature of the sin. Sometimes repentance is a black and

white matter, as with a man who has abandoned his wife. For him, repenting means returning to her, plain and simple. Yet sometimes repentance doesn't mean conquering a sin completely so much as demonstrating a new diligence in waging war against the sin, as with a person caught in a cycle of addiction.

Clearly, the question of true repentance is a difficult one that requires much wisdom. Caution must be balanced with compassion. Some time may need to pass for repentance to be demonstrated by its fruits, but not too much time (see 2 Cor. 2:5–8). Once a church decides to restore a repenting individual to its fellowship and the Lord's Table, there should be no talk of a probation period or second-class citizenship. Rather the church should publicly pronounce its forgiveness (John 20:23), affirm its love for the repenting individual (2 Cor. 2:8), and celebrate (Luke 15:24).

WHY SHOULD A CHURCH PRACTICE DISCIPLINE?

As a church moves toward practicing church discipline, it will often find itself facing real-life situations that are complex and have no exact “case-study” in Scripture to help it sift through the various layers of circumstances. It will not always be clear whether formal church discipline is required, or how long the processes should take, or whether the guilty party is truly repentant, and so on.

As a congregation and its leaders work through these complex issues, they must remember that the church is called, above all else, to guard the name and glory of Christ. Fundamentally, church discipline is about the reputation of Christ and whether or not the church can continue to affirm the verbal profession of someone whose life egregiously mischaracterizes Christ. The sins and circumstances of sin will vary tremendously, but this one question always needs to be

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in the forefront of our churches' thoughts: "How will this sinner's sin and our response to it reflect the holy love of Christ?"

After all, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about the good of non-Christians. When churches fail to practice church discipline, they begin to look like the world. They are like salt that has lost its saltiness, which is only good for being trampled upon (Matt. 5:13). They are no witness at all to a world lost in darkness.

Also, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about other members of the church. Christians should want to look like Jesus, and church discipline helps to keep his holy picture clear. Members are reminded to take greater care in their own lives whenever a formal act of discipline occurs. The Congregationalist James sums it up well: "The advantages of discipline are obvious. It reclaims backsliders, detects hypocrites, circulates a salutary awe through the church, adds a further incentive to watchfulness and prayer, proves beyond question the fact and consequences of human frailty, and moreover, publicly testifies against unrighteousness."²

Finally, to care about the reputation of Christ is to care about the individual caught in sin. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul knew the most loving course of action was to exclude a man from the congregation "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5).

Why should a church practice discipline? For the good of the individual, the good of non-Christians, the good of the church, and the glory of Christ.³ Keeping these basic goals in mind will help churches and elders move from one difficult case to another, knowing that God's wisdom and love will prevail even as ours fall short.

² James, *Christian Fellowship*, 53.

³ See Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2004), 174-78.

A Step-by-Step Primer for Church Discipline¹

GEOFF CHANG

Church discipline makes sense when you understand what the church is. If the church were a building, then discipline might involve better property management. If the church were just an institution, then discipline might be about organizational restructuring. If the church were merely a weekly show, then discipline might require better event planning.

While those things play into our experience of church, the New Testament is clear that the church is fundamentally a people, a congregation marked by their commitment to Christ and to one another. Therefore, when the Bible talks about church discipline, it involves the spiritual care of *people*. It's the process by which members of a church guard one another from the deceitfulness of sin and uphold the truth of the gospel.

Church discipline largely takes place informally, as Christians speak the truth in love to one another and point each other to the grace of the gospel. However, in this fallen world, there will be times when informal discipline will not be enough; there will be times when those who belong to the church refuse to repent and continue down the path of sin. It's for these situations that Jesus provides instructions for church discipline:

1 *Author's note: For more detail on these questions, consult Jonathan Leeman's Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus.*

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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. But 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.” If 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. (Matt. 18:15–17)

Every single step of this process is an expression of Christ’s loving and wise rule over his church, and therefore every step ought to be followed.

STEP #1: HAVE A PRIVATE CONVERSATION

It all begins with private confrontation (Matt. 18:15). As mentioned above, this happens regularly in the life of the church in all kinds of contexts. The member who knows of unrepentant sin is to go to the one who has sinned and, in love, call him to repentance. Rather than fostering gossip and division, Jesus commands his people to speak privately first, “just between the two of [them].” And in God’s grace, so often this is the means by which God works repentance among his people.

But what happens if that initial confrontation is rejected? What does it look like once we get beyond that informal step? Though details will vary depending on the church and the circumstances, below are five steps that church leaders should generally take in the process of church discipline:

STEP #2: TAKE ONE OR TWO OTHERS ALONG (MATT. 18:16)

The next step widens the circle of involvement, while not yet involving the church as a whole. Jesus instructs the members to take one or two others along to confront the one caught in sin. If the elders have

already been notified, it might be appropriate for one of the elders to go along with the member making the charge. It's also worth considering whether there might be another member of the church—perhaps a trusted friend—to speak into his life. Ideally, this step would happen in a personal meeting, but in certain situations, a phone call, voicemail, or perhaps even written correspondence may have to suffice.

Those involved up to this point should evaluate the response of the one caught in sin and determine if there's evidence of genuine, lasting repentance. Of course, the goal isn't perfection but rather a heart that's broken over sin and clinging to Christ, evidenced by humility and a willingness to follow wise counsel. In many cases, this step may take weeks, or months, or even longer. Often, it's here that God brings about repentance and reconciliation. But in some cases, it will become evident to those involved that there's no genuine repentance and, in obedience to Christ's instructions, the church should proceed to the next step.

STEP #3: INVOLVE LEADERS OR ELDERS BY INFORMING THEM OF THE SITUATION

Somewhere around step 2, maybe before, maybe after, a Christian should consider involving a few elders or other leaders of the church (like a small group leader). This might begin with a conversation, but eventually the elders should have a way of formally receiving charges (for example, the elders might require that the charges be made in writing or they might invite the person to meet with one or two of them). Jesus does not speak of the involvement of elders in Matthew 18, but given the responsibility over the church that the apostles assign to them in other passages, it makes sense that elders would be involved in the process of church discipline at some point. In more difficult situations, the elders will need to be involved sooner rather than later.

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Here, the leadership has the responsibility to consider the nature of the charges. Is the sin concrete and serious enough to warrant taking the next steps of church discipline? Are there extenuating circumstances that the member might not know? Are there other members who might better speak to the one caught in sin? How do we care for those who have been wronged? The leaders of the church will need to think through these and other important questions, and prayerfully shepherd those involved in the following steps.

STEP #4: GIVE ADEQUATE NOTICE TO THE ONE CAUGHT IN SIN

Before making the matter public, the elders will want to make formal contact with the one caught in sin. This is especially in cases where there has been minimal contact with the elders, as when communication has been rejected or most of the information has been communicated secondhand. The goal of this contact is to explain the charges and express their love and concern. If the person remains unrepentant, then it's necessary to notify them of when this will be shared with the congregation. Given the need for clarity and precision in communication, the initial contact should probably be some form of written communication, followed up by a phone call or a personal meeting.

If none of the elders have met with the one being confronted, they should make clear that they want a chance to hear his side of the story. If meeting with all the elders is too intimidating, they can offer to send a smaller group of the elders. The goal in this step is to give the unrepentant member a chance to meet with the leaders personally and make sure there is no misunderstanding.

If after this step it's clear there's no misunderstanding and there's still no repentance, then the elders should proceed to the next step.

STEP #5: TELL IT TO THE CHURCH (MATT. 18:17)

At this point, Jesus commands the member to “tell it to the church.” Though “church” has been interpreted in many different ways, Jesus seems to understand the church to be a gathering of disciples in his name (Matt. 18:20, see 1 Cor. 5:4). The church is the congregation. In this step, the elders will communicate what’s taken place to the congregation.

Given the sensitive nature, it makes sense that the elders would present this at a regularly scheduled members’ meeting, rather than a public worship service. The elders need to think through carefully what and how much to communicate about to the congregation. They want to communicate enough so that the congregation understands what has taken place and the need for church discipline. However, they should not communicate so much that it makes returning upon repentance difficult because of public shame, embarrasses family members, or causes weaker sheep to stumble.

Given the need for carefulness and precision, it’s generally wise for the elders to craft a letter to be read at the meeting, rather than trying to explain it extemporaneously. In some cases, the elders may want to involve the member who initially brought the charges in crafting the letter. After the elders read the letter, they should allow for questions from the congregation, and invite people to talk to them privately if they have further questions. In more difficult cases, the elders might consider holding a forum for members of the church to bring questions.

Having been apprised of the situation, the congregation should be instructed to pray. Those in the church who have a personal relationship with the one caught in sin should be encouraged to reach out prayerfully. The elders will want to give the congregation enough time to participate in the process of confrontation.

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This period may be the time until the next members' meeting, or longer if needed. However, in certain cases, the church may need to act more quickly, perhaps even right away, if the church feels confident about a lack of repentance (1 Cor. 5:1–5).

STEP #6: REMOVE THE UNREPENTANT PERSON FROM MEMBERSHIP (MATT. 18:17)

After following all the previous steps, if the individual continues to refuse to listen “even to the church,” then the elders should update the congregation on the situation and bring a formal motion for the congregation to remove him from the membership of the church. If the vote passes, then the church needs to understand that they no longer affirm this person's profession of faith. They are to relate to him no longer as one who belongs to the church but to the world, like “a pagan or tax collector.”

Following the removal, the elders should instruct the congregation on how to interact with the individual. As someone under discipline, the goal is *not* to shun him or to cut off all relationship. Rather, members should relate to him as someone in need of the gospel, yet who is self-deceived. In that sense, interactions are more complex than relating with non-Christian friends who know they are non-Christians. Any interactions should be used to call the person to repentance and to remind him of the hope of the gospel. Members should encourage him to attend the services of the church and to sit under the preaching of the Word. And yet, at the same time, they must avoid relating to him casually as if nothing has changed.

After the meeting, the elders should send a written communication to the individual, informing him of the act of discipline, and expressing their love for him and their desire for his repentance and restoration. The elders should also continue to follow up with the congregation in different settings (Sunday School classes, small

groups, etc.) to see if there are any concerns or questions about what has taken place. Church discipline can be a difficult time in the life of a church, and yet it can also be used by God to bring about maturity and growth. Elders should shepherd the congregation wisely both throughout the process and after.

CONCLUSION

Church discipline would be easier if the church wasn't made up of people. But Jesus didn't come for buildings or institutions or events. He came to save a people for himself, sinners like you and me.

It's this reality that makes church discipline a wonderful gift. The church is a gathering of those who through repentance and faith have received the hope of Christ's salvation and are helping each other persevere in that hope. To neglect church discipline is to fail to love one another in that way. So, as we labor to follow Christ's instructions for the purity of the church, we cling to the hope of the gospel both for ourselves and for those around us.

6. Discipleship

WHAT IS IT?

The Christian life is one of growing in godliness (2 Pet. 1:7–10). Growth comes not only by instruction, but also by imitation (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). Therefore, churches should exhort their members to grow in holiness and help others do the same.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- ✦ Peter exhorted his readers to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18)
- ✦ Paul exhorted the Ephesians to grow by speaking the truth in love to one another (Eph. 4:15).
- ✦ Many passages in Scripture instruct us to imitate godly leaders (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 4:9; Heb. 13:7).

The point is that, according to Scripture, all Christians should grow in Christ, imitate other godly Christians, and encourage others in their growth in Christlikeness.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Promoting biblical discipleship and growth is important because none of us are finished products. Until we die, all Christians will struggle against sin, and we need help in this fight. Moreover, churches that foster cultures of Christian discipleship strengthen their witness by offering the world a picture of what the gospel looks like in action.

Elders — The Church's Lead Disciple-Makers

JERAMIE RINNE

Are you an elder in your church? Then you should be one of the church's lead disciplers. You knew that this was a key part of an elder's job description, right?

Let me back up just to make sure it is clear. If I had to pick one image to best explain an elder's job in the local church, the choice would be a no-brainer: the New Testament predominantly portrays elders as shepherds. Both Paul and Peter urged elders to shepherd their flocks (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). The writer of Hebrews called believers to submit to their leaders who “keep watch” over them “as men who must give an account” (Heb. 13:17). Peter said that elders serve as under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). Many of an elder's duties—including teaching the Word, guarding against heresy, modeling godliness, pursuing wayward believers, overseeing church affairs, and praying for members—can be summed up within the simple picture of a shepherd tending sheep.

But what's the goal of shepherding?

Elders shepherd church members in order to help those members *grow up* in Christ. Elders tend the flock in such a way that believers develop from spiritual infancy to full-grown Christ-likeness. Overseers labor in hope that the sheep will move beyond a needy, self-focused, toddler Christianity to an adulthood of serving Jesus and leading others to Jesus.

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Paul identified Christian maturity as the reason Jesus gave various leaders to the church, including pastors (i.e., shepherds):

It was he who gave some to be . . . pastors and teachers 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. (Eph. 4:11–13)

When elders fulfill their duties well, believers will “no longer be infants” but will instead “grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ” (vv. 14–15). Elders should say with Paul, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ” (Col. 1:28).

In other words, shepherding aims at making mature disciples. What is disciple-making if not helping people progress toward maturity in Christ?

So as the church's shepherds, elders should lead the way and set the pace for disciple-making. All believers are called to the task of making disciples, but elders bear an overall responsibility for the discipleship work of the congregation.

When elders grasp the goal of shepherding as disciple-making and disciple-maturing, it will transform their ministry. Consider how the goal of making mature disciples might impact five common aspects of an elder's pastoral work.

MATURING DISCIPLES THROUGH TEACHING

Elders must be able to teach the Bible (1 Tim. 3:2, 5:17; Titus 1:9). God's shepherds feed God's sheep with God's Word. And what's the point of feeding the sheep, except to strengthen and mature them?

When an elder opens his Bible to teach fifty people at a Sunday evening service, or twelve people at a home Bible study, or one guy over a cup of coffee, he should not only focus on interpreting the Bible well, though of course that is critical. Instead, he must also look up from his Bible to see the people in their various stages of discipleship, and then connect the Bible's truths to his congregation's hearts, relationships, speech, and finances. He should strive to apply the text in ways that ripen Christ-followers.

MATURING DISCIPLES THROUGH PASTORAL CARE

What is the point of that elder's hospital visit? Or why does he spend an evening with the couple devastated by infertility or have breakfast with the elderly man who recently lost his wife of fifty years? Certainly, he is there to encourage and comfort these hurting church members. But he should also be there to promote spiritual growth.

So instead of only asking, "How are you feeling?" and "Is there anything the church can do to help?" a discipleship-minded elder will tactfully ask questions like, "What do you think God is doing in your life through this difficult experience?" and "Has God showed you something about himself in the midst of your suffering?" He will not only pray for healing and comfort, but also for God's refining, sanctifying work.

Suffering is perhaps one of God's sharpest tools for chiseling us into Christ's image. Elders can support spiritual growth simply by reminding brothers and sisters that their suffering has a divine purpose.

MATURING DISCIPLES THROUGH HOSPITALITY

Paul twice says that elders must be hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:8). But let's again view this elder task through the lens of making disciples. When we do, we find that hospitality is about more than elders

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being friendly. Hospitality is also about elders making disciples by being examples.

An elder's hospitality enables others to see that elder up close in his natural habitat. They see how he relates to his wife, shapes his kids, and works out his Christian faith in real life. Hospitality facilitates an elder's ministry of modeling maturity (1 Pet. 5:3). It allows people into his life so that he can say to them, "Join with others in following my example" (Phil. 3:17).

MATURING DISCIPLES BY LIVING LIFE TOGETHER

Hospitality is just the beginning. Modeling maturity takes more than a cookout; elders must open their lives to others. Just as effective shepherds must be among the sheep, so effective elders will live life together with church members. Members need to see elders' behavior in a variety of contexts, including work and play, ministry and misery, success and setback.

This may sound daunting to men with hectic lives and busy schedules. But doing life together is not as much about adding more to the schedule as it is about inviting others into what is already happening. So if you're an elder, include members into your normal golfing or fishing, gaming or gardening. Commute together to work. If you teach a class at church, bring on an assistant teacher to apprentice with you.

Elders should be able to say with Paul, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well" (1 Thes. 2:8). As elders share their lives, members get glimpses of Christian maturity in high definition.

MATURING DISCIPLES THROUGH LEADERSHIP

Let's take one more example: leadership. Elders lead a local church, just as shepherds lead a flock. That's why they are called "overseers" (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 13:17).

But when an elder grasps the goal of making mature disciples, he no longer sees "leadership" as merely sitting around a table making decisions. He understands that leadership includes raising up more leaders. The maturity-minded shepherd invites others into his life to share in teaching and responsibility (2 Tim. 2:2). He will demonstrate and delegate. A discipleship vision shifts an elder's leadership focus from policies and programs to training future shepherds.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF MAKING MATURE DISCIPLES?

Why is it so critical that elders see disciple-making and disciple-maturing as the goal of their shepherding? Because making disciples isn't really the ultimate goal.

The ultimate goal for elders and the church is to savor and exalt God and his glory. Both shepherds and sheep exist to reflect the image and character of Jesus.

So when elders shepherd in such a way as to grow up Christ-like disciples, they are extending the reflection of Jesus's glory in the world. Making more and more mature disciples means there are more people treasuring Jesus, imitating Jesus, and proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Disciple-making shepherds labor to bring glory to the Chief Shepherd himself.

Discipleship According to the Scriptures

GARRETT KELL

My earliest memories revolve around fishing trips with my father. He taught me how to bait a hook, cast a line, and land a catfish without getting stabbed to death. But fishing wasn't all I learned. I learned about my father. I learned how he walked, how he talked, how he joked, how he prayed, how he spoke to others, and how he always thought about my mother on the drive home.

More than fishing, I learned about being a man.

To this day, the lessons I learned from my dad impact the way I live and love others. What happened in my time with my father was a form of discipleship. He led and I followed.

What is biblical discipleship? Of all the questions Christians need to wrestle with, this is one of the most important. Being disciples of Jesus gets to the very core of who we are and what we should be doing with our lives.

In this article I suggest that discipleship—helping others follow Jesus—flows directly from being a disciple of Jesus. Disciples are called to follow Christ, and following him means helping others follow him.

Are you a disciple that makes disciples?

DISCIPLES FOLLOW JESUS

When we encounter Jesus, we meet a man who calls us to come and die (Mark 8:34–35). And he calls us to follow him and learn from him (Matt. 4:19, 11:29). It doesn't matter whether we're smart or

stupid, rich or poor, young or old, Asian, African, or American. The only requirement is that we repent of rebelling against our Creator and cling to him through faith (Mark 1:15; 1 Thes. 1:9). If we do this, we're promised forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation to God (Col. 1:13–14; 2 Cor. 5:17–21). Jesus calls us to come and die so that we might live.

Those who follow Jesus by faith are known as his disciples. Some suggest that disciples are the “super Christians” who are gettin’ it done for Jesus, while Christians are just “normal believers.” Scripture, however, offers no support for this distinction. (See, for example, Matt. 10:38, 16:24–28; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23, 57–62; John 10:27, 12:25–26). We are either following Jesus or we aren't; there is no middle ground (Matt. 12:30).

DISCIPLES IMITATE AND REPLICATE JESUS

At the heart of following Jesus is Jesus's call to imitate him and replicate him. As disciples, we are called to imitate Jesus's love (John 13:34), his mission (Matt. 4:19), his humility (Phil. 2:5), his service (John 13:14), his suffering (1 Pet. 2:21), and his obedience to the Father (1 John 2:3–6). Since he is our teacher, we are to learn from him and strive in the power of the Holy Spirit to become like him (Luke 6:40). This growth in Christ-likeness is a lifelong endeavor that is fueled by the hopeful expectation that one day we will see him face to face (1 John 3:2–3).

DISCIPLES HELP OTHERS FOLLOW JESUS

As we follow our Lord, we quickly learn that part of imitation is replication. Having a personal relationship with Jesus is magnificent, but it is incomplete if it ends with us. Part of being his follower is to intentionally help others learn from him and become more like him. As a friend of mine says, “If you aren't helping other people follow

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Jesus, I don't know what you mean when you say you're following Jesus." To be his follower is to help others follow him.

Being a disciple that makes disciples happens in two particular ways. First, we're called to evangelize. Evangelism is telling people who don't follow Jesus what it means to follow him. We do this by proclaiming and portraying the gospel in our neighborhood and among the nations (Matt. 28:19–20). We must never forget that God has placed us in the families, workplaces, and circles of friends that we are in so that we can proclaim the gospel of grace to those who are destined to hell apart from Christ. We must help people learn how to begin to follow Jesus.

The second aspect of making disciples is helping other believers grow in Christ-likeness. Jesus has designed his church to be a body (1 Cor. 12), a kingdom of citizens and a family who actively build each other up into the fullness of Christ (Eph. 2:19; 4:13, 29). We are called to instruct each other about Christ (Rom. 15:14) and to imitate others who are following Christ (1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1; 2 Thes. 3:7, 9). As disciples, we are to intentionally pour into other disciples so they can pour into still others (2 Tim. 2:1–2).

DISCIPLES INTENTIONALLY BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Discipleship does not just happen. We need to be intentional about cultivating deep, honest relationships in which we do spiritual good to other Christians. While we can have discipleship relationships anywhere, the most natural place for them to develop is in the community of the local church. In the church Christians are commanded to meet together regularly, spur each other on in Christ-likeness, and protect each other against sin (Heb. 3:12–13; 10:24–25).

The discipleship relationships that spring out of this type of committed community should be both structured and spontaneous.

When we study the life of Jesus, we see that he formally taught his disciples (Matt. 5–7; Mark 10:1) while also allowing them to observe his obedience to God as they lived life together (John 4:27; Luke 22:39–56).

In the same way, some of our discipleship relationships should be structured. Maybe two friends decide to read a chapter from the Gospel of John and then discuss it over coffee or a workout at the gym. Maybe two businessmen read a chapter each week from a Christian book and then talk about it on a Saturday walk through the neighborhood with their kids. Maybe two couples do a date night together once a month and talk about what the Bible says about marriage. Maybe a godly older lady has a younger single woman over to her home on Tuesday afternoon to pray and study a Christian biography. Maybe a mom spends time at the park with other moms each week. Regardless of the format, some of our discipleship should involve scheduled times of reading, praying, confessing, encouraging, and challenging each other to become more like Christ.

Discipleship can also be spontaneous. Maybe friends go to a movie together and then grab ice cream afterwards to compare the movie's message to what the Bible says. Maybe a father and a son sit on the porch and reflect on God's glory being displayed in a sunset. Maybe you invite visitors from church over for lunch and ask everyone how they came to know Jesus.

We always need to be intentional, but we don't always need to be structured. In fact, Deuteronomy 6 shows us that discipleship happens “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (v. 7). Every moment presents an opportunity to discuss who God is and what he's doing. Since we are always following Jesus, we always have the opportunity to help others follow him as well.

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DISCIPLES DEPEND UPON GRACE

While it is true that a disciple of Jesus ought to help others follow Jesus, we must always remember that apart from the sustaining and empowering grace of God we can do nothing (John 15:5). Whether you're a pastor, a plumber, a policeman, or a stay-at-home parent, you never graduate from your need for God's grace.

As we follow Christ and help others follow him, we're constantly made aware that we need grace. We fail. We sin. We struggle. But thankfully, God's grace abounds to his children. This is good news as we seek to follow Jesus together and daily be transformed into his glorious image (2 Cor. 3:18). May we faithfully follow Christ and help others to do the same until we see his face. Come soon, Lord Jesus!

7. Church Leadership

WHAT IS IT?

There are two church offices according to Scripture: elders and deacons. Elders are to be godly, qualified men who serve as teachers and shepherds of the church. Deacons, on the other hand, are servants of the church, focusing on practical needs of members and the unity of the whole body.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- ✦ Paul lays out the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9.
- ✦ God gifts churches with elders to
 - o feed God’s sheep God’s Word (John 21:15–17),
 - o guide the sheep (1 Tim. 4:16; 1 Pet. 5:3, Heb. 13:7),
 - o and protect the sheep from attackers (Acts 20:27–29; 2 Tim. 4:3–4; Titus 1:9),
 - o while protecting both themselves and the church through the wisdom of their plurality (Prov. 11:14; 24:6).
- ✦ When the Epistles mention elders, they present them as a group or a plurality (Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, 1 Tim. 4:14, 5:17; Jas. 5:14).
- ✦ The qualifications for deacons are found in 1 Timothy 3:8–13.
- ✦ While “the seven” are not named deacons in Acts 6:1–7, these seven individuals demonstrate the basic work of a deacon: (i) meeting tangible needs, (ii) bringing unity to the church, (iii) and supporting the teaching ministry of the elders.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Biblical eldership is important because through it God blesses the church with instruction, protection, and unity.

Elders: Lead!

BOBBY JAMIESON

In many churches, the elders aren't really the leaders. But they should be.

ELDERS WHO AREN'T LEADING

Scenario one: The elders are viewed as more of an advisory board. They're trustees, not teachers. They exercise some responsibility over policies, personnel, and programs, but the only real leader is the senior pastor.

Scenario two: The elders don't really lead the church because the staff have taken over that role. The staff run all the programs. The staff are most people's point of contact in the church. If you have a question or problem, you'll turn to the youth leader or women's ministry director or discipleship coordinator.

Scenario three: At the other end of the spectrum, these theologically minded elders shy away from anything that remotely resembles administration. Patterning their ministry on the apparent division of labor in Acts 6, the elders devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer and leave everything else to deacons and other church members, from the church budget to the contents of the worship service to the selection of books in the bookstore.

In the first two scenarios, the elders need to grow into their role as shepherds (1 Pet. 5:2) and ministers of the Word (1 Tim. 3:2).

The elders in the third scenario are much closer to the mark, but I would suggest that there are some ways in which they're still failing to truly lead.

ELDERS ARE LEADERS AND OVERSEERS

What does the Bible say about elders' leadership?

- ✦ **1 Timothy 5:17** (NIV) says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." The Greek term behind "direct the affairs" is *proistemi*, which has two basic meanings: (i) to exercise leadership, and (ii) to care for someone or something. The first is clearly in view here. The elders exercise leadership over the whole church. In other translations they "rule" or "are leaders."
- ✦ This word also shows up in **1 Timothy 3:4 and 12**, where Paul says that both elders and deacons must manage their households well. Managing a household involves comprehensive oversight, including making decisions, teaching, training children, setting a godly example, and competently managing finances. That this kind of leadership is a prerequisite for being an elder suggests that "administration" as such is not beyond the pale of elders' responsibilities.
- ✦ Further, another common term for "elder" in the New Testament is "**overseer**" (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). This Greek noun (*episkopos*) and its cognate verb imply the assumption of responsibility and care. Care for what? The church and its affairs.

Therefore, what can look like delegation of administration may in fact be abdication of leadership.

- ✦ **What about Acts 6?** True, the apostles devote themselves to the Word and prayer and refuse to allow administration to usurp those priorities (Acts 6:1-7). But that's just the point—they don't allow administration to usurp those priorities. So, they exercise their leadership to come up with a solution that serves the church. They don't just say, "Distribution of food? That's not our job!"

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Taken together, these New Testament passages clearly teach that the elders have a general responsibility to lead and oversee the affairs of the church. That's a broad, all-embracing responsibility. Given their primary focus on teaching and attending to the spiritual needs of the flock, elders shouldn't allow administration to swamp those priorities. Yet on the other hand, they shouldn't abdicate leadership either.

In general, the extent of their involvement will vary depending on how closely the matter at hand relates to the ministry of the Word and spiritual oversight.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION; TEACHING, WORSHIP, BOOKSTALL, BUDGET

What does this mean practically?

Preaching and teaching: The elders will likely do the majority of it, and they will exercise very close oversight over other teachers who contribute. The elders should also exercise oversight over the content that is taught in every area of the church's life, from small groups to children's ministry to evangelistic outreaches. This doesn't mean the elders need to do all the teaching. But it does mean that the elders as a whole have a special responsibility for everything that is taught.

Corporate worship: The elders are finally responsible for the contents since corporate worship *is* a ministry of the Word. A non-elder should not have full and final authority over what songs the church sings. The elders may decide to delegate much of the work to, for example, a theologically sound and musically gifted deacon, but it should be clear to all involved—including the congregation—that the elders are responsible for the contents of corporate worship.

Bookstall: The elders should have the say over what books are and aren't included. After all, recommending books is an extension

of the ministry of the Word. They may assign one elder or a theologically discerning deacon to manage the store, and perhaps do most of the legwork for selecting titles. But the elders should have veto power over what books are sold.

The church budget: This is trickier territory. On the one hand, the elders should work not to get bogged down in endless details. So it makes good sense to farm out much of the legwork to one or more deacons, or the treasurer, or other godly and trustworthy individuals in the church.

On the other hand, the elders should set the overall direction for the budget since it reflects and embodies the church's ministry priorities. So the elders should lead the church in considering how much money to give to missions, how much and what kind of staff should serve the church, what local evangelistic ministries to partner with and to what extent, and so on.

Also, it takes godliness and maturity to ensure that pastors are paid enough (1 Tim. 5:17; Gal. 6:6). Not every budget committee obeys Scripture's clear command to provide for our pastors' needs.

Thus, the elders should handle the aspects of budgeting that most directly relate to spiritual oversight and the ministry priorities which flow from the Word. And they should gladly delegate much of the plumbing work to other godly church members, who perhaps work together with a small subset of fiscally wise elders.

Of course this is a difficult balance to strike in practice. But my main point is that it should be the elders, not the deacons, or treasurer, or some political cabal, who are "in charge of" putting together the budget. As every leader knows, delegation is essential to leadership. Leading doesn't mean doing everything yourself. But the budget should be, and should be seen to be, a matter in which the elders lead and exercise substantial authority.

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ELDERS: LEAD!

My basic point in all this is that the elders should lead the church. This leadership flows from teaching the Word, setting a godly example, and attending to the spiritual state of the flock. But it also flows into all kinds of practical matters as those matters intersect with the church's theological vision.

Our Church Wants a Plurality of Elders, but We Don't Know Where to Start¹

DAVE HARVEY

“A thrilling frenzy of restless exhilaration!” That’s how John described his life as a church planter.

Living Faith Community, the church he planted two years ago, is growing faster than he ever expected. But people import problems. Counseling, conflict, marriage issues, mission drift—it’s all dizzying to John. He spent so much time preparing to start the church that he never considered what it meant to shepherd or lead beyond the planting. If you bumped into John around town, you’d probably detect early signs of burnout.

Recently, it dawned on John that he alone is carrying the burdens for the church. Theologically, he’s convinced a plurality of elders what Scripture holds out as best. John once aced a paper he wrote on elder teams for his Doctrine of Ecclesiology class. But now he’s in the trenches of a new church, and he has no idea where to actually find these men. He wonders, “What does it even look like to put an elder team together? How do I begin to transition leadership from *me* to *us*?”

Transitioning to a plurality of elders is an urgent topic—for both planters and pastors who don’t yet have this structure. Why?

1 Editor’s note: For more on this topic, check out Dave’s book: *The Plurality Principle: How to Maintain Gospel-Centered Leadership in a Multipastor Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), <https://www.amazon.com/Plurality-Principle-Maintain-Leadership-Coalition/dp/1433571544>.

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Because the quality of your elder plurality determines in large part the health of your church. It really is that important.

So, with this in mind, here's how pastors and church leaders can kickstart the process.

1. TEACH, TEACH, TEACH

Make it clear that a plurality of men serving together is an essential part of a flourishing church. *The New Testament terms for pastor, overseer, or elder are never used to talk about a single leader ruling or governing the church alone.* Show this to your people in Scripture; point them to Acts 20, Philippians 1, 1 Timothy 4–5, and 1 Peter 5.

For many, the term “elder” smacks of a quaint relic, like the Navy’s “quartermaster.” It sounds familiar, but unless you’re in the Navy, you’d have to Google it. Even church members may only know them as the guys who appear under the “Elders” tab on the church website.

But being an elder is significant. In order to serve as part of a healthy elder plurality, a pastor must learn humility. He must be willing to come under authority, traffic in nuance, and consider his gifts and position through the lens of what best serves the whole church. Serving as elders together ought to draw men closer to God and one another as they teach, lead, and care for the congregation.

Pastors, teach your church to see the beauty and significance of this biblical design. The strength, unity, and integrity of an elder plurality infuses the church with vitality and sustainability. Where pluralities experience depth and joy, churches grow in health and strength.

2. CONSIDER ASSEMBLING A PROVISIONAL PLURALITY

There are many ways to do this. Perhaps assemble a *leadership team* from men in the congregation. Make it clear their role is temporary;

make it clear that they're not elders, and it's possible some of them never will be. Nonetheless, these meetings offer a great context to observe men who may one day be elders. So encourage them. Let them know you still want to benefit from their counsel and friendship. Also, it's probably wise to place a time limit on this team's service so that there's a natural endpoint.

Here's another idea for churches in the early stage of this: you might invite an experienced pastor from outside your church to be a part of this team. If you're leading a church plant, perhaps ask a pastor from your sending church. Not only does this maintain continuity and accountability, it provides less experienced men with a framework for how eldership ought to function.

3. FAMILARIZE YOURSELF WITH TRAINING MATERIALS THAT YOU CAN WORK THROUGH WITH POTENTIAL ELDERS

Some helpful tools include the *Study Guide to Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch², resources at [Biblicaleldership.com](https://www.biblicaleldership.com), the Basics of Church Eldership at TGC³, *Gospel Eldership* by Bob Thune⁴, and the eldership training materials available through 9Marks⁵. My new book *The Plurality Principle* also has a free study guide⁶.

2 Alexander Strauch, *Study Guide: Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1997), <https://www.amazon.com/Study-Guide-Biblical-Eldership-Mentoring/dp/0936083131/>.

3 "The Plurality of Elders," in *Basics of Church Eldership*, The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/basics-of-church-eldership/#the-plurality-of-elders>.

4 Robert H. Thune, *Gospel Eldership: Equipping a New Generation of Servant Leaders* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), <https://www.amazon.com/Gospel-Eldership-Equipping-Generation-Servant/dp/1942572611/>.

5 Mike McKinley, "Raising Up Elders: Three Areas to Address," 9Marks <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalraising-elders-three-areas-address/>.

6 Dave Harvey, *Study Guide for The Plurality Principle* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), <https://uploads.crossway.org/excerpt/study-guide-the-plurality-principle.pdf>.

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Because ministry can quickly deteriorate to a tyranny of the urgent, many leaders don't prioritize training. But there's nothing more important for a new pastor to do than find a way to train elders. It's an investment into the church's future since healthy pluralities lead to thriving churches. But it will also help you! Appointing elders who share the shepherding workload will free up big blocks of time. And doing this will prepare you for my next encouragement.

4. MAKE ROOM NOW IN YOUR SCHEDULE TO BE THE CUSTODIAN OF YOUR CHURCH'S ELDER PLURALITY

As the senior leader of a local church, it's your job to consistently give yourself to the health of the team. The overarching role of the lead pastor among the elders is to steward the group into a culture of care, trust, affection, doctrinal growth, and honest burden-sharing. Setting this example is particularly important at the beginning of a church.

How do senior pastors do this? By actively serving, loving, and shaping their fellow elders. By encouraging, celebrating, and stirring up the team toward mutual service. This requires humble leadership—listening well to feedback, graciously addressing others' hurts, readily confessing sin, and admitting when you're wrong. This work must be an ongoing and faithful practice—not merely once in a while when you feel like it.

5. FINALLY, REMEMBER GOD'S GRACE

God is actively at work in your congregation pouring out his grace upon men so they can become pastors and elders. When Paul unpacks the qualifications for eldership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, he often uses the present tense controlling verb "must be." The elder "must be" above reproach, sober-minded, respectable, and so on. This verb tense carries throughout both passages.

Our Church Wants a Plurality of Elders, but We Don't Know Where to Start

This means Paul isn't holding out a list of yet-to-be-achieved traits. He's talking about *preconditions*—qualities already present in the men appointed. By using the verbs this way, Paul indicates that the Spirit of God is actively at work in the church pouring out grace on some men so that they will manifest these qualities. Elder training begins by recognizing an empowering process God has already begun. Which means you need to have the eye to spot where God is at work. You need to be able to see grace in the men of your church.

So, when I meet church planters like John who are spinning their wheels for God's glory, I invite them to consider, "Which men are the people in your congregation drawn to? Who is known for their character? Who's already influencing people for the right reasons?" Then exhort him to believe this promise: *God is so committed to the future of his church that he is already at work preparing elders to lead it.*

How to Separate Deacon Work from Elder Work

MATT SCHMUCKER

The Evil One loves to divide, and he often divides most effectively along the lines of authority: husband and wife, parent and child, boss and employee. This is true in the church as well. Whether between the pastors and the congregation or within the church's leadership, division causes Christ's church to suffer.

One way this division creeps into the church is when issues arise that don't clearly fall to either the elders or the deacons.

The goal of this article is clarify how to separate deacon work from elder work. This will help to minimize division between elders and deacons and thus preserve unity among the church's leaders.

WHERE'S THE RUB?

Fights occur over issues that don't clearly fall to either elders or deacons. If it's clear to all parties who's responsible for something, there's no cause for dispute. But trouble occurs when it's less clear: Is this deacon work? Is it elder work? How much should the elders comment on the deacons' work? Can the deacons weigh in on the elders' conclusions?

My answer is a rock solid, "It depends."

No deacon should object to the elders' ability to pick Sunday School teachers. No elder should argue with the deacons about the furniture polish used on the communion table. If you have this level of disputes in your church, you need to do some basic teaching about

what an elder is and what a deacon is. Your elders should know they are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church, and your deacons should know they are responsible for the physical and material needs of the church. If both parties don't know that, start there.

On the other hand, the tough cases are tough because the issue falls on the boundary line between the spiritual oversight of the church and its physical and material care, or the issue involves both domains.

In order to try to sort some of these struggles out, let me give you three brief scenarios where the jurisdiction issue is fuzzy, two suggestions for bringing clarity, and two encouragements for the road ahead.

THREE FUZZY SCENARIOS

Here are three scenarios that seem to fall on the line between elders' and deacons' responsibilities:

1. Babies are being born and the nursery needs to be expanded. Whose job is it, the elders' or deacons'? You might think this is deacon work, but if the elders are doing their job well, they will have seen the growing need in the natural course of their shepherding. If you take in fifty new members over the course of two years who are single, the elders should expect to need an expanded nursery in five years or so! This matter will finally be resolved by the deacons through a construction project, but it should be initiated by the elders as they give oversight to the congregation.
2. Ninety-year-old Mrs. Spandler turned her car keys over to her daughter and can't get around like she used to. You might think the responsibility for getting her to church falls to the elders, but we would encourage the deacons to step up here. Consider appointing a "deacon of member care" who focuses on the physical needs of especially needy members such as elderly shut-ins.

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3. It's September and the church's budget needs to be passed before December 31st. Who leads? Finances sound like a deacon matter, right? In part. A budget is one picture of a church's vision. Show me the money and I'll show you the heart of the church. Therefore, elders should take the lead and give direction. That doesn't mean the deacons cannot help by submitting estimates and listing needs for their areas of service. And a deacon of budget can pull the entire spreadsheet together and propose a budget for the elders to begin working with. But the elders should apportion and balance the budget, weighing, for example, local needs (such as buildings and salaries) against international missions. I would recommend that the elders present the budget to the church with the support of the deacons.

TWO CLARIFYING SUGGESTIONS

How should elders and deacons decide which issues are or are not primarily their responsibility? Here are two suggestions that should help clarify matters:

1. Elders should be careful to keep administrative (deacon) matters from dominating their agenda. The work of the elders can easily be overwhelmed by a church's unending stream of seemingly urgent physical matters, yet this is not their main task. Consider forming an administrative sub-committee among the elders that can address more deacon-oriented concerns *before* they get to the elders. This can keep administrative concerns from clogging up the agenda of the elders as a whole. Give that sub-committee authority to act on behalf of the elders. On the flip side, elders can quickly take the legs out from under the deacons and thus discourage them by too much oversight. Instead, elders should delegate responsibilities to faithful servants and trust them to capably handle such matters.

2. Elders should model good communication. How? First, they should seek counsel from the deacons before making certain decisions. Consider Proverbs 15:22: “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.” Second, they should make sure the deacons are never caught off guard by any of the elders’ decisions. Therefore, keep the lines of communication open between the elders and the deacons. Consider planning one-on-one conversations between elders and deacons, as well as having a periodic gathering of both groups in which the elders inform deacons about decisions the elders have made before they put such matters before the whole church.

TWO ENCOURAGEMENTS FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

Finally, here are two encouragements to elders and deacons to press on in your work and labor for unity:

1. Elders: Labor to build *trust* with the deacons. Don’t assume they trust you by the mere fact that you hold an office. Work overtime to communicate with deacons and carefully consider their counsel. As the deacons’ trust and confidence grows, you will defeat the evil one’s divisive ways.
2. Deacons: Assume a posture of support *without* an attitude of “playing second fiddle.” According to 1 Corinthians 12:28 the gift of “administrating” is right up there with apostles, prophets, miracles, and healing. If you have a gift for administration and the qualities of a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8–13) you are a gift to Christ’s church. You have been given a particular “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:7) Use your gift to put down division and build up Christ’s body.

7. CHURCH LEADERSHIP

In short, be aware of the overlapping areas of responsibility that elders and deacons may have, and work to clarify which group should handle different issues. Fight against turfiness. Communicate openly and thoroughly with each other. In doing so, you will fight off division and model godly unity among the leaders for all the flock to see, profit from, and imitate.

8. Prayer

WHAT IS IT?

Many wrongly think of prayer as being a kind of mystical energy or religious ritual. But prayer is simply talking to God. It can include praising God, confessing sin, asking for needs, and even lamenting the brokenness of the world. In the Bible, individual Christians and churches are commanded to pray because God really listens and responds to the prayers of his people.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- ✦ Jesus taught his disciples to pray directly to God as their Father, to praise him for who he is, and ask him to provide for all our needs (Matt. 6:6–9).
- ✦ He also said believers should ask boldly because God knows what we need and has committed himself to providing for us (Matt. 6:25–34).
- ✦ James identified the reason for believers not having what we need is because we do not ask (Jas. 4:2–3).
- ✦ The early church regularly gathered to pray as they faced many challenges in advancing the gospel among the lost (Acts 1:14, 4:23–31, 12:5).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Prayer is so fundamental to the Bible that the Bible cannot be understood without it. This is because what God says demands a response from us. Proper responses to God's revelation include praising, asking, confessing, and lamenting to God in prayer.

On the Use and Importance of Corporate Prayer

MARK DEVER

SIGNIFICANCE OF CORPORATE PRAYER

What's the difference between individual prayer and corporate prayer?

In individual prayer, I am simply responding to God myself—my own knowledge of him, my relationship with him, my experience with him. In corporate prayer, when somebody opens their mouth to pray for a whole group of people, then the person leading has to think not just for themselves but they have to think, “What does this Bible study group, or what does my family, or what does this local church need to praise God for, thank him for, confess, and ask him for right now?”

In corporate prayer is the person praying speaking to God, to people, or to both?

To both. People don't think about that sometimes. You know, it's like when somebody talks about someone else praying in a quiet voice, and then the person who did the praying responds in a sort of self-righteous way, “I wasn't talking to you.” Well, actually, if you're praying out loud you are talking to them in part. You see this in the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. You'll see that in the Psalms too. Basically, if you're opening your mouth and asking us to close ours, then you are in part speaking to us. And you just have to take account of that fact.

So practically, if you're the person leading that prayer, pray "we," not "I." You may occasionally pray "I," but generally you should pray "we" because you're representing yourself and all those other people before the Lord.

Let me follow up on a point you were just making about seeing corporate prayer exemplified in Scripture. Since it's based in Scripture, is corporate prayer something pastors should—normatively should—be doing?

Oh, yeah. It's the example you see in Acts. Also, Paul exhorts Timothy to do this in his correspondence with him. Yeah, definitely.

Is the church that fails to take corporate prayer seriously depriving its members of something?

Yes, I think you deprive yourself and your members of one of those key parts of what your identity is as Christians. Paul tells the Corinthians that we have the same Spirit in us, and corporate prayer is a wonderful acting-out of the ontological unity that we have spiritually as we literally speak with one voice to God. To deny that, and to instead view the church's gathering as your quiet time with five hundred other people is to miss out. It screens out the local church from the reality experienced as a Christian. It's an impoverishment.

So what are some of the benefits for the individual christian of corporate prayer? Here I am; I'm a member of a congregation; I'm sitting here participating in this corporate prayer—what are the benefits for me? How will I grow in grace?

Participating regularly in corporate prayer begins to take out the individualistic assumption that Christianity is only about me and my relationship with God; and it begins to re-situate us as individual Christians in the congregation so that we become aware of this person who's sick, this person who's just had a baby, this person who's

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unemployed, this person who's just become a Christian. Participating in corporate prayer helps us discover that our lives as followers of Christ are tied up with one another's. It helps us discover how God cares about the congregation as an entity—that it should be marked by the fruit of the Spirit and the love of John 13:34–35.

That's not how Christians in America normally talk. You hear about “my own spiritual desires and demands;” you don't really hear about the local congregation's desires and demands. But regularly participating in corporate prayer reintroduces these ideas and reorients our thinking.

So it works against disunity.

Yes, among many other things. It works against disunity because you begin to realize that that person that you are disregarding, mocking, or dismissing is actually part of your own body. You have to approach them and their problems—even when you disagree with them—differently than you would before.

Including owning their. . .

Yes, it's not “their problem,” it's “our problem.” This pulls you into church discipline. It pulls you into correcting other people. It pulls you into other aspects of life together because you tangle your life up with theirs.

To what extent are you conscious of pastoring the people as you pray?

I am really aware of that when I'm preparing a prayer. I won't write out a manuscript, but I'll make notes of what I want to pray for and while I'm doing this I will think along these lines. When I'm actually praying, though, I am really aware of being in the presence of God, and I'm only secondarily thinking about the people.

Are you saying that you're more aware of being in God's presence when you lead in corporate pray than when you pray individually?

Oh, yeah! I'm highly aware of—you know—"Lord, here we are in your presence at CHBC, and here's what we would like to talk to you about." Yes, I feel very conspicuous.

More than when you preach?

Similarly or more. Certainly not less. I mean, I feel like I've walked up to the Chief Shepherd, and I'm his little undershepherd. And I've got all these sheep, and I'm trying to get them to, sh-h-h-h, pay attention now, you know, I kind of feel like that. I hope I'm not now ruining your experience of the pastoral prayers here at CHBC with distracting images.

Oh, not at all. . . What are you trying to teach people through your corporate prayer about their individual prayer lives? What would you want them to replicate?

I got a great letter once from a member who was a new Christian, saying that she had learned how to pray in her own personal devotional life from being in the services at CHBC. In fact, she had even learned how to pray in public by listening to the different prayers that were prayed. So I would hope that we would model different aspects of our relationship with God by the prayers that we have in public.

SUNDAY MORNING GATHERING

So, getting practical, you have two different services—the Sunday morning and the Sunday evening service. Let's start with Sunday morning. What do you do on Sunday mornings?

We certainly think that different churches have freedom to do it different ways. But at Capitol Hill Baptist, we will always have a **prayer of praise** (which is focused on some aspect of God), a **prayer**

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of confession (where we confess our sins), a **prayer of intercession/pastoral prayer** (where we pray through various concerns that we have as a church family), and a brief **prayer of thanks**. There will also be a prayer after the sermon in which we try to pray certain truths into our hearts; and there will sometimes be a brief prayer of invitation for God's presence at the beginning of our service.

You mentioned prayers of praise, confession, intercession, and thanks, which is basically what we see listed in the bulletin every week. But the Psalms have more than just these four categories. There are also prayers of lament, remembrance, and more. Would you ever do a prayer of lament? Why do you camp on those four?

Some of the things that the Psalms illustrates for us are contained in individual prayers. So they're not all prayers that will be normal in the corporate worship. Having said that, a prayer of lament certainly can be appropriate publicly and corporately, and I think we certainly would have elements of that.

Prayers of remembrance?

Yes, and that happens in the prayer of praise often. But back to the prayer of lament—I think that in my own pastoral prayers, at the end, sometimes I'll reflect on what we Christians are and how our culture understands us, and I'll lament that.

Any further comments on what you want accomplished in the prayer of praise?

We try to distinguish it from just a prayer of thanks. The prayer of thanks is me thanking God for something that he's given me. A prayer of praise is a prayer acknowledging an aspect of God's character that's been revealed to us. So we might praise him that he is a saving God; whereas we might thank him for his salvation of us.

We would praise him that he is a revealing God—that he, in and of himself wants to make himself known—whereas we might thank him for giving us the gift of his Word and his Spirit—things like that. So I think it's good to help us to think of God as the Bible reveals him to us even before we meditate on what he's done for us.

So for the few theological nitpickers out there who I've heard try to demolish the distinction between thanks and praise by saying, "We only know him through his economy of redemption," you're still going to say . . .

That he has revealed more about himself than merely the economy of redemption.

What's being accomplished in the prayer of confession?

We certainly can't confess every sin that we've committed. But we mean to lead the congregation in thinking about their lives before the Lord, especially in light of whatever text the church will be studying that particular morning. So it's meant to encourage self-examination and to help us meditate on God's holiness and how that matches with the lives we've been leading. Then at the end, with the entire bill being totaled up, as it were, we ask for his forgiveness in the name of Christ.

Which you then conclude with. . .

Well, after the prayer for forgiveness for our sins, we read an assurance of pardon from Scripture. We don't do that as priests saying, "I absolve you." But we do quote from God's Word on how God gives us forgiveness through Christ. There are many great verses which assure the saints and instruct others.

Seven or eight years ago, I remember you said that you didn't do a prayer of confession every week because you were concerned

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about causing visiting or former catholics to stumble, whereas now the practice is to do one every week. Why the change?

I just got to thinking about it and decided the damage of not doing a weekly prayer of confession was greater than the risk of doing one.

Gotcha.

Yeah, and we might change it back at some point. I don't know. But I think it seems like a good, healthy part of church life.

Will you walk me through your pastoral prayer? You seem to take an extended time on that. What do you do and why do you do it?

Let me start with the "why." I think the pastoral prayer is important for showing ourselves and others that the church is not doing what we appear to be doing, but that all this is God's work. Ultimately, everything that we do is dependent upon God and his grace, his mercy, his action. So I think the time given to intercession is a proper, appropriate, worshipful, thankful expression of dependency, and it's a good and right thing for Christians to do.

It's a form of praise.

It is. It's another form of praise as we confess our neediness. And we confess it out loud and publicly because we're confident of his sufficiency and of his good will toward us in Christ.

You often state that at the beginning of your prayers.

I'll sometimes say something like that. Other times I'll begin with a statement from a prayer of Daniel's in Daniel 9 where Daniel calls on God to act and to answer for the sake of his name.

I'll begin my requests by asking the Lord to intervene in situations that will be strikingly on the mind of the congregation if some

member has recently been married or died or if there's a situation that the whole congregation's aware of.

Then I'll pray for other classes of people: maybe the unemployed, maybe those longing to have children, something like that. Sometimes I'll pray for members by name.

And then I'll pray for those in authority over us, and I'll pray for two or three things about our city or nation that are at stake. I often pray for the schools. I think the public schools are a very important part of the future in this country. Part of what praying for our authorities means very practically is praying for those who have authority in the public schools.

Then I will pray for those who have gone out from us to preach the gospel, which for us means missionaries, seminarians, and pastors.

I'll also pray for at least one other church by name and its pastor. Sometimes it'll be another Baptist church, but more often than not it will be a church of another denomination. Usually it will be a church in our own area, but sometimes I pray for specific churches or ministries outside of this area.

Then I will pray for a number of different countries. Sometimes I'll pray for their governments, sometimes for religious freedoms, certainly for the spread of the gospel.

I try occasionally to thank God because he has done so much to answer our prayers. It seems appropriate to remember that when publicly praying, lest we make it look like we're beggars because he doesn't greatly give to us, when he does. I know we've already had the prayer of praise and we'll have a prayer of thanks, but I just want to thank him a little bit here too.

Finally, I will pray for Christians to be marked by certain characteristics, including our own congregation. And here I'll usually

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pray through the points of the sermon for us as a congregation. I pray that God would help us to hear, understand, and change.

How can a pastor get from a place where the Sunday morning gathering has one or two undefined prayers to having these three or four defined prayers every Sunday morning?

He should just start planning it into the service. He can teach on it in his sermons, as he has opportunity to mention prayer; quickly explain why he's doing these different things. Part of what prevents pastors from doing this, though, is the larger issue of thinking of the service like they're on TV time—no wasted time, no wasted space. So teach them, “Look, we're not about that. It doesn't matter if we get done at 12:00 or not.”

OTHER NUTS AND BOLTS

How long are your pastoral prayers?

I don't know. My guess is five to twelve minutes.

How long are the other prayers—the prayer of praise and of confession?

The prayer of praise, I'd guess, is like four to seven minutes. The confession is a little shorter, like four to six minutes maybe.

A few moments ago, you said you make notes. Do you encourage guys to write out their prayers, or is spontaneity the better way to go?

There are advantages to both. What you want is sincerity, but you also want it to be well thought through. If you're able to think on your feet well and not distract your people but lead them to the Lord, that's great. But if you get tongue-tied and repeat yourself a lot, then I don't care if you're sincere to the point of crying, that's not best—generally—for leading public prayer.

So you don't have a problem with people writing out prayers?

No, it's fine. Now, if they read their prayers in a way that's distracting because it sounds like they're reading an essay, that's a problem.

Once we had a staff member who quoted Luther to the Lord, and told the Lord that he was quoting Luther: "Oh, Lord, as Luther once said. . ." We told him later, "You don't ever need to tell the Lord who said something again."

So if the person praying doesn't come across as if they're reading an essay to God but that they genuinely perceive themselves to be praying, then I think that it's fine to have notes or a manuscript.

Earlier you said that when leading corporate prayer, we should pray "we" instead of "I." Any other practical tips for leading the congregation in corporate prayer?

Speak up, speak clearly. If you can't speak loudly and clearly, you're just frustrating the old people, and that's not kind.

Don't say heretical things.

Try to teach some godly friends in the congregation that it's a good thing for them to give you feedback—not to judge your relationship with God, but to help you better represent the Lord and teach people by your public prayers. It's appropriate for you to be humble enough to hear feedback from them.

SUNDAY EVENING PRAYER MEETING

Moving to the Sunday evening prayer service, how are your goals different for the evening service than the morning service as a time of corporate prayer?

People share various things, and I'll call on various folk to lead us in prayer for those things. So you hear more of a living body since it's not just the service leaders praying in monologue; it's a bunch of people praying.

Unlike many prayer services I've attended, people don't raise their hands and say, "Will you pray for this?" Instead, people come to you beforehand. I know it hasn't always been that way. How did you make that transition?

At first, our church had a normal Wednesday night prayer meeting where one old deacon prayed for all the sick people in the hospital, and then people put up hands and asked for unspoken concerns. So I tried to get them to move from praying about their uncle's cancer to their own cancer; and then from praying for their own cancer to their own spiritual life; and then from praying about their own spiritual life to their evangelism; and then from their evangelism to the church's evangelism. My goal has been to move their prayer to the more personal and spiritual, as well as to the corporate.

How did you do that?

I would tell people "no" when they wanted to pray for a sick baby.

Right, okay. Anything else?

I would say, "I'll pray. Thank you for telling me. Let me encourage you to get your small group to pray or your friends." When they say, "Can I share tonight?" I'll say, "Um, no," and then I'd try to explain what I'm trying to do. It's the one time the church has to get together and pray about things that affect us as a church, so . . .

How did you transition from people raising their hands, "Pastor, will you pray . . . ?" To everybody understanding that they needed to come to you beforehand?

Well, they just saw that that's what happened. I think that everybody came to understand it pretty easily. And they appreciate it because they benefit from the work you as the pastor do of brush clearing. You're not going to have one guy talk for seventeen minutes about a situation nobody understands, leaving everyone else

struggling in their carnal flesh wishing they could get out of there. People appreciate your work of making sure beforehand that that doesn't happen.

Somebody comes to you with something heavy on their heart—it's a neighbor or someone they love who has cancer. Any tips on how to pastorally respond with a "no"?

You pray with them right then. Encourage them in prayer. And ask them questions about their relationship with that person.

Corporate Prayer¹

JAMIE DUNLOP

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's 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

1 Editor's Note: This article is a lightly adapted version of a core seminar manuscript originally presented at Capital Hill Baptist Church.

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 Kgs. 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.

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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's 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. (Matt. 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?

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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.

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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.

Unity among God's people glorifies God. That's why 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 hear 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.

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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:

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- 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

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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!”

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 prayer 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 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.

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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 talk about these things with you. But always start by praying hard for us as a church. Don't just sit back and ignore a problem 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 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 article 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.

9. Missions

WHAT IS IT?

Missions is church planting across significant barriers. To fill out that just a bit, missions involves churches sending qualified workers across linguistic, geographic, or cultural barriers to start or strengthen churches, especially in places where Christ has not been named.

WHERE IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

- ✦ The entire Bible tells the story of God making a people for himself out of those who had been cast into darkness and death by Adam's sin and their own. He accomplished his people's redemption through Jesus's Christ, the one who the Old Testament anticipates and the New Testament celebrates. This means that the entire Bible is rightly said to be about missions—God's mission to save.
- ✦ In the Great Commission, Jesus bound churches everywhere to the task of disciple-making (Matt. 28:19–20). We know that local churches are the means for fulfilling Jesus's commission because (i) the apostles planted local churches wherever they went throughout the book of Acts; and (ii) Jesus commands new believers to be baptized—an ordinance normally given to churches rather than to individuals.
- ✦ The book of Acts is all about the planting of and strengthening churches in order to advance the gospel. The individual letters of the New Testament also serve this end.
- ✦ Revelation 7:9 guarantees that God's mission, which he is currently working through his church, will succeed. A "great multitude" from every nation will gather to him on the last day.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Missions is important because God's primary objective in creating the world has always been to redeem a people through Christ for his glory (Col. 1:16–22). God calls churches to join him in this mission.

A Plea for Gospel Sanity in Missions¹

AUBREY SEQUEIRA

PART I: OBSESSED WITH NUMBERS

I feel like I've had the conversation more than a thousand times. In my years living in the United States, believers often meet me and, having learned that I'm from India, they ask: "Oh! Have you heard of the Indian minister _____?"

"No, I haven't. How do you know him?"

"Well, our church supports him—he's an amazing evangelist who has planted churches in the last five years, has opened five orphanages, and runs a Bible College to train pastors!"

"Really? Do you know him personally?"

In most cases the reply is, "Sure, we've met him. He visited our church and shared his testimony. He has such an amazing testimony. His vision is to plant more than 30,000 churches in the next ten years."

It's been hard for me not to grow cynical and feel frustrated each time I have conversations like these. Because what my Western brothers and sisters often don't understand is that most Indian "ministries" have learned what excites people in the West. Indians have learned that massive numbers and astounding testimonies dazzle the Western church—and when supporting partners in the West

1 Editor's note: This article originally appeared on the Training Leaders International website.

are impressed, that typically means the dollars rush in. Unfortunately, Western churches seldom, if ever, learn that in many cases the numbers are inflated, the testimonies are fabricated, and the “gospel work” they’ve been investing in is actually a mirage.

The conversation I’ve described above illustrates some particular issues in missions that I’ve watched with growing concern, and as an Indian, who was born and raised in India and came to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through the faithful labors of a Western missionary in my city, I feel responsible to voice my concerns.

In turn, I hope to address some of the major problems in missions in India—problems that arise from certain emphases in the West. These problems are perpetuated and exacerbated both by Western missionaries who go to India, and Western churches who support indigenous Indian ministries. My desire is not to be pessimistic and critical, but to call us all to be faithful and obedient to the biblical commands to “make disciples” and proclaim the “whole counsel of God.” Consider this a plea from East to West for gospel-centered sanity in missions.

1. Obsessed with Numbers

First, it’s important to discuss one of the primary problems in missions in India—the Western drive for numerical efficiency, that is, the idea that large numbers are a validation of God’s blessing and ministry success.

The corporate world is infatuated with numbers. Big numbers. Numbers are the order of the day in every sphere of life, and the drive for impressive numbers has found its way into the church and the church’s mission, both in the West, and—as a result of Western influence—in India. Most missions buzzwords are in some way colored by the notion of numerical efficiency: “rapid,” “multiplication,” “strategy,” “growth.”

Every “vision” and every “report” has some kind of a numerical tag attached to it. 5000 churches in five years. 30,000 baptisms in three years. Bigger and faster = better. Right?

Wrong!

Sadly, the Western church’s obsession with numbers has had a destructive effect so that the name of Christ is blasphemed in India.

A sinful craze for bigger and better numbers has tainted both indigenous ministries *and* the work of Western missionaries in India. The notion that numerical growth is an indicator of faithfulness is foreign to the Scriptures and actually arises from the “church-growth movement.” My goal here is not primarily to advance a biblical and theological argument against the church-growth movement or against the more contemporary pragmatic proponents of “church-planting movement” (CPM) strategies. Rather, my aim here is primarily to point out the bad fruit of such methodologies in India. For an incisive and penetrating critique of CPM methodologies see the excellent articles by Jackson Wu: “There Are No Church Planting Movements in the Bible: Why Biblical Exegesis Missiological Methods Cannot Be Separated”² and “The Influence of Culture On the Evolution of Mission Methods: Using ‘Church Planting Movements’ As A Case Study.”³ But sadly, most churches—even those that hold to a more robust God-centered theology of the gospel—have bought into this false idea that “rapid growth” is the primary sign of God’s blessing. The faster you grow, the more faithful you are.

I hope to debunk this false idea by discussing some of the disastrous effects that it’s had on missions in India. But more than that,

2 Jackson Wu, “A Plea for Gospel Sanity in Missions: From East to West (Part 1),” *Global Missiology* (Spring 2015), <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1711>.

3 Jackson Wu, “A Plea for Gospel Sanity in Missions: From East to West (Part 2),” *Global Missiology* (Spring 2015), <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1712>.

I hope to rouse my Western brothers and sisters to a more sane, faithful, and gospel-centered approach to missions. We may certainly celebrate numerical growth if it accords with the Scriptures. But when numerical growth replaces Scriptural priorities, the gospel is compromised and Christian witness is tarnished. By pointing out some of the devastating results of the emphasis on numbers, I hope to encourage Western churches to be discerning in the missionary works they support while also encouraging my Indian brothers to seek true gospel growth in their ministries, regardless of whether that looks impressive to the West or not.

The Scourge of Christian Nominalism

Missionary reports from India are filled with the news of amazing “people-movements” to Christ that are apparently taking place all over the country. Missionaries I’ve talked to have described their work in these terms: “7000 churches were planted in Kashmir in the last five years.” “50,000 new believers were baptized in New Delhi last year.” “Hundreds of thousands of low-caste ‘Dalits’ (untouchables) are coming to know Christ.” We are told that things are happening in India on an “unprecedented scale,” matched only by the opening chapters of the book of Acts. Is this for real? Let me respond with three points.

1. Where Are the Churches?

A fellow Indian co-laborer in the gospel (who labors in one of the hardest regions in North India) tells me that when he hears Western friends talk about these thousands of churches planted, without blinking, he wryly asks for their address and postal code, so he can go visit at least one of them. His point is not that all churches must have a physical address, but that these numbers are reporting phantom churches that don’t exist in reality.

In short, the numbers are a delusion. These so-called “churches” are typically nothing more than a group of three or four people made to gather together once or twice casually. They hear a couple of watered-down Bible stories and vanish into oblivion after that.

In most Western missions work in India, pragmatic priorities have supplanted biblical ones. A Western missionary friend recently told me that upon his deployment to India, superiors in his organization insisted on being “strategic” to “stimulate rapid growth” by planting “rabbit-churches” that are quickly established and multiply fast, rather than “elephant churches” that take a long time to establish and then require much labor in discipleship, which slows things down. My friend’s forthright response: “But rabbit churches get devoured by hawks and wolves.”

The craze for numbers and the push for rapid growth results in “churches” that have no gospel, no trained leadership, no theology, and no depth—making them easy prey for the heresies of prosperity theology, syncretism, and other false teachings.

2. What Kind of “Conversion”?

Even worse, the scourge of Christian nominalism brings reproach on the name of Christ from unbelievers in India. The push for numbers and rapid growth in missions has resulted in much distortion and dilution of the gospel message today. People are taught to “believe in Jesus,” “receive Jesus,” or “make a decision for Jesus” without any of the biblical teaching on repentance. The so-called “conversions” that result are nominal at best, manipulative at worst.

Disregarding the biblical mandates and qualifications for church elders (1 Tim. 3:1–7, esp. verse 6: “he must not be a new convert”), missionaries appoint unqualified indigenous “leaders” whose only “training” is a week-long seminar with a missionary team.

In many cases, people “convert” in droves, believing that converting to Christianity will bring them certain social or economic benefits. Missionaries triumphantly send reports back home with testimonies featuring stupendous and unfathomable statistics of people converted and churches established. Ken R. Gnanakan, an Indian theologian, responding to the church-growth movement several years ago, phrased it well: “In our zeal to report back numbers to our prayer partners, we have left congregations to continue to follow their Hindu thinking, and apart from a change in name and place of worship there is little difference between the so-called Christians and their Hindu neighbors.”⁴

3. False Conversions Lead to Persecution

The plague of false conversions also has political ramifications which leads to persecution. Hindus accuse Christians of luring uneducated people and those of the lower castes by promising them benefits. Group conversions and nominal Christianity finally result in mass reversions back to Hinduism when underprivileged populations, who originally converted to Christianity hoping that it would raise their social status, find that Hinduism may have more to offer them politically.⁵

4 Ken R. Gnanakan, “Caste and the Indian Church: A Response to Donald McGavran,” *Transformation* 2 (1985): 24.

5 See the recent drive of the BJP government in India to pass an “anti-conversion” law and the spate of “homecoming” (ghar wapsi) reconversion ceremonies to Hinduism. PTI, “BJP Demands Anti-Conversion Law,” *Zee News*, December 29, 2014 [online]; available at http://zeenews.india.com/news/bihar/bjp-demands-anti-conversion-law_1522141.html; Pragya Kaushika, “Don’t Want a Religion that Only Rejects Us, Say the Aligarh Dalits on RSS list,” *The Indian Express*, December 14, 2014 [online]; available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/dont-want-a-religion-that-only-rejects-us-say-the-aligarh-dalits-on-rss-list/>. Reconversion of mass groups of people to Hinduism has been fairly common in India for several years. See, for instance, Nirmala Carvalho, “Tamil Nadu: A Thousand Dalit Christians Reconvert to Hinduism,” *Asia News*, April 14, 2008 [online]; available at <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Tamil-Nadu:-A-thousand-Dalit-Christians-reconvert-to-Hinduism-12011.html>.

Most of these “reconversions” are accompanied with the testimonies that say, “I used to be a Hindu, and I converted to Christianity on the basis of several false promises. So now I’m coming back to Hinduism.” Does not all of this raise the question of precisely what sort of “conversion” is taking place? Certainly not the kind of divine-wrought turning from darkness to light that we see on the pages of the New Testament.

Indigenous Missions and the Inflation of Numbers

The other outgrowth of the Western obsession with numerical growth is the large number of Indian “ministries” who have caught on to the trend and are riding the wave—all the way to the bank. Yes, the church in India is corrupt, as Yahweh says of Israel—“like a raw wound” (Isa. 1:6). I speak as one who knows *first-hand* of the kind of corruption that is pervasive across ministries in India.

Many Indian ministries gladly inflate their numbers and deceive Western supporters into believing that a great gospel “harvest” is taking place. After all, it’s the numbers that bring in the cash.

The techniques are tantamount: A large crowd of people is assembled in a field and someone on a podium asks them how many ate “puri-bhaji” (a staple in North India) for breakfast. Hands go up, a picture is taken, and a picture report is published, reporting “decisions for Christ.” In other cases, people are asked if they want to receive a financial blessing or healing. Those who desire it raise their hands, pictures are taken, and more “decisions for Christ” are reported.

On occasion, Western supporters visit, and some of them even to “pastoral training and teaching.” So the Indian ministry will pay a few pastors a token amount to show up for a couple of days. They do. And the Western missionary goes back, happy and satisfied that

they have not just supported financially but have “invested” in the lives of people who are “hungry for the Word” (and the free lunch).

Many of these Indian ministers live in the lap of luxury, wining and dining at 5-star hotels and getting driven around in luxury cars, as a result of the dollars rolling into their ministries.

It is with great sorrow I admit that my Western brothers and sisters are very gullible—happy to give and support any ministry that boasts big numbers. The statistics make their eyes glaze over, and they are blinded to what actually takes place.

A Better Way

Is this a rebuke? Yes, in some ways it is. But I write out of heartfelt love, and with a passion to see soundness and truth begin to take root in missions work in India. Big numbers simply feed big egos with the notion that we are doing something worthwhile for God. But God’s real work simply cannot be measured by numbers alone.

Last summer, I sat with a faithful Indian brother, an older man of God who has labored for several decades in one of the hardest and most unreached states in North India. He told me of Western churches over the years who offered to support him, if only he would diligently report a certain number of baptisms each month. In every case, he refused, because he has always believed that conversion is God’s work and cannot be manufactured. This man has not planted thousands of churches. The numbers are not sexy and spectacular. But the churches he has planted are sound, faithful, gospel-preaching, and disciple-making. They are not phantoms. The disciples he has made are those who know the Lord, and in them the Word of Christ dwells richly. The fruit of his ministry shines like gold in the dung-heap of other so-called “ministries” all around. And God will reward his faithfulness.

Let me share with you another personal story, this time, of a foreign missionary. I knew a missionary who lived and worked in India for years—well over a decade. He established a business in a major city and labored slowly and patiently. He barely had any converts—in fact, he probably had only one. He died in India and within months of his death, his business was destroyed. By numerical standards and “strategic” considerations for “rapid growth,” he was a total failure. By the standards of many Western mission agencies, the many dollars given to support him over the years were a total waste.

So was his ministry a waste? I think not: I was his one convert. He taught me the gospel. He proclaimed to me the excellencies of Christ. He taught me how to read the Bible and how to discern truth from falsehood. He spent his life in service to his King, and my eternity is changed as a result.

So I plead with my brothers and sisters in the West: In your sending of missionaries and in your support of indigenous gospel-laborers, please prioritize faithfulness over efficiency, quality over quantity, and growth in truth over growth in numbers. Am I opposed to the growth of the church and the multiplication of disciples? By no means! I long to see a great revival sweep across India. Indeed, I pray that masses of people are evangelized and that countless churches are established all across the nation.

But let us not strive for manufactured numbers and “growth” that come from sacrificing truth on the altars of efficiency and perceived success. In the New Testament, the concern for numerical growth *never* drives the mission of the church—a concern for the glory of Christ does (Rom. 1:5). Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit who calls spiritually dead people out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Lord Jesus as the gospel is proclaimed with boldness and clarity. Therefore, do not use numbers as a yardstick

to measure God's work, but rather let God's work be measured by the lives of people who "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8; Rom. 15:18). Rapid growth and multiplication may well be one indicator of God's blessing, but they are certainly never the primary indicator. May our work be driven by Scripture rather than statistics and strategies!

PART II: OVER-AWED BY THE "SUPERNATURAL"

I sit there, intrigued, as I listen to the man's story. We are in an important and extremely unreached city in North India. Detail upon intricate detail mounts as he narrates the amazing events that caused him to renounce Sikhism for Christianity. I listen intently as he tells us of the healing his mother received from a life-threatening illness, his subsequent rise from rags to riches, the persecutions he has faced, and, most importantly, the supernatural vision in which he saw a figure cloaked in white who squeezed his hand and told him, "I will bless you."

He rubs his moistened eyes, wiping away tears—and then he tells us that though it has been over twenty years now, he can still feel the hand of that otherworldly figure squeezing his hand today. My Western friends listen, some of them wary, but a couple of them are absolutely enthralled.

My Indian co-laborer nudges me. We are all too familiar with the gimmick; this is something we've seen and heard many times before. The man finishes his story, and one of my Western friends, a sincere brother—in fact, one who is fairly solid in his theology—remarks, "Wow! Praise God! That's such an awesome testimony brother!"

Inwardly, I am flabbergasted. *How is it that even people who know their Bibles and understand the gospel well get duped by this stuff? Isn't the complete absence of the gospel in his testimony obvious?*

My Indian friend and I begin to explain to the man about the true forgiveness of sins that only Jesus can provide, about Christ's death and resurrection and his sin-bearing substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. He looks puzzled, for he has no idea what we're talking about! All he knows is that "Jesus is the only god who will *bless* you." That's why he became a Christian. That's why he became a pastor. And he's been a pastor for twenty years! He used to be a poor Sikh, but now he's driving a posh SUV as a "Christian bishop." He drives us to his "church" building, a multi-story mega-church that seats 3000, and tells us that he's the "bishop" over a ministry that plants several hundred churches every six months. But one could replace the name "Jesus" everywhere in his testimony with the name of any other god, and it wouldn't make a difference.

To make matters worse, this "bishop" has a Western missionary, totally taken in by his story, functioning almost like his foot-servant. Why not, since the missionary can report back all this bishop's numbers as his own!

Clearly, the West has an enchantment with the "supernatural." My intent here is not to enter into the debate over whether God still operates supernaturally or not. Rather, I hope to alert my brothers and sisters in the West to the dangers of being allured by sensational stories that are devoid of the biblical gospel message. I also hope to call my brethren in both India and the West to keep the gospel message central in all our gospel work, and to prize the power of God's holy and authoritative Word above all else.

Has the Holy Spirit Migrated?

The Beatles. Madonna. Julia Roberts. *Eat, Pray, Love*. College students without a job. One can think of a long list of people in the West who are fascinated with the otherworldliness of Eastern spirituality. And this trend has found its way into the church as well. I've

grown weary of hearing it over and over: “We Western Christians are so narrow-minded. We put God in a box! We place limits on what he can do. That’s why we don’t see God work supernaturally here like he does in the East.”

Many of my brothers and sisters in the West have bought into this false idea that the Western church is devoid of the Holy Spirit’s *supernatural* work today; meanwhile, they say, the third person of the Trinity is greatly active in the East in places like India and China, where people are purportedly seeing dreams and visions and miracles are happening all over the place. So in the West, people are fascinated and allured by all the amazing testimonies and reports they hear from what is happening “out there” on the mission field.

But sadly, this fascination with the “supernatural” is often accompanied with a loss of discernment. At times, Westerners get so googly-eyed with sensational stories from the East that they don’t even notice the non-existence of any form of the gospel message.

Beloved friends, wake up! The Holy Spirit has not transferred locations. He is just as active in the West as he is anywhere else in the world, doing what he has been sent to do—empowering witness to Christ (John 15:26–27; Acts 1:16; 1 Pet. 1:12); convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8); leading the church into all truth (John 16:13); glorifying Christ by drawing people from darkness to light as the gospel message is proclaimed (2 Cor. 3:12–4:6); and sealing God’s people for the Day of Redemption (Eph. 1:13).

Oh, that we would recognize that the greatest, most supernatural work of God is when the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of sinners to the glory of Christ, regenerating and renewing them through the proclamation of the gospel, so that they are transferred out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ

in repentance and faith. Do we not realize that the Spirit of God is sovereign and active, accomplishing this work in every place where Christ is faithfully proclaimed from the Scriptures?

I know of so many dear brothers and sisters in the West whose testimony goes something like this: “I grew up in a Christian home. From my youngest years, my parents taught me the Bible. My parents loved the Lord. They pointed me to Christ and told me of his sacrificial death on behalf of sinners. I was very young when I heard the gospel, repented of my sins, and trusted Christ for salvation. And so I’ve grown up almost all my life knowing the Lord.” Beloved friends, is this *less* glorious or *less* supernatural in any way? Is this not a demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s power to raise dead sinners to life? Have we forgotten the glory of the gospel? Have we forgotten that all of heaven celebrates when one sinner comes to repentance?

Let us *not* emphasize other things, for this has disastrous consequences.

The Fabrication of Testimonies That Titillate

Similar to the Western obsession with numbers, the West’s fascination with sensational stories has had a similar corrosive effect. Testimonies are fabricated in order to dazzle and daze Western believers into generously giving financial support. And once again, I am sorry to say that my Western friends, even the theologically sound ones, are gullible.

In India, I have encountered professing Indian believers who don’t say much to me by way of testimony—and why would they, since I am just a fellow Indian? But these very people, when they meet a Westerner, as soon as they see white skin, are quick to narrate stories of dreams, visions, and amazing supernatural experiences.

On more than one occasion, I have had the heartbreaking experience of meeting churches and believers in the West who have

had the awful experience of being duped by Indian “ministries.” For instance, one Indian “evangelist” hoodwinked a whole network of churches with his fantastic testimony.

He claimed to have been raised as a religious Hindu, and his family owned a snake that they worshipped daily. As an adult, he was gripped with religious fervor and zeal for Hinduism. He was on his way to attack and kill Christians when he saw a vision of Christ that halted him and brought him to tears. He then became a Christian, resolving to proclaim the faith he once persecuted, and despite being rejected by his family and friends, he is following Christ and serving him as an evangelist.

Several churches and ministries supported this “man of God,” only to later learn that the entire story was made up. This man actually grew up as the son of a pastor in a “Christian home,” and fabricated this testimony because he learned that it is only testimonies like this that generate support from the West. And let me assure you that this story is not an isolated case. There are many, many others like this one, and in every case, my Western brothers and sisters are too quick to be amazed—and sadly—deceived.

Such deception could be avoided by exercising more caution and discernment, by verifying every detail of such testimonies (especially in view of their extraordinary details) on the account of eye-witnesses, and by carefully checking if the person understands the biblical gospel and prizes it above such experiences.

When Western believers unwittingly get carried away with sensational stories of the supernatural, not only does corruption thrive in India, but so does false teaching. Even churches and believers who decry the evils of the heretical prosperity gospel actually promote its growth in India. How? By endorsing and supporting ministries that emphasize great miracles while teaching the health-and-wealth

anti-gospel. This is also tied to the craze for numbers: the “prosperity gospel” prospers and brings in the people by the droves. It thus boasts of both supernatural “miracles” *and* big numbers.

Putting the Emphasis in the Right Place

My brothers and sisters, the only way for true gospel growth to happen in India is for us to remember how gospel growth comes: through the gospel. The gospel proclaims that all people everywhere have sinned and rebelled against God our Creator and stand justly condemned under his holy judgment; but God graciously saves sinners through his Son Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death on the cross as a substitute for sinners, and was raised from the dead, so that all who repent of their wickedness and trust in him alone receive full forgiveness of sins and eternal life through him. The story of God’s great and supernatural plan of salvation must take precedence over all other “supernatural stories.”

Let’s not get carried away by stories of dreams and visions, but let’s stand firm on the bedrock of God’s inspired Word. Even the apostle Peter, who was an eye-witness to the glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, who heard the very voice of God and saw with his own eyes the Son of God in all his majestic glory, tells us that we have something more sure than his experience. Something “more fully confirmed, to which we would do well to pay attention”—the Bible (2 Pet. 1:16–21).

The faithful Indian co-laborers that I know, who sincerely work for true gospel growth in the hardest regions of India, do one simple thing when anyone comes to them with stories of a dream or vision or anything else. Open God’s Word. Point them to the Bible. Remind them that such “supernatural” occurrences might be shaky and uncertain, but that Scripture is steadfast and true. Do we thank God for dreams, visions, supernatural healings, deliverances, and

any other special acts of God's providence that glorify Christ? Absolutely. But the most supernatural work of all is when the Holy Spirit brings people to submit to the supernatural book.

My brothers and sisters in the West, in your support of gospel work in India, will you be discerning and resolve not to get carried away by the sensational stuff? Will you remember that the proclamation of the gospel and the teaching of the Scriptures are what produces a people conformed to Christ's image? Will you ensure that any "gospel work" that you endorse or support is founded on the message of Christ's death and resurrection for sinners, the gospel of repentance and faith, and God's holy and inspired Word? I pray that you will.

So, the next time you hear a supernatural testimony from India (or anywhere), be careful to discern whether the person has truly understood the gospel. And be careful to ensure that God receives the glory above all else for his marvelous supernatural work in saving lost sinners.

PART III: OVER-EAGER FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION

The scene was so disorienting, it felt like it must be from a Hollywood (or Bollywood) movie. We are in a bustling *bazaar* in a large city in Northern India. A white dude in skinny jeans rides up on a mini-motorcycle to meet us. He guides us through narrow "gullies" (alleyways) into the small and crowded neighborhood in which he lives and works. We hear about the ministry that he and his friend are engaged in here. Their goal: to win a particular people group to Christ.

But they don't want to work alongside the established national church. They want to win people groups to Christ, but they don't want to teach these people what it looks like to be followers of Christ. Rather, they want people to be able to follow Christ "from

within their own cultures.” Yet in many cases, what results is a hodge-podge mix of religion that has virtually no resemblance to biblical Christianity.

There are more than a few such foreign workers laboring in India.

I’ve already mentioned the craze for numbers and the West’s fascination with “supernatural” testimonies. Here, I wish to address another issue that is quickly gaining traction and causing problems in India, much like it has in the Muslim world: extreme forms of “contextualization.”

Now, what do I mean by contextualization? The word used in missions scholarship to describe how the gospel should be fleshed out and made clear in varying cultures. Am I opposed to contextualization? Of course not! In my years of ministry in India, I’ve never worn a tie to preach. I often preach barefoot, and the congregations are dressed in Indian attire and seated on the floor. When I preach in the West, I am almost always in suit and tie. The tone of my preaching is different, the illustrations I use are different, and the matters to which I apply the Scriptures are different, all depending on context. And yes, my wife wore a saree (and not a dress) on our wedding day. Certainly, I am thankful for the many Western missionaries who contextualize the Bible’s message in ways that are biblically warranted, helpful, and appropriate to the culture.

My purpose here is not to criticize contextualization. Neither do I wish to get into nuanced discussions about the spectrum of contextualization and how much contextualization is legitimate. Rather, I wish to raise awareness about certain illegitimate forms of contextualization that are taking root in India. These forms of contextualization receive their impetus from Western missionaries who refuse to cooperate with the established national churches, believing that they understand more about Indian culture than anyone else.

And much like the “Insider Movements” of the Islamic world, most of these teachings result in false and heretical movements in India, far removed from biblical Christianity. It is my prayer that what I share here would challenge brothers and sisters in the West to cease supporting missionaries who propagate false teachings and practice harmful methods of ministry.

Hindu Followers of Christ?

Some of my encounters with Western Christian workers in India leave me feeling deeply disturbed. Last summer, I was visiting India when my ministry team bumped into one of these guys—an American who has spent almost the last decade in India. He considers us Indian Christians too “Westernized,” and he thinks that he’s more attuned to Indian culture, for he celebrates Indian festivals and practices several Indian-Hindu customs—customs that Indian believers such as myself have rejected. This Westerner believes that the things he does will help remove barriers to belief among the high caste Hindus he’s seeking to reach.

There are others like him who dot the missions landscape. They come from varied backgrounds in the West, but a lot of them are latte-sipping, skinny-jeans-wearing Christian hipsters from the West coast or Canada, who for whatever reason, seem to have grown bored or disillusioned with traditional Christianity. They’re looking for something new. They’ve read the latest and greatest books on missions, contextualization, and culture (and perhaps a smattering of emergent church literature and post-modern philosophy). And so they come to India and try to form communities of “*Yeshu-Baktha* Hindus” or “Hindu disciples of Jesus.” They don’t want to be identified as “Christians” because they consider this “too Western” (never mind Acts 11:26!).

In these communities, a *puja* or Hindu initiation ritual performed in Jesus's name takes the place of Christian baptism. The "Lord's Supper" consists in the breaking of a coconut and drinking of coconut water. *Bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs) are sung in Jesus's name instead of Christian hymns. The place of worship is lit up by little *diyas* (Indian oil lamps typically used in Hindu religious ceremonies). Preaching finds no place in these communities, for "monologue" is considered a Western idea. These groups are led by "gurus" instead of "pastors." And the storyline of Scripture is replaced by a storyline borrowed from the indigenous culture: Jesus is understood in terms of Hindu mythology, and Jesus's sacrifice is interpreted in light of the Vedas.

Many who propagate such teachings *typically* do it from good motives. They are wary of a colonialist form of missions that imposes Western culture on indigenous Christians. They truly want to see an indigenous Christian movement established. They've bought into the latest "missions research" which says that removing cultural barriers to belief is the best way to achieve church growth. And so they dress up Christianity in the garb of specific cultural groups hoping that these groups would accept the Christian faith while retaining their own culture.

Shall We Provoke the Lord to Jealousy?

Sadly, these well-meaning proponents of "contextualized" Christianity do not realize that they are presenting a garbled gospel and forming sub-Christian communities. I will respond here by identifying four serious problems with these "contextualization" movements.

1. Syncretism and a Biblical Worldview

First, the natural result of such kinds of "contextualization" is syncretism of the worst kinds—a dangerous and damning mix of

the Hindu and Christian worldviews. In more serious cases, I do not hesitate to call the movements heretical. The eager proponents of “contextualization” think they are preserving Indian culture, but they do not realize that for Indians (unlike in the West), culture, worldview, and religion are inextricably intertwined. Most Indians, including “Westernized Christians” such as myself, as well as former Hindus who have trusted in Christ, recognize this fact.

The close link between culture and religion in the Indian mind is the reason that most Indians have a negative impression of Christianity, for they assume that all Western cultures are “Christian cultures.” But we know Christianity is not a product of “Western” culture. Rather, the Christian message is a worldview that transforms *all* cultures, both Eastern and Western. The gospel demands a renunciation of secular thinking, immorality, and profligate living in the West, just as it demands a renunciation of idolatry and superstition in the East. We must proclaim the trans-cultural lordship and glory of Jesus, rather than hyper-orienting our message and praxis around specific cultural groups.

The Apostles never permitted pagan cultures to influence the biblical message or the form of Christian worship. Rather, even in a pagan culture like Corinth, Paul gives the Scriptures pre-eminence. Writing to a predominantly Gentile congregation in Corinth, Paul calls these believers to see their identity in terms of the biblical storyline (1 Cor. 10). Paul prescribes what should happen in their worship services and even dictates to them how they should take the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11–14). Paul proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ in “accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4), and not some cultural metanarrative from Corinth. Scripture forms the people of God, not vice versa. I have often wondered if a connection exists between contextualization movements and the influence of

post-modernism. The authority is shifted from the revealed Word to the community of readers.

Proponents of “contextualized” movements disregard the biblical principle that darkness has no fellowship with light, and Christ has no part with Belial (2 Cor. 6:14–15). And Christ’s Word is mutilated in the name of “contextualization.”

When Indian national believers advance these criticisms, we are labeled as being “Westernized.” In fact, Indian “Christian background” believers are told that we have no right to speak on such issues at all, for we are the root cause of the problem. But even when “Hindu background” believers voice their concerns—and I know several who do—they are sidelined as having already been “Westernized.” The irony is astonishing: These are *Westerners* claiming that they know more about Indian culture than *Indians* who have been born and raised in India.

2. Christ Commands Us to “Teach”

Some of the more moderate “contextualization” advocates with whom I’ve interacted tell me that they do not want Western understandings of Christianity to be imposed on people in India. Therefore, instead of teaching Indians what Christian life and worship looks like, they ask them to read the Bible and come to their own conclusions. Sounds good, doesn’t it?

Perhaps, if Christ hadn’t commanded us otherwise. The Great Commission includes the call to make disciples, teaching them to obey all of Christ’s commands (Matt. 28:18–20). And Christ’s commands are revealed in the apostolic Word—the Bible. The Bible sets the agenda. The Bible forms Christian identity. The Bible shows us what Christian life and worship looks like. And the Bible tells us that Jesus equips his people through *teachers* (Eph. 4:11). This means that we must interpret and apply the Word of God across

ethnic and cultural lines—much like Paul the former Jew did in the congregations that he formed in Gentile and pagan cultures. The notion that communities should read and come to their own conclusions is actually rooted in the post-modern mindset that places authority in the community rather than in the text.

3. “Insider Movements” and “Secret Believers”

Another result of “contextualization” movements is the emergence of Hindu “insider movements.” Proponents of “insider movements” teach people to remain as “secret believers” or as “Hindu devotees of Jesus” (*Yeshu-Bakhta* Hindus) so that they will not be excluded from their families and communities but can instead stay on the inside in order to “eventually win more converts to Christ.” Furthermore, those who advocate these forms of contextualization—in direct violation of 2 Corinthians 6:14–18 (also 1 Cor. 7:39)—teach people to prefer marriage to unbelievers from their same backgrounds and ethnic caste groups over marriage to believers of other groups. They also insist that “Hindu followers of Jesus” should never intermarry with “Christian background believers.”

The pragmatic desires to maintain cultures and grow the church result in a dilution of the gospel message, and a casting aside of the call to follow Christ at the cost of persecution and exclusion from one’s kin (Matt. 10:34–38; Mark 8:31–38; John 15:18–25; 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:12).

This testimony of a sister in Christ from a Hindu background illustrates the point:

When I became a Christian, there were some people in my area who started teaching me that I should remain a “secret believer” and not inform anybody of my faith. They did not want me to be excluded from my family. Therefore they encouraged me to live as a “secret believer” so that I could

remain within my family, hoping that eventually my family and community would also come to Christ. When I moved to a different area to start a job, I learned that this teaching was seriously wrong. I found great freedom in finally expressing my faith in Christ openly and boldly told my parents and community. I told them about Jesus and the work he has done in my life. Though I was rejected and ostracized at first, after ten years, my family finally began to respect my decision to follow Christ. They even attended my wedding to a Christian believer in the church!

Indian church leaders like myself and my Indian co-laborers call people to be open and committed followers of Christ and to come under the authority and discipleship of the local church. In response, proponents of “contextualization” condemn us for practicing “extraction evangelism” (taking individuals out of their families and communities) and not “stimulating the growth of people movements.” But if I remember correctly, it was Jesus who declared that those who follow him would be hated by all for his name’s sake, and that a person would find enemies among those of his own household, yet one must embrace and follow Jesus at the cost of all these (Matt. 10:34–39). The New Testament tells us that Christians are “sojourners and exiles” who have been “rejected by men” but are “chosen and precious in the sight of God” (1 Pet. 2:4–11). Believers are called to bear the reproach of Christ, going with him “outside the camp” (Heb. 13:12–13).

4. What They Do When It Doesn’t Work

The irony of it all is that when it comes to truly winning people to Christ in India, “contextualization” proponents fail dramatically. Virtually no one is won to Christ, for when the gospel is not clearly proclaimed, there is no power to draw people from darkness to light. In fact, very few Indians are interested in joining a movement that

looks in every way the same as their own religion but simply has a new god tacked on. One of the Westerners I mentioned above has lived in India for several years and has adopted all these Indian customs, but no one seems interested in his teaching.

And so, desperate for some kind of success, some of these groups resort to shameful and underhanded tactics. They begin to enter the established Indian churches that they once spurned. They give some impression of reaching out for fellowship and try to gain the trust of national church leaders. And after making their way into the established church, they begin to target new believers who have recently embraced Christ from Hindu backgrounds—those who are weak and facing imminent persecution and rejection, those who are learning what it costs to follow Christ. The “contextualization” proponents then begin to brainwash these weak and fledgling believers, teaching them that they are being “Westernized.” They are told not to give up their Hindu identity: “You don’t need to be a Christian—instead, be a ‘Hindu follower of Jesus.’” This is how many “contextualization” proponents find their “converts.” I know, because I’ve seen it happen over and over, and I’ve known struggling baby believers who have fallen into these traps. When things like this happen, I pray that the Lord would obliterate such “ministries.”

Moving Forward

Okay, perhaps by reading this article you’ve been stirred to take this issue more seriously—what now? How can you help prevent the growth of these kinds of false and destructive teachings?

1. Please be very careful whom you support. Most of these Western workers on the field have been funded by orthodox, evangelical, Bible-believing churches who would be utterly horrified to learn of what those they support are doing on the field. Please be cautious. Hold all your supported missionaries to rigorous doctrinal

accountability and periodically check in on them to ensure that they are teaching the truth.

2. Always be careful to review the values and distinctives of mission agencies and refuse to support any mission agency that advocates these extreme forms of contextualization. Contextualization is necessary in every cross-cultural endeavor, but beware the forms of contextualization that fall short of biblical Christianity.

3. If you're seeking to be a missionary, resolve that you will not ignore the established national church. Whenever possible, partner with faithful national church leaders, so that you better understand the culture and how the gospel should take shape in that culture. I know this can be challenging, and in many cases national churches are corrupt, unhealthy, or non-existent. But if at all possible, strive to find faithful and doctrinally sound national brothers with whom you can partner. I assure you—they exist. If you are in a pioneer endeavor where no national church exists, be careful to understand the culture well. Make a distinction between those forms of culture that are religious and those that are not. Do not shrink back from teaching the “whole counsel of God”—which means teaching people to embrace Christianity as an entire worldview. *Teach* them to reject cultural practices where the Scripture demands it and be certain that all your “contextualization” is biblically warranted.

The Case for Long-Term Missions

BROOKS BUSER

“Missions,” in our day, seems to be the umbrella term for an ever-expanding set of jobs, callings, ambitions, and church programs.

Gone are the days when the word represented those who would set out for the field knowing it was likely a one-way trip. This type of missions aimed at converts, finished Bible translations, and churches that would last generations. Missions was seen as a lifetime endeavor, not a task to be completed. Of course, this is partly because of technological limitations; round-trip transatlantic journeys are much more difficult than round-trip transatlantic flights. And yet, I suspect there also exists some philosophical disagreement as well as to what the goal of “missions” actually is. What previous generations called “missions” we have specified and relabeled as “long-term missions.”

The point of this article is not to knock short-term work, mercy ministries, social programs, and other good endeavors. These are all helpful in their own way. But we should be aware that short-term endeavors, by their very nature, are insufficient to establish generational churches by the power of the gospel.

My goal is not to rebuke anyone but to remind all of us that long-term missions is costly—and it’s worth it. It’s worth prioritizing over everything else. True churches take years to plant. . . in the English-speaking world. How much more so where “no foundation has been laid”?

When it comes to the church, faster is not better.

THE VALUE OF LONG-TERM MISSIONS

Let's consider a few reasons to prioritize long-term missions.

First, Long-Term Missions Adorns the Gospel

My wife and I lived overseas for thirteen years among the Yembiy-embi people in Papua New Guinea. During that time, we observed the gradual metamorphosis of cross-cultural church planters who lived among the people long-term. Their English started to bend around the local language. Their knees and ankles grew calluses from constantly sitting cross-legged. Their appetites changed. Their very bodies started to take on marks that lent credibility to the gospel.

As missionaries die to calendars and buy into long-term ministry that looks, smells, and sounds like the people whom God has sent them to, they model the heart of the message they seek to proclaim. We see a biblical example of this in Paul's love for the Ephesian church. It's clear the Ephesian elders know him not as an at-arms-length leader, but rather as a dear friend.

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house. (Acts 20:18–20)

Second, Long-Term Ministry Is Necessary if Healthy Churches Are the Goal

Let's return to Paul's farewell speech for a moment. As he leaves his friends behind, he seems to be most concerned about their church. He said, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church

of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28–29).

Establishing long-term churches requires long-term workers. God may grant that converts are made in a short amount of time, but to see disciples gathered into a self-led, self-taught, self-propagating body of believers—led by men qualified according to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1—is always a long-term venture.

There are shorter, quicker, “more efficient” methods that are common in our day. They celebrate strategies that seem to circumvent the need for patience. For example, they utilize unbelievers as teachers, they view language fluency as a time-consuming encumbrance to ministry, and they prefer oral translations over the written Word.¹ Indeed, these new methods shave off years and years of time, which leads to unprecedented increases in “converts” and “churches.”

But make no mistake, the cost of that speed is paid in full by the churches left behind.

When short-term workers and methods were introduced in Burma, Adoniram Judson’s views were quite clear. He wrote,

I fear that this will occasion a breach in our mission. How can we, who are devoted for life, cordially take to our hearts one who is a mere hireling? I have seen the beginning, middle, and end of several limited-term missionaries. . . . Though brilliant in an English pulpit, they are incompetent for any real missionary work. They come out for a few years, with the view of acquiring a stock of credit on which they may vegetate the rest of their days, in

1 This is a helpful article that speaks to the current problem: Aubrey Sequeira, “A Plea for Gospel Sanity in Missions,” *9Marks*, <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-plea-for-gospel-sanity-in-missions/>.

9. MISSIONS

the congenial climate of their native land. . . The motto of every missionary, whether preacher, printer, or schoolmaster, ought to be “Devoted for life.”²

To our modern ears, Judson’s concern may sound overstated. But should it? He knew what so many in pioneering, church-planting contexts intuitively grasp: if the church left behind is to be healthy, then only a long-term approach will do.

THE COST OF LONG-TERM MISSIONS

One of the primary reasons long-term missions is rarer in our day is that the cost is so awfully high. The unreached language groups of our time are the last ones reached for a reason. I lead a missions training organization called Radius.³ We exist to equip students who plan to invest their lives among the unreached and unengaged. The students who come to us are uncommon, and they quite often come from uncommon families and uncommon churches. The desire to spend fifteen, twenty, or thirty years in some of the most difficult locations on earth requires everyone involved to know the cost.

The Cost to the Family

Saying goodbye to sons, daughters, grandchildren, and futures that will never be realized; walking away from family businesses and holidays at home—this cost is so high. But it’s worth it.

In his excellent biography⁴ of the life of John G. Paton, Paul Schlehle describes Paton’s decision to leave behind a thriving ministry and go to a land that had recently claimed some of his

2 Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore*, (Little Brown and Company, Judson Press, 1987), pg. 409

3 Radius International, <https://radiusinternational.org/>.

4 Banner of Truth, “John G. Paton: Biography,” <https://banneroftruth.org/us/store/history-biography/john-g-paton-biography/>.

fellow countrymen. Paton's parents were among the few who spoke in support of his going. Schlehlelein reflects on this fact with this helpful insight:

Let every person note the weight such wise counsel will have upon their children's lives. Let every parent who clutches jealously to kith and kin ponder Paton's godly parents. Let them contemplate whether it be hypocrisy to sing "Give of thy sons to bear the message glorious," but "glorious" only if that son belongs to someone else. When it seemed the whole world of Christian influence impeded Paton's plans, it was the words of his parents that buttressed his resolve. Whatever uncertainty he may have had, it melted like snow atop the glowing hearth of what he learned in his home.⁵

When we read things like this, it sounds superhuman. How can "normal" Christians see their sons and daughters board ships and planes and be gone for decades, perhaps forever?

The only sufficient answer I have found is this: these saints see past this world. By God's immeasurable grace, they measure things not in years, but in eternity.

Near the end of his life, Paton saw his own sons off to the mission field. By this point, he had lost his first wife and seven children. And yet, this is what he writes, "I deeply rejoice—when I breathe the prayer that it may please the blessed Lord to turn the hearts of all my children to the mission field; and that he may open up their way and make it their pride and joy to live and die in carrying Jesus and his gospel into the heart of the heathen world."⁶

5 Paul Schlehlelein, *John G Paton: Missionary to the Cannibals of the South Seas*, (The Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, UK, 2017), pg. 96

6 John G. Paton: *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, UK, 2016), pg. 444

The Cost to the Church

Since coming back to the United States in 2016, I've noticed lots of people end up in the mission field for the wrong reasons. In many evangelical quarters, the thinking goes something like this: "He or she is kind of awkward, kind of strange, and not very disciplined. But he or she is super sincere—and loves lost people. We would never make them an elder or a deacon. But you know what? They might be perfect for the mission field!"

The rise of an "anyone can be a missionary" mentality has brought more people into missions, but "more isn't always better." In fact, more missionaries sometimes compromise our goal of a clear, competent, and theologically rigorous gospel witness.⁷

David Brainerd preached to thousands in the English-speaking world before giving his life to missions. He turned down dozens of senior pastor positions, even the option of serving alongside Jonathan Edwards.⁸ Before William Chalmers Burns gave his life to ministry in China, he was hand-picked by Robert Murray M'Cheyne to pastor his church for over a year, and membership increased.⁹ These weren't flighty, searching men with nothing better to do. They were serious, dedicated, and gifted.

We should aim to send such men and women.

Some might say, "Wait! If we send our best, then what happens to our churches here?" Sometimes, the benefit of the nations is viewed as a loss to the sending church. But that's not true. The Lord will equip his churches anywhere with what they need for maturity.

7 This is a helpful article on why more missionaries is not always better, from one on the field: Steven Jennings, "Stop Sending Missionaries: Why More Isn't Always Better," *9Marks*, <https://www.9marks.org/article/stop-sending-missionaries-why-more-isnt-always-better/>.

8 John Piper, *21 Servants of Sovereign Joy*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2018), pg. 222-223

9 Michael D. McMullen, *God's Polished Arrow*, (Christian Focus, 2001)

Ephesians 4:11–16 applies to churches in America and churches in places we will never go, among peoples we will never see.

Sending your best is costly, but it's worth it. And it jeopardizes exactly nothing.

THE GLORY OF LONG-TERM MISSIONS

The Glory of a Strong, New Testament Church

We speak often at Radius of finishing well. As we've already seen, finishing well means seeing a strong, New Testament church established where none existed. The Scriptures and church history know nothing of Christians who are content with converts and lukewarm to the task of solidifying a local church.

But here's the unfortunate truth: starters in church planting are common; finishers are rare.

In Acts 20 again, we see Paul's abiding vision of finishing well.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:22–24)

Should we not assume Paul expected the same devotion to the church of Ephesus from the elders who stayed behind?

On the last page of John Paton's autobiography, we find his exhortation for those who would come behind him: "Plant down your forces in the heart of one tribe or race where the same language is spoken. **Work solidly from that center, building up**

with patient teaching and lifelong care a church that will endure” (emphasis added).¹⁰

Even the best of missionaries can’t accomplish this over several summer trips or even five-to-ten-year stints. It takes, as Paton says, “lifelong care.”

God may allow certain missionaries to see this task completed in a shorter period of time. But for the vast majority, it will be a long, arduous process with a steep price tag.

For John Paton it took 42 years. For Adoniram Judson, it took forty. Paton lost his first wife and seven children; Judson buried two wives and nine children. Both faced sickness, shipwreck, spears, broken bones, and a myriad of other trials. But they were ultimately spared by God to finish the work he had called them to.

This is Paton’s final analysis:

Let me record my immovable conviction that this is the noblest service in which any human being can spend or be spent; and that, if God gave me back my life to be lived over again, I would without one quiver of hesitation lay it on the altar to Christ, that he might use it as before in similar ministries of love, especially amongst those who have never yet heard of the name of Jesus.¹¹

CONCLUSION

Friends, for nearly 2000 years, the people of God have been marked by patient, quiet endurance while leaving the results to God. Long-term missions is our heritage. May we raise up many to carry on that heritage to the ends of the earth.

10 John G. Paton: *Missionary to the New Hebrides*, (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, UK, 2016), pg. 496

11 Ibid pg. 444

The Lost Coin

MARK DEVER

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of a woman who has lost a coin and sweeps her entire house looking for it. It's clearly not a large coin. It's clearly not laying in the middle of the floor. It's probably a smaller coin—somewhere in a corner.

Reflecting on that lost coin, I am left wondering about the lost souls in the world today. Particularly those whom none of us are trying to reach.

FOUR LANES OF MISSIONS

While the varieties of cross-cultural Christian ministry are nearly infinite, Brooks Buser has summarized¹ and categorized those varieties into four “lanes”—each of which is important and strategic for the mission of church. He describes these lanes as:

1. Training national pastors
2. English-speaking churches in cross-cultural contexts
3. Church planting in national or majority languages
4. Reaching those within minority language groups that are currently unreached by the gospel

The fourth is the focus of this brief article.

1 Brooks Buser, “A Better Way to Look at Missions,” *9Marks*, <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-better-way-to-look-at-missions/>.

LANE 4 IN PRACTICE

It goes without saying that addressing the first three lanes of missions occurs more easily and naturally. The work necessary to access these communities safely, learn two languages (one that likely doesn't have a writing system), translate the Bible, and persevere through some of the hardest living conditions in the world is extremely difficult. Pastors and church leaders naturally build relationships with those who are Christians from across the world in educational or conference settings. The cross fertilization that takes place gives rise to countless plans to send workers to help churches in other lands. Many of these connections encourage missions work in Lanes 1–3.

Lane 4, however, seems to require the concentrated attention of one who searches for a coin in the corner. It's not going to get swept up easily or quickly. It's going to take more intentionality, more deliberation, and more time. These things are required of both the individual who wants to go, and (even more fundamentally) on the part of the church from which they are sent.

LANE 4 IN THE BIBLE

We see Lane 4 missions described in a number of ways in the Bible. From “all families” in God's promise to Abraham to “all nations” in the Great Commission. From Isaiah's prophecy concerning the “ends of the earth” to John's vision of the “great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” Furthermore, Paul's logic in Romans 10 should lead us to continuously consider our approach to Lane 4 missions: “How will they hear without someone preaching?”

Ever since those unnamed Christians returned to their homelands after Pentecost, the Great Commission has been pushed forward to the ends of the earth by people whose names we won't know until heaven. The great majority of gospel advance, no doubt,

has taken place through the humble witness of men and women about whom no biographies ever have been—or could be—written.

And yet, we stand on the shoulders of those unknown witnesses. Occasionally, a flash of celebrity reveals to us a small part of our history. We know about Paul's entrance into Macedonia, but we don't know that there weren't Macedonians present at Pentecost. We know Paul's desire to get to Spain, but we don't know if other Christians had arrived there before him. We know that by the time Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, where he had never been, he could already name 26 Christians who were there in the imperial capital.

LANE 4 IN OUR CHURCHES

The fact that any people remain in gospel darkness under God is the responsibility of his churches. We are the ones who send out preachers. How are we doing?

If we wait until members volunteer themselves for this work—if we as pastors are passive in the matter—are we obeying Paul's command in Romans 10? What steps can we take to encourage our congregations to be sending congregations? If we don't have a Paul and a Barnabas identifying themselves to us, can we pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out more laborers? Can we pray that publicly? Can we start prayer groups to pray for the language groups among whom there is no gospel witness?

These and many other questions pour into the mind of the honest and sympathetic reader of Paul's logic in Romans 10. As we look around today, we ought to praise God for the spread of the gospel since Christ gave the Great Commission. Yet we cannot forget the darkness of ignorance that has not yet been dispelled. There are still more places that need the light.

The path of light to reach those lost in darkness can begin with the pastors of churches who ask questions like:

9. MISSIONS

- ✦ Is there anything more I should be doing as a pastor?
- ✦ Is there anything more that our church should be doing?
- ✦ How should our support of 4th Lane missions look different than what we do to encourage the other missions lanes that we happily support?
- ✦ Would it be worth our elders having a dedicated discussion about this?

I share these questions with you because I'm wrestling with them right now. Pray for me, as I pray for us.

APPENDIX

The Church: Universal and Local¹

JONATHAN LEEMAN

DEFINITION

The universal church is a heavenly and eschatological assembly of everyone—past, present, and future—who belongs to Christ’s new covenant and kingdom. A local church is a mutually-affirming group of new covenant members and kingdom citizens, identified by regularly gathering together in Jesus’s name through preaching the gospel and celebrating the ordinances.

SUMMARY

The New Testament word translated into English as “church” (*ekklesia*) means assembly, and the New Testament envisions two kinds of assemblies: one in heaven and many on earth. These two kinds are the universal and local church, respectively. To become a Christian is to become a member of the universal church, whereby God raises us up with Christ and seats us in the heavenly place. Yet membership in the heavenly assembly must “show up” on earth, which Christians do by gathering together in the name of Christ through the preaching of the gospel and mutually affirming one another as belonging to him through the ordinances. The heavenly universal church, in

1 Editor’s note: This article was originally printed at TGC and is reprinted here by permission.

other words, creates earthly local churches, which in turn display the universal church. Christians throughout history have sometimes emphasized the local or the universal church to the neglect of the other, but a biblical posture emphasizes both. Such a posture entails pursuing one's individual discipleship in a local church, but a local church that partners with other churches.

TWO USES OF THE WORD 'CHURCH'

What exactly is the church? A brand-new Christian who begins reading the Bible might find him or herself initially confused trying to answer that question. On one page, Jesus says that he will build his church, and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). The new Christian considers how Jesus uses the word "church" here and rightly concludes that he intends the church to be something broad, comprised of vast numbers of members from around the globe and over centuries of time. Then, a couple pages later, the young believer encounters Jesus telling the disciples they should address unresolved sin by telling it "to the church" (Matt. 18:17). Now he or she wonders if a church isn't in fact a specific group of people located in one place.

Turning to Paul's epistles similarly reveals two different uses of the word. In one moment, Paul talks about "coming together as a church," like it's an assembly (1 Cor. 11:18). In the next he writes that "God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers," like it is something much bigger (1 Cor. 12:28).

What the young believer is discovering, of course, is how the Bible uses the word "church" in both a universal and a local sense.

At the most basic lexical level, the Greek word *ekklesia*, which the English Bibles translate as "church," means assembly. Yet Scripture employs the word to refer to two kinds of assembly: a

heavenly one and an earthly one. Christians refer to these as the universal church and the local church, respectively.

UNIVERSAL CHURCH—A HEAVENLY ASSEMBLY

The universal church should come first in our thinking because people “join” the universal church or heavenly assembly by becoming Christians.

Salvation, after all, is covenantal. By the new covenant, Jesus Christ secured not just individuals but a people for himself, all of which he accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection. Yet by uniting a people to him, he also united them to one another. Listen to how the apostle Peter puts it:

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:10; see also Eph. 2:1–21).

Peter places the second line about receiving God’s saving mercy in parallel with the first line about becoming God’s people. The two things happened together.

Fittingly, one crucial metaphor for our salvation is adoption (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). To be adopted by a father and mother is to receive—derivatively but simultaneously—a new set of brothers and sisters. And this is the universal church—all the new brothers and sisters we have received from across time and around the world who belong to this new covenant people.

Why then say that the universal church is in heaven? Upon saving us by grace, Paul says, God “raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6; see also Col. 3:1, 3). By our union with Christ we

are seated in the heavens, meaning, we possess standing and a place in God's heavenly throne room. All the prerogatives and protections of that place belong to us because we are sons and daughters of the king. We are there. Yet Paul goes on: Not only have we been vertically reconciled, being raised up and seated in the heavenly realms. A horizontal reconciliation follows: "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ," such that "he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one" (Eph. 2:13, 14). Which means: if you are sitting with Christ in the heavenly realms, you are also seated with everyone else seated in those realms. This is the heavenly assembly, or the universal church, which Paul goes on to discuss in the following chapters (3:10, 21; 5:23–32).

The author of Hebrews highlights the heavenly location of this assembly even more explicitly for his Christian audience:

You have come to—the heavenly Jerusalem—to the assembly [*ekklesia*, or church] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (Heb. 12:22–24).

Again, how is it that the saints on earth could be assembled in heaven even now? Before the judgment seat of God, they have been declared perfect through Christ's new covenant. There, in heaven, God counts all the saints, living and dead, as possessing standing.

Furthermore, this heavenly assembly anticipates the end-time assembly of all the saints who ever lived, gathered around the throne of God—what the apostle John calls "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9). For this reason,

theologians refer to the universal church as not just a heavenly assembly, but an eschatological (end-time) one.

Definition 1: the universal church is a heavenly and eschatological assembly of everyone—past, present, and future—who belongs to Christ’s new covenant and kingdom.

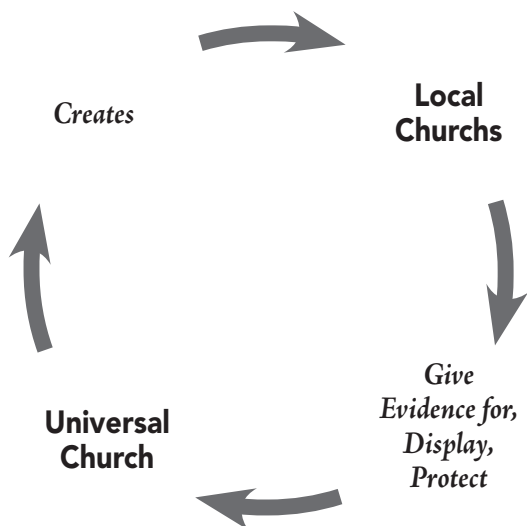
This is the church that Jesus promised to build in Matthew 16. This is the entire body of Christ, the family of God, and temple of the Spirit. Membership comes with salvation.

LOCAL CHURCH—AN EARTHLY ASSEMBLY

Yet a Christian’s heavenly membership in the universal church needs to show up on earth, just like a Christian’s imputed righteousness in Christ should show up in works of righteousness (Jas. 2:14-26). Membership in the universal church describes a “positional” reality. It’s a heavenly position or status in God’s courtroom. It is therefore as real as anything else in or beyond the universe. Yet Christians must then *put on* or *enflesh* or *live out* that universal membership concretely, just like Paul says we must “put on” our positional righteousness in existential acts of righteousness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10, 14).

In other words, our membership in Christ’s universal and heavenly body cannot remain an abstract idea. If it is real, it will show up on earth—in real time and space with real people, people with names like Betty and Saeed and Jamar, people we don’t get to choose but who step on our toes and disappoint us and encourage us and help us to follow Jesus. Membership in the universal church must become visible in a local gathering of Christians.

To summarize the relationship, the universal church creates local churches, while local churches prove, give evidence for, display, even protect the universal church, like this:



Consider what this means: if a person says he belongs to *the* church but he has nothing to do with *a* church, one might rightly wonder if he really does belong to *the* church, just as we wonder about a person who claims to have faith but has no deeds.

The local church is where we see, hear, and literally rub shoulders with the universal church—no, not all of it, but an expression of it.

It is a visible, earthly outpost of the heavenly assembly. It is a time machine which has come from the future, offering a preview of this end-time assembly.

GATHERING, MUTUAL AFFIRMATION, PREACHING, ORDINANCES

More specifically the universal church becomes a local church—it becomes visible—through (i) a regular gathering or assembly of people (ii) who mutually affirm one another as Christians (iii) through preaching the gospel (iv) and participating in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Let's back up and explain. Every nation and kingdom possess some way of saying who their citizens are. Today, countries use passports and borders. Ancient Israel used both circumcision and Sabbath-keeping, signs of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenant, respectively. The church is not presently a land-possessing earthly kingdom, yet this heavenly kingdom needs some way of affirming its citizens on earth, too. How does it do that? How can these heavenly citizens know who "they" are, both for their own sake and for the sake of the nations?

To answer that question, Jesus provided covenant signs for members of the new covenant: the entrance sign of baptism, whereby people are baptized into his name (Matt. 28:19); and the ongoing sign of the Lord's Supper, whereby they affirm one another as members of his body (1 Cor. 10:17).

Not only that, he gave local churches the authority to publicly affirm their members as citizens of his kingdom—to affix these covenantal signs on people, almost like a coach passing out team jerseys. To that end, he gave churches the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose on earth what's bound and loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). What does that mean? It means churches possess the authority to render judgment on the *what* and the *who* of the gospel—confessions and confessors. With the keys, he authorized churches to say, "Yes, this is the gospel confession we believe in and that you must believe in to be a member." To say: "Yes, this is a true confessor. We will baptize her into membership" or "We will remove him from membership and the Lord's Table for unrepentant sin." In everyday terms, Jesus gave this gathered assembly the keys of the kingdom in order to write statements of faith and fill up membership directories.

So definition 2: a local church is a mutually-affirming group of new covenant members and kingdom citizens, identified by regularly gathering together in Jesus's name through preaching the gospel and celebrating the ordinances.

Jesus describes this gathered local church in Matthew 18. It is an expression of the body of Christ, the family of God, and temple of the Spirit.

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY:

LEANING TOWARD THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Through the history of the church, different individuals and traditions have emphasized either the universal or the local church.

In the first generations following the apostles, the emphasis rightly fell on both, at least as judged by early letters to churches and their leaders by pastors like Clement of Rome and Ignatius. The second-century document the *Didache* suggests likewise, with its dual emphasis on the practical workings of a local church and Christian faithfulness more broadly.

Yet just as people sometimes shift their weight off of both feet and onto one, so the writings of the church fathers moving into the third, fourth, and fifth centuries presents a growing emphasis on the universal church, albeit in an institutional guise. There were historical reasons for this. A number of theological heresies were cropping up. Also, churches divided over how to treat Christians (and bishops in particular) who denied Christ in the face of persecution but then asked for readmission. Such pastoral challenges prompted everyone from Cyprian to Augustine to emphasize the importance of being united to the one, holy, apostolic, and *catholic*—meaning universal—church. And unity with the one true universal church, they began to say, required unity with the right bishop; and unity with the right bishop, they eventually said, meant unity with the bishop of Rome, or

the pope. In other words, catholicity or universality became an earthly reality as much as a heavenly one. It belonged to the institutional structures formally binding the global church together—an episcopacy supposedly tracing back to Peter and centering on the pope.

The Protestant Reformation would break this pattern by offering a more spiritual conception of catholicity. They, too, affirmed the necessity of external structures in the life of the church, but they also began to distinguish between the visible and invisible church. They argued that a person can belong to the visible church, but not the invisible church, or vice-a-versa, since salvation is not mechanistically gained through baptism or the Supper but only by regeneration and faith. This emphasis on the invisible church, then, effectively turned the catholicity or universality of the church back into a spiritual attribute, not an institutional one. The universal church, in other words, would prove on the Last Day to be the invisible church across space and time, not simply everyone who called themselves members of visible churches.

LATER CHURCH HISTORY:

LEANING TOWARD THE LOCAL CHURCH

That said, the earliest Reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer still maintained room in their thinking for an institutional form of unity and catholicity (universality). Their denominations were “connectional,” meaning, churches were formally and authoritatively *connected* to one another. By their lights, such formal connection was the requirement of unity and therefore catholicity. Hence, they treated the visible church as consisting of more than the *local* church—the assembly of people gathering in one *locale*. It also included larger church hierarchies, whether presbyteries or episcopacies. Hence, they would name their churches the “Church of England” or the “German Lutheran Church.” Not surprisingly, their

theologies also emphasized the visible vs. invisible distinction as much if not more than the local vs. universal distinction. The practice of infant baptism and the fact that unregenerate infants would be treated as members of churches heightened the need for the invisible vs. visible distinction. After all, unregenerate infants belong to the visible but not the invisible church.

Within a couple decades of the Reformation, however, the Anabaptists and eventually the Baptists would more completely locate the unity of the catholic or universal church back into the heavens. They argued that every church should remain institutionally independent and consist only of believers. The *visible* church on earth, they argued, is only the *local* church and only the local church—the gathered, geographically-located congregation. The Church of England, they would say, is not a church. It’s a parachurch or administrative structure binding multiple churches together.

Yet among Baptist groups the risk now would be to shift the weight of the body entirely onto the other foot, where Christians would give all their attention to the local church and little to the universal. Certain strains of Baptist churches, such as the Landmarkists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, would in fact argue that only the local church exists. They would also refuse to share the Lord’s Supper with anyone who was not a member of their own church. Gratefully, such strains were rare.

Far more common has been the functional dismissal of the universal church among commercial- and marketing-minded church leaders in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century churches. Such churches will verbally affirm the existence of the universal church. They will praise God for Christians around the world in their sermons. But their self-reliant church practices too often ignore the universal church. A marketplace mindset employs

ministry language and methods that effectively promote a church's own brand identity, like a fast-food restaurant promoting its own way of preparing hamburgers. This has the effect, presumably unintentionally, of pitting churches against one another. For instance, church mission statements, which have been popular in the last few decades, highlight a church's unique mission emphases, as if Jesus did not give every single church precisely the same mission statement (Matt. 28:18–20). And this emphasis on what's unique, instead of an emphasis on the shared partnership, corresponds to working separately from other churches, not together. So when a building is full, a church's first instinct is not to plant another church. Instead it starts a second service or site. Churches might invite pastors from other countries to visit and share prayer requests on stage, but they won't do this with a pastor from down the street.

Overall, the marketing and branding-heavy mindset does not entail opposing other churches, as it can among fast food restaurants. Yet it does mean nearby churches ignore one another. Worse, they have effectively placed themselves on a vast field of unacknowledged competition, where the most charismatic speakers with the best branding and programming draw numbers away from surrounding churches. Partnership among churches in the same neighborhood or city, then, is rare.

EMPHASIZING BOTH THE LOCAL AND THE UNIVERSAL

Yet the biblical picture rests the body's weight on both feet—the local and the universal.

The universal church “shows up” in local congregations, as I argued at the beginning. Yet it should also “show up” in every church's disposition to partner with other churches, even as we see among churches in the New Testament. The New Testament churches

shared love and greetings (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Cor. 13:13; etc.). They shared preachers and missionaries (2 Cor. 8:18; 3 John 5–6a). They supported one another financially with joy and thanksgiving (Rom. 15:25–26; 2 Cor. 8:1–2). They imitated one another in Christian living (1 Thes. 1:7; 2:14; 2 Thes. 1:4). They cared for one another financially (1 Cor. 16:1–3; 2 Cor. 8:24). They prayed for one another (Eph. 6:18). And more.

Christians today might disagree about whether the Bible means to establish institutional unity or connectivity between churches (I do not believe it does). But every local church should love the universal church *by* loving, partnering with, and supporting other local churches, including the ones nearest *by*. We should be willing to share the Lord's Supper with baptized members of other churches when they visit with us.

Also, every denominational tradition should affirm that Christians must join themselves to local churches since these local churches are expressions of the universal church. Our homeland in heaven has sent out ambassadors and built-up embassies here and now. Those gathered churches are an outpost, a foretaste, a colony, a representation of the final gathering. If you belong to *the* church, you will want to join *a* church. It is where we put flesh upon our proclamation, our faith, our fellowship, and our membership in Christ's body.

FURTHER READING

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4. Biblical Church Membership
5. Biblical Church Discipline
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7. Biblical Church Leadership
8. A Biblical Understanding of the Practice of Prayer
9. A Biblical Understanding and Practice of Missions

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