



XI
TWELVE
TRAITS

EMBRACING GOD'S DESIGN *for the Church*

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To access this sermon series, as well as other free resources from David Platt and Radical, go to radical.net.

12 TRAITS

Embracing God's Design for the Church

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INTRODUCTION

When people look for a church, they often ask questions: Does it have good parking? Are the entrances clearly marked? Are the seats comfortable? Are the bathrooms clean? Are the kids' programs state-of-the-art? Are the people like me? Are the songs to my liking? Are the sermons engaging . . . or at least short?

Not all of those questions are bad. It helps to have a place to park, clearly-marked signs, and clean bathrooms. However, a church can have all those things yet not actually be a church.

I was recently on a plane, and in the seat next to me sat a self-proclaimed Unitarian Universalist Buddhist. This lady told me about her church, but her definition of the church did not match the Bible's. In fact, what she described was not a church at all; it was simply a group of people gathered around man's ideas. But a group of people gathered around man's ideas is not worth giving your life to. On the other hand, a church—a unique community designed by God for our good and for the spread of His glory in the world—is worth giving your life to.

So how do you know what separates a church from any other group of people? And what do we base that on? Is there a blueprint for how the church should be structured, what its priorities should be, and what its mission is? To answer these kinds of questions, we need to look to God's Word. In the chapters that follow, we'll look at twelve biblical traits that should mark every church. Each chapter is based on a particular passage of Scripture—found at the beginning of each chapter on the left-hand page—though other passages will also be used to explain each trait.

Remember, no church is perfect, or even close to perfect, but

churches should at least be *aiming* for faithfulness in these biblical traits.

So whether you're a Christian looking to join a local church, a church member seeking to fulfill your role in the body of Christ, or a pastor wanting to shepherd your church under the authority of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, knowing the traits of a biblical church is of the utmost importance. Amazingly, it is the church, the gathering of God's people, where God has chosen to manifest His glorious presence in a unique way. And it is through the church that God has chosen to make known the good news of the gospel to a world in desperate need. So with the apostle Paul, we say,

“ . . . to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”
(Ephesians 3:21)

PREACHING & TEACHING

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

— 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5



— TRAIT 1 —

Attempts to undermine the importance of preaching and teaching God's Word should not surprise us. They have always been around, and they come in various forms. Years ago, I listened to a lecture about how preaching had become irrelevant in the church. Music and singing were supposedly more effective mediums for communicating truth. Yet, I noticed that this lecturer did not communicate this information by singing. He taught it. Teaching and listening, it seems, are indispensable when it comes to communicating certain truths.

Some people wonder why Christians spend so much time listening to someone teach the Bible. It's not because pastors like to talk but rather because God has told us that we need to listen to His Word. And the primary way we hear His Word in the church is through preaching and teaching. Biblical preaching and teaching is the most important trait of a church because it determines all the others. If you get this trait right, then everything else follows. But if you get this trait wrong, then everything else about the church can get thrown off course.

Perhaps the most clear passage on the importance of biblical preaching and teaching is 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5 (see pg. 8). In this passage Paul gives us at least three reasons biblical preaching and teaching is essential for the church.

1. The Church is a Community Formed by God's Word

All kinds of communities are formed *apart* from God's Word. For example, a community can be formed around a common ethnicity, a service project, or a certain teacher. People also gather based on similar interests and lifestyles. Communities are even formed around shared struggles. But the church, the community of God's people, is altogether different. It is formed by God's Word. This truth is pictured vividly by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel.

God gave Ezekiel a vision about His people, Israel, a people who were spiritually dead. He compared them to a valley of dry bones. God commanded Ezekiel to start preaching to the dry bones, and as he preached, something amazing happened:

. . . as I [Ezekiel] prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he [God] said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. (Ezek 37:7–10)

Notice how these bones came to life and assembled into a great army. They were given breath, and the breath came through the proclamation of God's Word. Even today, that same life-giving power comes as God's Word, or Scripture, is proclaimed. The apostle Paul tells us, "All Scripture is breathed out by God . . ." (2 Tim 3:16), which means Scripture is not only powerful but also completely reliable. We don't have to pick and choose what to believe in Scripture because it is "all" breathed out by God. And He doesn't breathe out lies! Why, then, would we not want God's Word to be our final authority in the church? Consider some of the ways God's Word

forms God's people.

The Word saves us

According to 2 Timothy 3:15, the Word of God makes us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” This is another way of saying that the revelation of Jesus—who He is, what He has done, and how He saves us—is found only in God's Word. We do not create our own path to salvation. Rather, we need the Bible to tell us how to be saved. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

A missionary friend was sharing the gospel on the streets of South America, and he had a New Testament with him. The man he was sharing the gospel with was looking at the New Testament and remarked that it had nice, thin paper—paper that would be perfect for rolling cigarettes. So the missionary said, “I'll give you this New Testament, with all its nice paper, if you'll promise me that before you tear out a page to make it into cigarettes, you'll first read that page.” After thinking about it for a minute, the man agreed, and the missionary gave him the New Testament. Later, the missionary was back on that same street, and he ran into this man. He asked him if he was keeping his promise to read the pages before rolling them into cigarettes. The man said, “Well, I read and smoked my way through Matthew, and then I smoked my way through Mark and Luke. I smoked all the way to John 3, where I read a verse and everything made sense. I realized that God loves me so much that Jesus died for my sins. Now I've asked Him to forgive me and to become my Lord.” This man who smoked his way through the New Testament is now training to be a pastor! The Word of Christ has supernatural power to save.

The Word teaches us

Scripture is profitable for “teaching” (2 Tim 3:16). It teaches us about who God is and what He is doing in history. If you want to become all that God has designed for you to be, then read and listen

to His Word. The Word of God is our teacher.

The Word convicts us

God's Word is also useful for "reproof," or conviction (2 Tim 3:16). Because we are all prone to wander from God's Word and live according to our own desires, God has given us His Word to keep us on the right path.

When I was learning to drive as a teenager, I would drive down the road in the middle of the lane, and, gradually, the car would start gliding toward the white line on the right or the yellow line in the middle. My dad would sit beside me calmly and say, "Drifting, drifting." If I did not hear him the first or second time, the calm words would be replaced with a loud yell—"Drifting!" This is what God's Word does. As we read the Word, with hearts prone to wander, it quietly warns us. And sometimes when we are slow to listen, it yells, "Drifting!" The Word wakes us up before we leave our lane and drift into a disaster.

The Word corrects us

Another thing Scripture brings is "correction" (2 Tim 3:16). The Word does not just sound an alarm in our hearts; it stimulates a change in our lives. It repositions, reorients, and redirects us according to that which is wise, profitable, and glorifying to God.

The Word trains us

To receive God's Word is to receive "training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Although we have been declared righteous in Christ, that righteous status isn't always reflected in the way we live. We need training.

When I was training my two oldest sons to ride bikes, I used to take them to the top of the steepest hill in our neighborhood. One time I let them go and then lost sight of them around a corner before realizing I had not told them how to use their brakes. As soon as I realized my mistake, I took off running down the hill. When I

could see them again, I saw one lying in a neighbor's yard and the other facedown on the pavement in the middle of the road. I failed to give them the training they needed. God, on the other hand, has not failed to give us the training we need. He trains us through His Word.

The Word equips us

The purpose of the Word teaching, convicting, correcting, and training is so that “the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). A football player would not enter a game without a helmet and shoulder pads. A catcher would not crouch behind the plate without a facemask and chest protector. A soldier would not enter the battle without a vest and a weapon. Likewise, Christians should not enter their daily lives unequipped. God's Word is our equipment for godly living in this world.

The Word transforms us

The goal of the Word of God is to make us “complete,” that is, completely what God has designed us to be in Christ (2 Tim 3:17). His Word does not just inform us; it transforms us. As we learn and obey the Word, it changes our lives.

Given how many people seem to doubt or downplay the power of God's Word, it's worth thinking further about its transforming effects. Amy Carmichael worked in India for fifty-five years, rescuing girls from temple prostitution and sharing the gospel. She was bedridden the last twenty years before she died at age eighty-three. This was her testimony to the power of God's Word:

The amazing thing is that everyone who reads the Bible has the same joyful thing to say about it. In every land, in every language, it is the same tale: where that Book is read, not with the eyes only, but with the mind and heart, the life is changed. Sorrowful people are comforted, sinful people are transformed, people who were in the dark walk in the light. Is it not wonderful to think that this Book, which is such a

mighty power if it gets a chance to work in an honest heart, is in our hands today?¹

The transforming power of the Bible was recently highlighted in an extensive, four-year study examining the Bible engagement of thousands of people around the world.² According to the study, those who engage the Bible at least four days a week are significantly less likely to give in to certain temptations than those who read the Bible less than four days a week. More frequent Bible readers



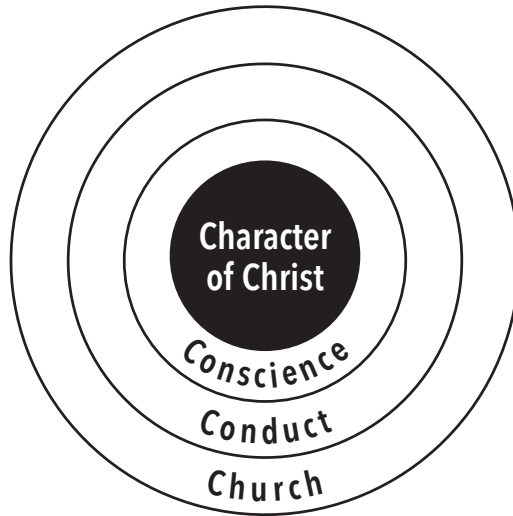
***THE BIBLE TRANSFORMS
US SO THAT WE LOOK
MORE LIKE JESUS.***

were, among other things, significantly less likely to commit adultery, view pornography, gamble, and get drunk. God's Word had apparently brought some level of conviction, correction, and transformation in their lives.

Given that many people think of the Bible as an ancient, outdated book that is irrelevant to their daily activities and circumstances, it's worth thinking further about the way it transforms us. The Bible was never intended to be a manual for every circumstance of life. There are parents struggling to raise teenagers, but the Bible has very few passages about teenagers. There are men and women experiencing the pain of divorce, but the Bible does not have many passages about divorce. There are people trying to figure out how to manage their financial investments, but the Bible never mentions stocks, bonds, or Social Security. There are families facing sickness, disease, and unique physical needs, but the Bible does not contain how-to texts on managing these issues. Thankfully, though, what the Bible does is far better than anything offered in an instruction manual.

The Bible transforms us so that we look more like Jesus. It enables us to walk in step with the very Spirit of God, and the Spirit of God will lead and guide us in all of life's circumstances. We might picture this transforming work in terms of concentric circles. Be-

ginning with the core, where the character of Christ is formed in us, we'll work our way from the inside out.



Inside Circle: Character of Christ

When you are saved by Jesus Christ and become His follower, He dwells in you through the presence of His Holy Spirit. The more you feed on His Word, the more His Spirit teaches you, convicts you, corrects you, and trains you to be like Jesus. The Bible is supernaturally inspired by God to cause the character of Christ to grow in you. That's true whenever you read any part of the Bible, whether the Old or New Testament, regardless of whether it seems relevant or irrelevant. The Bible may not tell you what to do with your retirement account, but it does help you become more like Jesus. And becoming more like Jesus affects everything else about you.

Second Circle: Conscience

The second circle represents your conscience. The more God's Word fills your mind and heart, the more God changes your conscience. You begin to think what God thinks and want what God wants. Your desires will be transformed by His Word, and, as a result,


you will desire the things of this world less and less. Your thinking about the world around you—family, work, etc.—will align with God’s thoughts.

Third Circle: Conduct


The third circle, our conduct (what we do, how we behave, how we speak), is always based on the second circle, our conscience (what we believe, how we think, and what we want). As the Holy Spirit forms the character of Christ in us, our thoughts, words, and actions change. If we have selfish desires, those desires will be evident in the way we behave at home, at work, and in the world around us. But if we have *selfless* desires, those desires will also be evident. The character of Christ will affect every facet of our lives, including how we think about our money, what we want for our family, and how we treat our spouse and children.

Fourth Circle: Church

Christ forms us through His Word, not just as individuals, but as a church community. Too often Christians come to church hoping to receive answers for all the practical situations they face in

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the twenty-first century. Rather than a sermon on Leviticus, they want to hear a sermon on how to manage money, raise teenagers, or handle stress. In other words, they want tips to improve their life.

But no pastor is an expert on all these topics. And no pastor has access to a biblical text for every circumstance you face. What pastors *do* have is something better. Pastors have an entire book

guaranteed by God to help you grow in your relationship with Him. This book, the Bible, will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, transform your life so that you look more like Jesus. Life transformation, not

practical advice, is what you most need as a parent, spouse, student, and money manager. It is relevant to your stress, your cancer, and to all your specific needs. More than anything, you need Jesus, which is why you need the Bible.

2. The Church is a Community in Awe of God's Word

The church is not only formed by God's Word, but it should also stand in awe of the Word. Notice Paul's charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1–2:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

The glory of God is the first reason we preach His Word when His people gather. As we've already seen, the Bible is "breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16) and thus possesses His power. In fact, the entire world was created by the Word of God (Gen 1:1; Ps 33:6–9; Jn 1:3). We see the power of God in the ministry of Jesus, the Word made flesh, as He stills storms (Matt 8:23–27), casts out demons (Mk 1:39), forgives sins (Mk 2:5), causes the blind to see (Lk 7:21), and raises the dead to life (Jn 11:1–44).

Preaching God's Word is also critical in light of the gravity of Christ's coming. One day every individual will stand before God to give an account for his or her life. Christ will "judge the living and the dead" (2 Tim 4:1), and His judgment will determine our eternity. It would be wise, then, to listen to what He says and obey each command He gives.

The coming judgment of God is why Paul commands Timothy to "preach the word" and to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2). Timothy is to preach this


way knowing that people would rather have their ears tickled—i.e., hear what they want to hear—and that some will even turn away from the truth. Too much is at stake for Timothy, or any other pastor, to stand up in front of the church and deliver his own opinions. The church needs the Word of God.

A commitment to understand and obey God’s Word is what leads healthy churches to teach systematically through the Bible. Regardless of whether they go verse-by-verse through a book of the Bible or address larger passages in one sitting, pastors are responsible to make sure that God’s Word is faithfully proclaimed. This is called *expository* preaching, and it refers to exposing the Word of God (not the word of man). A sermon can be expository and still be on a particular theme, topic, or doctrine. The question the church needs to ask each week is, *Did we hear from God according to His Word today?* Because of the glory of God and the gravity of His coming, the church needs to hear from Him every week. Biblical preaching prepares us to meet God in eternity and to walk with Him, enjoy Him, and be in awe of Him now.


3. The Church is a Community Holding Fast to God’s Word

Finally, the church must hold fast to this awe-inspiring Word by which it has been formed. But this is not easy. The Bible is under attack in our culture today, as many view it as antiquated, old-fashioned, politically incorrect, or even offensive. These attacks are why many (supposed) churches have left behind the preaching and teaching of the Bible. Others have given themselves over to distorting and twisting it. Such attacks against God’s Word are not new. Paul exhorted Timothy to persevere in teaching and obeying the Word of God: “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim 4:5). As R.A. Torrey reminds us, attacks on the Bible come and go, but the Bible remains:

Every type of destruction that human philosophy, human science, human reason, human art, human cunning, human force and human brutality [can] bring to bear against a book has been brought to bear against this Book . . . and yet the Bible stands absolutely unshaken today. At times almost all the wise and great of the earth have been pitted against the Bible, and only an obscure few for it. Yet [the Bible] has stood.³



***BIBLICAL PREACHING
PREPARES US TO MEET
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As the prophet Isaiah reminded God's people, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Is 40:8). Therefore, we base our lives, our families, and our churches first and foremost on God's Word. We preach it, teach it, learn it, and obey it. And as we do, we find in it eternal life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Why is biblical preaching and teaching the most important trait of the church? What are some negative ways that unbiblical preaching and teaching affect the church?

2

How is the Bible different from an instruction manual? What are some ways the Bible transforms us? (See 2 Timothy 3:15–17)

3

How would you respond to someone who says that the Bible is outdated and irrelevant?

4

What does it mean for a sermon to be expository?

5

What is the benefit of preaching through books of the Bible? Why is this a healthier model than simply preaching through interesting topics?



EVANGELISM

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.


— Matthew 16:13–20



— TRAIT 2 —

Ever since childhood, John has dreamed of playing for his favorite professional baseball team, the Atlanta Braves. John has worked hard to achieve this goal, and his friends and family have encouraged him along the way. Now, after years of hard work, the day has come. Tomorrow is the season opener, and John plans to put on his Braves uniform and take the field. There's only one thing that stands between him and his childhood dream—John doesn't actually play for the Braves. In fact, John has terrible hand-eye coordination and very little athletic ability. When he attempts to run out onto the field tomorrow, John is going to learn a painful lesson: calling yourself an Atlanta Brave doesn't make you an Atlanta Brave.

Jesus said something similar about those who profess to be Christians: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” On the day of judgment, “many” will claim to know Christ, but He will say to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:21–23). In other words, it is possible to profess publicly what we do

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not possess personally. We can be so close to spiritual reality yet be deceived by superficial religiosity. Therefore, in order to understand what it means to be a church, we need to understand what it means to be a Christian. These two doctrines are inseparable.

The first time the word “church” appears in the Bible is in Matthew 16:18 when Jesus asks His disciples about His identity. The entire passage, Matthew 16:13–20, is important for understanding what it means to be a church and what it means to be a follower of Christ (see pg. 22) This passage has sparked debate, division, and confusion over the course of Christian history, and Christians continue to disagree over the meaning of certain phrases and concepts. However, identifying the overarching truths in this passage is actually pretty simple. Jesus defines the church as a community of people who know Him truly and proclaim Him confidently.

The Community of People Who Know Jesus Truly

In response to the all-important question from Jesus, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” the disciples reported the varied responses people had given: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets (Matt 16:13–14). Even those who thought Jesus was the promised Messiah had such a warped understanding of what that meant—many assumed He would bring immediate political deliverance—that Jesus told them to refrain from revealing His identity to others. People still have all kinds of opinions about Jesus today.

Jesus is viewed as a religious teacher, an example to follow, or someone who cared for the poor and needy. Muslims say He was a prophet; Hindus believe He is one of many gods; an atheist or agnostic might consider Jesus nothing more than a good man. Some people still hold to a warped, political view of Jesus, similar to what we read about in Scripture. The identity of Jesus continues to be debated.

After hearing His disciples report on who the crowds thought

He was, Jesus turned the question back on them: “But who do *you* say that I am?” (v. 15). Jesus was confronting these disciples with this central question, a question every human being must answer. In fact, it is life’s *most* important question because the answer determines one’s eternity.

Who do *you* say Jesus is?

Peter, representing the other disciples, responded to Jesus, saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Peter’s statement marks the first time the disciples truly confessed Christ’s identity, and this confession was loaded. Christ is a title that means “Messiah”—the One promised by God ever since the beginning of the Bible. Peter did not say Jesus was a good religious teacher, a good example to follow, a good man, a good prophet, or another god. No, his response was in line with Old Testament promises. God had promised that Jesus would be . . .

- The Seed who would defeat sin and Satan (Genesis 3:15)
- The Promised Offspring who would bring blessing to all the nations (Genesis 12:3)
- The Promised Lamb who would pay the price for sinners (Exodus 12)
- The Promised Bread from heaven and Water who gives life (Exodus 16–17)
- The Great High Priest who alone can make atonement for sin (Leviticus)
- The Prophet whose word can be trusted (Deuteronomy)
- The Lord who will save us (Joshua)
- The Redeemer who loves us (Ruth)
- The King who is coming (Samuel, Kings, & Chronicles)
- The Son of Man and Son of God who will be crucified and resurrected from the dead (Psalms)
- The Baby who will be born of a virgin, God with us (Isaiah 7:14); the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6); the Suffering Servant who will pay the price for our sins (Isaiah 53); the Loving Savior who will heal the blind, lame, and deaf (Isaiah 35)

- The Son of Man (Ezekiel 34)
- The Authoritative King (Daniel 7)
- The Faithful Husband (Hosea 3)
- The High Priest and King (Zechariah 6)
- The God who will come (Malachi 3).

This is what we mean when we confess that Jesus is the long-promised Messiah. This is what it means to know Him truly.

I recently asked a woman seated on a plane next to me whether she believed in Jesus. She said she believed Jesus was a good teacher and a good example for others. But then I asked her, “Do you believe

ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE CLAIM TO HAVE MADE A DECISION, PRAYED A PRAYER, SIGNED A CARD, AND ACCEPTED JESUS INTO THEIR HEARTS, BUT THEIR LIVES LOOK NO DIFFERENT THAN THE REST OF THE WORLD. THESE PEOPLE SAY THEY ARE CHRISTIANS, BUT THEY DO NOT KNOW CHRIST.

you need Jesus to forgive you of your sin against God, and do you want Him to reign as Lord over your life?” She said, “Absolutely not.” Contrary to what she claims, she does not believe in Jesus. She is rejecting who Jesus is and what Jesus taught.

If you think Jesus is a good teacher, then you will treat him like you would treat other good teachers. If you think Jesus has good ideas, then you will occasionally listen to what He says. If you think Jesus is a good example, then you will try to follow his example from time to time. Many men and women who attend church view Jesus as a good but distant religious figure. They believe He is worthy of casual church attendance and a periodic offering. They want Jesus enough to save their skin for eternity, but they do not want Him to reign as Lord over every area of their life right now. *That* is not believing in Jesus. That is patroniz-

ing Jesus, and it is far too common in contemporary Christianity.

All sorts of people claim to have made a decision, prayed a prayer, signed a card, and accepted Jesus into their hearts, but their lives look no different than the rest of the world. These people say they are Christians, but they do not know Christ. When you know Christ, your life looks different. Very different.

The Community of People Who Proclaim Jesus Confidently

In response to Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus says to him, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). Who, or what, is the rock that the church is built on? Is it Peter? Or is Jesus the rock? What about the apostles, or the gospel?

Some of the confusion about this passage is due to the various ways the metaphor of a rock is used in the New Testament. For instance, while Jesus is called the foundation of the church (1 Cor 3:11), the rock (1 Cor 10:4), and the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20), Scripture also refers to the apostles as the foundation of the church (Eph 2:19–20; 1 Cor 3:10). The New Testament uses a variety of different metaphors to make different points. So what point is Jesus making when He calls Peter the "rock"?

Peter's name means "rock," so Jesus is likely using a play on words. He's saying something like, "You (Peter) are a *rock*, and on this *rock* I will build my church." Jesus seems to indicate some kind of foundation in Peter, but this is not a foundation based on Peter's abilities or his intellect or his character. Remember, Jesus makes this statement after Peter's confession of faith. In other words, Jesus is building His church upon Peter and Peter's confession of faith. Jesus is essentially saying, "You are being sent out by me with my authority to proclaim the gospel, and upon you and your proclamation of this good news, I will build my church." The rock of the church, then, is the people of God proclaiming

the gospel of Christ. Peter is the first apostle to make this declaration, and this declaration is the foundation upon which the church is built.

The truthfulness of Jesus's statement is put on display in the book of Acts. After Jesus died on the cross for sinners and then rose from the grave in victory over sin, He told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. After the Holy Spirit came to indwell the disciples, Peter stood up and preached the first Christian sermon (Acts 2:14–36). Here is the climax of Peter's sermon:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:36)

Peter proclaimed exactly what he had declared in Matthew 16, namely, that Jesus is Lord and Christ. Immediately following Peter's declaration, three thousand people put their faith in Jesus, and the church was founded.

Jesus continued building His church upon the proclamation of the gospel through the mouth of Peter and the other apostles. The first believers immediately devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42), which fits with Paul's statement that the church is built on the "foundation" of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). After the first twelve chapters of Acts, Peter eventually takes a back-seat as Paul becomes more prominent in the last half of the book. But the gospel does not slow down. It keeps going, and the church keeps growing. Jesus builds His church wherever the people of God are proclaiming the gospel of Christ. He uses Peter and Paul, and all who follow Him, to build His church. That is the story of the book of Acts, the story of the church throughout history, and the story of the church today.

I have seen the church grow in remarkable ways recently. I saw it grow when four high school students headed to the mall to share

their faith. They led a student to Christ and brought him to church the following Sunday. I saw the church grow when young adults at our church went to “hot spots” in town to provide free rides to people in order to share the gospel with them. I saw the church grow when a local restaurant played a sermon on their television, and a young man named Luke asked the cashier why they were playing it. The cashier shared the gospel with Luke, and Luke put his trust in Christ. I saw the church grow when a church member delivered a care package to a Muslim woman from Bangladesh, and the woman trusted in Christ and now owns, studies, and treasures her Bengali Bible. Whenever and wherever the people of God are proclaiming the truth of Christ, Jesus is building His church, and nothing can stand against it.

Jesus promised His disciples that “the gates of hell” would not prevail against His church (Matt 16:18). The phrase “gates of hell” is a Jewish expression for the powers of death. Death cannot stop this Christ or His church. The testimony of Christian martyrs throughout church history testifies to this truth. When, for example, a second-century Christian named Polycarp was told to deny Christ or else lose his life, he replied with unshakeable confidence:

“Eighty and six years have I served Christ, nor has He ever done me any harm. How, then, could I blaspheme my King who saved Me?”

“I have wild animals here,” replied the proconsul. “I will throw you to them if you do not repent.”

“Call them,” Polycarp replied.

“If you despise the animals, I will have you burned,” the proconsul said.

Polycarp said, “You threaten me with fire which burns for


an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the coming judgment and eternal punishment. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.”⁴

Minutes later, Polycarp was burned alive, but his testimony to Christ lives on today. Nearly sixteen centuries later, the Anglican bishop J.C. Ryle said,


Nothing can overthrow and destroy [the church]. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, beheaded, burned; but the true church is never extinguished; it rises again from its afflictions; it lives on through fire and water. When crushed in one land it springs up in another. The Pharaohs, the Herods, the Neros, have labored in vain to put down this church; they slay their thousands, and then pass away and go to their own place. The true Church out-lives them all.”⁵

Ryle’s words in the eighteenth century continue to be proven true today. The twentieth century saw unprecedented growth in the church across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and in countries like China, South Korea, and Iran. Not even death will stop the purposes of Christ.

As we confidently proclaim Christ, we cannot forget where our authority comes from. Jesus said to His disciples, “I will give you

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***WE WHO KNOW JESUS
TRULY SHOULD PROCLAIM
JESUS CONFIDENTLY.***



the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:19, emphasis added). The church does not proclaim the gospel by its own authority, but rather by the

authority granted to it by Jesus. Who are we to say whether or not someone goes to heaven? We are nobodies, and we have no inher-

ent authority. But the One with all authority has commissioned us (Matt 28:18–20). We who know Jesus truly should proclaim Jesus confidently.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

What does it mean to call Jesus “the Christ”?

2

What does Christ’s question, “Who do you say that I am?” have to do with the church’s identity?

3

How would you define the word “evangelism” for someone who is a new Christian?

4

Why is it important to see that Jesus is building His church rather than seeing ministry as something we accomplish in our own power?

5

How does the authority of Christ give the church confidence to proclaim the gospel?



DISCIPLESHIP

“Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

— Deuteronomy 6:1–9



— TRAIT 3 —

Whether it's returning home from the hospital with a newborn or welcoming a child into your home through adoption, adding a new member to the family is one of life's greatest joys. However, this initial "welcoming" phase is only the first step in raising a child. No responsible parent would expect a child to figure out life on its own. Unfortunately, though, this is often what happens when people are added to God's family.

Many churches count the number of people who make professions of faith, and then they move on. But Jesus never called the church to count decisions; He called the church to "make disciples" (Matt 28:19).

When those who profess faith in Christ are not taught to grow in Christ, many end up falling away. Like a baby left on the street, they do not survive. Others survive, but, spiritually speaking, they remain babies. But this is not God's design for His children. He is our Father, and He has adopted us into His

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MANY CHURCHES COUNT THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO MAKE PROFESSIONS OF FAITH, AND THEN THEY MOVE ON. BUT JESUS NEVER CALLED THE CHURCH TO COUNT DECISIONS; HE CALLED THE CHURCH TO "MAKE DISCIPLES" (MATT 28:19).

family, not to flounder but to flourish and to experience the joy of being His child. According to J.I. Packer, we know how well a person understands Christianity by whether or not the thought of God as Father is the “thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life . . .”⁶ God has created us to grow as His children, and the church is the family that He has designed to help us experience this growth. The process of growth is called biblical discipleship.

The word “discipleship” is often misunderstood, and it’s not only those who are unfamiliar with the church who are confused. Those who attend church regularly also have misconceptions. Some view discipleship as a program to attend, like a small group or a class. Others think discipleship is something done individually, as when another person invests his or her life in your life. This kind of individual discipleship often consists of setting aside a certain amount of time every week to study the Bible and pray in a one-on-one setting. Finally, some professing believers feel that they do not need to be discipled. All they need to do is attend church. Regardless of your perspective, the most important consideration is not what you think discipleship is but rather what God says it is.

It’s not a stretch to say that the concept of discipleship is found throughout the Bible because everything in the Bible is focused on helping us flourish in our relationship with God. One passage that has significant implications for our understanding of discipleship is Deuteronomy 6:1–9. This passage lays the foundation for what it means to be a part of God’s people.

You may recall from the book of Exodus that God delivered His people, Israel, from slavery and then brought them to Mount Sinai where He entered into a covenant relationship with them. He gave them laws that would lead to life with Him in the Promised Land. But God’s people turned from His Word, and they were not able to enter into the land. An entire generation died in the wilderness. Then, in the book of Deuteronomy, God gathered the next generation and gave them His laws a second time. He wanted to show His

people how to experience the life He had designed for them.

Like Israel, God wants us to flourish in our faith, and He has designed the church uniquely for this purpose. In short, the way to flourish as a disciple of Jesus Christ is to *learn and obey the Bible personally, and in small and large group community*. We'll unpack each part of that statement as it relates to God's instructions to His people in Deuteronomy 6:1–9 (see pg. 34).

Learn and Obey

The first step in discipleship is to learn and obey the Bible. All Israelites would have been intimately familiar with Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” God wanted His people to know that He was the one true God and that they were forbidden from worshipping idols. This verse is known as the *Shema*, which means “hear,” because this is the first Hebrew word in the verse. This is the kind of hearing that goes beyond mere physical hearing, as when certain sounds come into our ears. This is the kind of hearing that involves understanding and calls for obedience.

Prior to the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4, God tells the people numerous times to learn and obey His Word. Notice, for instance, how the words in bold emphasize the concepts of learning and obeying God's Word:

And now, O Israel, **listen** to the statutes and the rules that I am **teaching** you, and **do** them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may **keep** the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you. . . . See, I have **taught** you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should **do** them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. **Keep** them and **do** them, for that will

be your wisdom and your **understanding** in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” (Deut 4:1–2, 5–6)

The path to life is found in a relationship with God, and God commands His people to learn from Him and obey Him. The importance of this kind of “hearing” is found throughout Scripture.

When Jesus gives His disciples the Great Commission, they are to teach people to “**obey everything I have commanded you**” (Matt 28:19). Likewise, Paul commands Timothy, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have **heard** from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to **teach** others also” (2 Tim 2:1–2). These verses repeat what God teaches His people in Deuteronomy; in other words, the essence of discipleship has not changed.

The way to flourish in faith is to learn *and* obey the Bible.

We must not define discipleship simply as participation in a small group, for there are all kinds of small groups in churches today that are not focused on learning the Bible. They are focused instead on analyzing the newest pop psychology book from the Christian bookstore. They may open the Bible, but they are not actually studying it. They read a passage and ask, “What does this mean to you?” Then they twist the Bible to say all kinds of things it does not actually say. On the other hand, some groups actually study the Bible but fail to connect their study to obedience. It is possible to attend a Bible study every week, increase in Bible knowledge, and yet fail to put that increased knowledge into practice. For instance, you may become an expert on Galatians, but if you are not sharing the gospel, then you are missing the point.

Bible studies and small groups are not bad, but they are only good insofar as they help us to learn and obey the Bible. The Bible is the key to growing, flourishing, and multiplying in faith.

Make it Personal

The *Shema* commands us to learn from and obey the one true God, but there's more to our relationship with God than this. The next verse gives us another command: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart" (Deut 6:5). The God of the universe has created you for a personal relationship with Him, a relationship marked by love.

Life is found in loving God more than you love your wife, husband, kids, comforts, home, job, possessions, achievements, reputation, safety, security—even more than you love your own life. In fact, Jesus calls the command to love God supremely the "first and greatest commandment" (Matt 22:37–38). This should cause each of us to ask, *Do I love God or do I love His gifts?*

God gives us many good things, but if we are not careful, we fall into the temptation of loving those good things more than we love the One who gives them. Amidst all of God's promises of land and descendants, He knew Israel would be tempted to focus on the promises and forget Him. He therefore followed the command to love Him and teach His Word with this reminder:

And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut 6:10–12)⁷

We need constant reminders that the greatest gift God gives us is not our spouse, our kids, our friends, or our family. Nor is it health or wealth. The greatest gift God gives us is Himself.

Whenever we give our affection or attention to someone or

something other than God, the Bible calls this *idolatry*. God warns His people of idolatry in Deuteronomy 6: “You shall not go after other gods” (v. 14). And why should they not go after other gods?



**THE GREATEST GIFT GOD
GIVES US IS HIMSELF.**

“For the Lord your God in your midst is a jealous God” (v. 15). Jealousy is not an attribute we usually associate with God because our jealousy is often evil. Our jealousy is driven by sins like pride, covetousness, and insecurity.

There is, however, a good kind of jealousy that is driven by love, which is exactly the kind of jealousy we see in God.

God is not insecure. He knows that He is infinitely good, and He loves His people so much that He wants them to experience His goodness. God also knows that when His people focus on His gifts and wander after other gods, it will not do them good. He wants to keep us from missing out on what is good for us.

We can see the goodness of God’s jealousy if we think about His covenant with His people like a marriage relationship. For instance, I love my wife, and I want what’s best for her. And God has designed our marriage for the good of both of us, which means I am jealous for her affections. I don’t like even the thought of her giving her affections to another man. For this reason, anyone who threatens to steal her love from me will be met with strong opposition! This is a *good* kind of jealousy. It is the way marriage is supposed to be. This is also the way a relationship with God is supposed to be. He is infinitely good and infinitely loving, and so He calls us to love Him. This is how we experience our greatest good. God has created us for a wholehearted love relationship with Him.

So how do we grow in our experience of God’s love? By learning and obeying His Word. Here is how Jesus put it:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may

be in you, and that your joy may be full. (Jn 15:10–11)

Jesus does not tell us to learn and obey His Word out of duty but rather because it is good for us and it brings us joy. However, this is not something we experience simply by being part of a particular church or group of believers. Each of us must *personally* spend time with Jesus through His Word in order to grow in our love for Him. No one falls in love with someone else by proxy. When I go on a date with my wife, I do not ask a surrogate to go in my place, to talk to her for me, or to tell her how much I love her. That misses the point.

Christian, God has designed you to have a personal relationship with Him.

Small and Large Group Community

While our relationship with God is personal, it is not meant to be private. His words should infuse our relationships, beginning at home and expanding into everyday life. Immediately after the command to love God with all our hearts, we are given the following instructions about His words:

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:7-9)

Though some of the language is figurative—God doesn't require that we literally write Scripture on our doorposts—the point is clear: God's Word should saturate our lives and our relationships. Discipleship does not just happen when we are alone. It happens in community, both in small and large groups.

The Larger Gathering

Moses gathered the entire nation of Israel in order to teach them what God commanded (Deut 5:1). God’s people often assembled together in a large group, listened to the Word of God, and worshipped Him. This pattern continued in the New Testament, as disciples gathered together in churches for worship and to hear the Word (Acts 2:42–47; 1 Tim 4:13). Consistent attendance in corporate worship is therefore not merely a routine. God Himself designed the church to gather together in order to grow in Christ. Therefore, we must not only read the Bible on our own or attempt to live the Christian life as a lone ranger. The church is critical for our discipleship.

Smaller Groups


When Israel scattered from the larger assembly, they needed to be in smaller communities where they could learn and obey the Bible together. This aspect of discipleship starts in your home but then extends to everyday life. We all need this kind of “smaller” commu-

nity. As helpful as large group discipleship can be, it is insufficient by itself.


There is a danger, particularly in larger churches, that people will come, sit in a service, walk away, and remain anonymous. Churchgoers can live detached from the “one another” relationships found in Scripture—love one another, care for one another, serve one another, encourage one another, help one another, pray for one another, support one another, and bear with one

another (for example, see Rom 12:3–21; Eph 4:25–32). Regardless of whether it is a formal or informal time of Bible study, we need people who know us and encourage us with the Word.

In summary, every Christian should be involved in discipleship

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**REGARDLESS OF
WHETHER IT IS A FORMAL
OR INFORMAL TIME OF
BIBLE STUDY, WE NEED
PEOPLE WHO KNOW US
AND ENCOURAGE US
WITH THE WORD.**



on at least three levels: personally, in large group community, and in small group community. This is how we grow as followers of Christ and how we experience life as God intended. How are *you* doing in these three areas?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

According to this chapter, what is the way to flourish as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

2

What is the danger of “Christian community” that is not founded on and fueled by God’s Word?

3

In what ways are you tempted to treasure the gifts God has given you more than God Himself?

4

Do you have a plan to ensure that you are personally spending time being exposed to God’s Word? What does that plan look like?

5

How are you disciplined by gathering with the church weekly?



PRAYER

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

— Acts 2:1–13



— TRAIT 4 —

James Truslow Adams is credited with coining the phrase “The American Dream.” Nearly a century ago, he defined it as “a dream in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are.” In other words, you can do anything you set your mind to. With ingenuity, imagination, innovation, skill, and hard work, you can earn any degree, start any business, climb any ladder, and achieve any goal.

Hard work and high aspirations are certainly not bad, and the freedom to pursue our goals is something we should celebrate. Yet underlying Adams’s definition of The American Dream is a dangerous assumption that we may unknowingly accept, namely, that our greatest asset is our own ability.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, beckons us to die to ourselves and to rely on God, to trust in His power rather than our own. In the gospel, God confronts us with our utter inability to accomplish anything of value apart from Him. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Believing in The American Dream leads to a subtle but deadly goal: as long as we achieve *our* desires in *our* power, we will use *our* achievements for *our* own glory. In the words of Adams, we will be “recognized by others for what [we]


are.”⁸

While the goal of The American Dream is to make much of man, the goal of the gospel is to make much of God. God delights in putting us in situations where our inability is on full display, for it is then that He demonstrates His ability to do things that we could never do on our own. We do these “impossible” things in ways that make much of Him.

Unfortunately, some churches embrace a hybrid version of The

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**WHILE THE GOAL OF THE
AMERICAN DREAM IS TO
MAKE MUCH OF MAN, THE
GOAL OF THE GOSPEL IS
TO MAKE MUCH OF GOD.**



American Dream, assuming that their greatest assets are their own abilities. Not surprisingly, they end up making much of themselves. Consider, for example, the way many churches define success: you put together a great weekly performance with a great speaker and a great band in a great location (one that is comfortable and attractive), and then you add top-notch programs run

by ministry professionals for every age and stage of life. Sound familiar?

We have convinced ourselves that if we can rightly position our resources and organize our strategies, then the church can accomplish anything it sets its mind to. But missing in that picture of performances, personalities, places, programs, and professionals is desperation for the power of God. We have created an entire system for doing church that needs little, if any, assistance from the power of God. We carry on the majority of our activities every Sunday smoothly, efficiently, and successfully. But this is not the way the church is supposed to operate.

In the book of Acts, we get an amazing account of the spread of the gospel through the early church. However, it's not the wisdom or power or creativity of the early church that is put on display. God is put on display—*His* grace and *His* wisdom and *His* power. So what was the early church's role in the church's growth?

The early Christians were certainly responsible for proclaiming the gospel, but even in doing this, they were completely dependent on God's power. That's why prayer plays such an important role in the book of Acts. And it's one of the reasons prayer must play a central role in the life of the church today. A brief recap of the church's growth in the first half of Acts highlights the critical role of prayer in the spread of the gospel.

Prayer and the Spread of the Gospel

At the beginning of Acts, an unimpressive, fledgling group of believers met in a small room, and they were scared to death. Instead of plotting strategies, discussing models, or making plans, they were "devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). And in response to their prayers, God sent His powerful Spirit on the day of Pentecost (see pg. 46).

This unimpressive band of Christ-followers began speaking the gospel in different languages. This was so surprising that the first line of Peter's sermon (the first Christian sermon) was an assurance that he was not drunk. This is the same Peter who, only weeks before, had denied that he even knew Jesus. Now he, Peter, stood in front of thousands of people to proclaim Jesus, and over three thousand people believed. This power was not innate to Peter; it was the power of God.

Acts records how the power of God caused the church to explode in growth. In chapter 1, the church begins with just over 100 believers, and then in Acts 2 there are more than 3,000 believers. And all this growth takes place in one day! The new believers join the church, and immediately they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42). Then in Acts 3, Peter and John speak the name of Jesus and a forty-year-old man crippled from birth stands up to walk for the first time. Not only does he walk, but also he runs and jumps through the temple, praising God. The miracle amazes the

people and leads them to a remarkable conclusion:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

Notice: the crowds do not attribute the miracle to Peter and John's innate ability. They recognize the miracle as evidence of supernatural power at work. Jesus gets the credit.

Following this miracle, the disciples start to experience persecution in chapter 4, so they gather together to pray (vv. 23–24). They pray for boldness and power, and the moment their prayer ends, the building starts to shake (v. 31). Can you imagine your church building shaking at the end of a prayer meeting? It would either bring people back the next week or scare them off!

The disciples continue to perform many signs and wonders among the people, but in chapter 6 the church begins to get distracted. The apostles recognize this and again devote themselves to prayer (v. 4). Three verses later we find this report: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (v. 7). Once again the number of disciples multiplies in response to prayer.

In chapter 8 the church is scattered due to persecution, which serves to spread the gospel from Jerusalem to regions throughout Judea and Samaria (v. 1). Philip is led to Gaza by the Holy Spirit in order to lead an Ethiopian to Christ. In Acts 9, Saul, the most ardent persecutor of Christians, becomes a follower of Christ. In Acts 10, as Peter and Cornelius are praying in different places, racial and ethnic barriers to the spread of the gospel start to collapse. In Acts 11, the church at Antioch is founded as the future base of mission to the world. Chapter 12 begins with James beheaded and Peter put in prison. In response, the church does what it has been doing: “So Pe-


ter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5). God works as the church prays, sending an angel to Peter’s cell to break him out of jail. Once free, Peter heads to the house of Mary, where—no surprise—the church is gathered praying for him.

Acts 13 begins with a different gathering of the church (in Antioch, not in Jerusalem), but prayer was still involved. While fasting and worshipping, the church leaders are instructed by the

Spirit to send Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel to the Gentiles (v. 2). This time of worship, prayer, and fasting had enormous repercussions. It helped ignite a missions movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman empire within two and a half centuries. Today, two thousand years after this prayer meeting, over a billion Christians bear witness to Christ in almost every country of the world. Also, thirteen of the twenty-nine books in the New Testament (Paul’s letters) resulted from the ministry that was launched by this time of prayer and fasting in Antioch. Needless to say, powerful things happen when the church prays! For the remainder of the book of Acts (fifteen more chapters), Paul and others preach the gospel, and the results are astounding: people are saved, healed of diseases, healed of demon-possession, and even raised from the dead.

Do you ever look at this picture of the early church in Acts and then look around at the church today and think that something does not add up? We have the performance, the preachers, the places, and the programs, but something is missing. We have what we can manufacture, but we do not have what we need. We need the power of God at work in our lives, in our families, in our churches, in our cities, and in the world around us.

If you long for more than status quo, run-of-the-mill, mundane Christianity, then you must throw aside all dependence on your in-




***THE CHURCH THAT WANTS
TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN
THE WORLD WILL DEVOTE
ITSELF TO PRAYER.***




nate ability and all desire to make much of yourself. The church that wants to make a difference in the world will devote itself to prayer.

Only By God's Power

When we think about the importance of prayer, a natural question that arises is, "What should I pray for?" In short, pray for what can only be accomplished by the power of God.

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***PRAYER IS THE
INTERSECTION BETWEEN
OUR INABILITY AND
GOD'S ABILITY.***



Recall that the book of Acts begins with Christians sitting in an upper room, scared to death. They know they cannot follow Christ, glorify Him, and make disciples on their own. And we must acknowledge this too. God has

given us the mission of glorifying Him by making disciples and multiplying churches among all nations, but we cannot do this apart from His power. We are foolish to think otherwise.

It does not matter how large a church is, how talented, gifted, or influential the members may be, how much money is in the church's bank account, or how many resources the church owns. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit of God, a church can do nothing in the world for the glory of God. A church could be extremely small and filled with the least talented, gifted, and influential people; they could have little money and few resources; yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that tiny church could shake the nations for the glory of God.

This all sounds good, but do you really believe it? Do you believe that a church can accomplish more in the next month in the power of the Holy Spirit than it can in the next hundred years apart from His power? Do you believe that you can do more in the next week in dependence on God's Spirit than you can in your entire lifetime in dependence on yourself? We are oblivious to the depth of our inability and the wealth of God's ability. We have been fooled into thinking that our greatest asset is our strength. Our greatest

asset is our weakness, for it is when we are weak that we are most dependent on the strength of God (2 Cor 9–10). This may sound counter-intuitive, but it gets at the crux of prayer.

Prayer is the intersection between our inability and God's ability.

We pray because we need God to do something we cannot do on our own. We are desperate for His help. It's like the desperation we see from football teams when they use a play called a "Hail Mary"—a long pass thrown downfield as time is running out. A Hail Mary is only used when a team is desperate, when they are out of other options. The only hope for victory is "divine intervention." For the rest of the game, the team relies on its own resources and game plan, but in that moment of desperation, when time is running out and the game plan has failed, with no other options remaining, the team's only hope is to "throw up a prayer." What if we lived with that kind of desperation all day every day? What if we acknowledged that we were constantly and desperately in need of divine intervention? This type of desperation should characterize the lives of individual Christians and the church. We cannot do anything without the power of God, and we should not *want* to do anything without the power of God.

Too often prayer is supplemental to what we do rather than fundamental. We spend hours every day looking at our phones, watching TV, and running from place to place, but we spend so little time alone with God in prayer. Or when it comes to our families, we spend hours doing all kinds of activities with our kids or our spouse, yet we only spend minutes, if not seconds, with them in prayer. The same mindset transfers over into the church, where we pray almost as a matter of routine at the beginning or end of a meeting. Sometimes prayer is used as a transition in a corporate worship gathering. When someone says, "Let's pray," we bow our heads, but in a matter of seconds, our minds go in a thousand different directions. We do not think about Who we are talking to or Who is listening to us. We forget that we are speaking to the all-powerful King of the universe, the God whose majesty, glory, beauty, holiness, and splen-

dor outshine our wildest imaginations. How did we get so casual with prayer, and why are we so often a prayerless people?

YET COULD IT BE THAT THE GREATEST HINDRANCE TO THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL IN THE WORLD TODAY IS NOT THE SELF-INDULGENT IMMORALITY OF OUR CULTURE BUT THE SELF-SUFFICIENT MENTALITY OF THE CHURCH?

We are a prayerless people because we are a prideful people. When we do not pray, we are essentially saying, “We don’t need your help, God. We can do this without you.” Yet, could it be that the greatest hindrance to the spread of the gospel in the world today is not the self-indulgent immorality of our culture but the self-sufficient mentality of the church? And could it be that God is waiting to show His power to a people who will take Him seriously in prayer? We need to heed the words of Samuel Chadwick:

The devil fears nothing from prayerless work, prayerless studies, and prayerless religion. He laughs

at our wisdom, he mocks at our toil, but he trembles when we pray.⁹

Oh, that we would pray for what can only be accomplished by the power of God!

Solely for God’s Glory

As we pray for that which only God can accomplish, then it only makes sense that He would get the glory. A call to prayer, then, is a call to experience what can only be attributed to the glory of God.

In each description of disciples being “added” to the church in the book of Acts, the verb “added” is passive. In other words, the disciples didn’t add themselves to the church, nor did the church add new members by its own power. Acts 2:47 says, “. . . And the

Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (emphasis added). Not Peter or John, not Paul or Barnabas, but the Lord adds people to the church. God does what can only be attributed to Him.

During the 1800s, George Müller pastored a church in Bristol, England, for more than sixty years. However, Müller was best known for the orphan ministry he founded. He cared for more than ten thousand orphans over the course of his life, but he never asked for money or other resources to provide for them. He simply prayed and trusted God to provide. In fact, according to one of his journal entries, Müller’s primary purpose for starting the orphanage was not to care for orphans but to magnify the greatness of God:

If I, a poor man, simply by prayer and faith, obtained without asking any individual, the means for establishing and carrying on an Orphan-House, there would be something which, with the Lord’s blessing, might be instrumental in strengthening the faith of the children of God, besides being a testimony to the consciences of the unconverted, of the reality of the things of God. This, then, was the *primary* reason for establishing the Orphan-House.... The *first and primary object* of the work was that God might be magnified by the fact, that the orphans under my care are provided with all they need, only by prayer and faith without anyone being asked by me or my fellow-laborers whereby it may be seen, that God is faithful still, and hears prayer still.¹⁰

Müller decided to focus on prayer in such a way that it would be evident to everyone who looked at his life and ministry that God was the One who was doing it all. Faithful churches should share Müller’s motivation.

We want to see disciples made, churches multiplied, needs met, orphans cared for, the hungry fed, and unreached peoples reached. And when people ask, “How did all of that happen?” we have one response: “God did it all.” We want to experience that which can

only be attributed to the glory of our God. But if that is going to happen, then the church must be devoted to prayer. Not a prayer room or an occasional prayer time, but concentrated prayer whenever we gather—whether in small groups or large groups, on our own or with our families. Prayer must not be supplemental to our lives but fundamental to everything we do.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

How have churches in our day misunderstood success?

2

What are some signs that a church may be relying on its own abilities to carry out Christ's mission?

3

What role did prayer play in the spread of the gospel in the book of Acts?

4

How does dependence on God in prayer bring Him glory?

5

What can we do to ensure that prayer is fundamental rather than supplemental to the life and mission of our churches?



GIVING

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

— 1 Corinthians 16:1–4



— TRAIT 5 —

I live in one of the wealthiest places in the world. That is to say, I have clean water, sufficient food and clothes, a roof over my head at night, access to medicine, a mode of transportation, and the ability to read a book. So relative to billions of people in the world, I am incredibly wealthy.

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert observe how the standard of living common among Americans is extremely uncommon in human history: “At no time in history has there ever been greater economic disparity in the world than at present.” Speaking specifically about present-day Americans, they conclude, “By any measure, we are the richest people ever to walk on planet Earth.”¹¹ In other words, when most people in the world hear the word *wealthy*, they picture people like me, my neighbors, and the members of my church.

Nowhere does the Bible say that wealth is a sin, but it does give us multiple warnings about the dangers of wealth. For example:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. (1 Tim 6:9–10)

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that

are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. (James 5:1–3)

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mk 10:23)

We almost always think of wealth as a blessing, but Jesus warns us that wealth can be a barrier to the kingdom. It can keep you out of heaven.

***WE ALMOST ALWAYS
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When the Bible addresses your money, the primary concern is not your money but your heart. Jesus says your heart is always found where your treasure is (Matt 6:21). In other words, the way you spend your money is a heart issue. And because God is concerned about our hearts, He speaks often about how we use our money. We

need to listen to Him far more than we need to hear from a financial expert. For the sake of our own souls and for the health of our churches, we need a biblical perspective on giving.

Once again the early church’s practice in Acts 2 has something to teach us. Not only were these believers praying to God and learning from the apostles’ teaching, but they were also selling their possessions to help those in need (Acts 2:44–45). From the very beginning, then, the church was marked by sacrificial giving. They were not practicing socialism or communism or some other forced distribution scheme. These new Christians, with the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, saw needs in people’s lives and voluntarily sold possessions to help meet those needs. And their generosity was not a one-time act.

A few chapters later (Acts 4:32–37), Christians were selling their homes and land and bringing the money to the church. As a result of their generosity, there was not a needy person among them (vv. 34–35).

Then, years later, the church in Jerusalem was struggling in the middle of a famine. In response, the apostle Paul began collecting a love offering to take to these struggling Christians. He wrote a letter to the Corinthian church telling them about his upcoming visit and his desire to collect funds to help the church in Jerusalem. Specific instructions about this collection of funds are given in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 (see pg. 58).

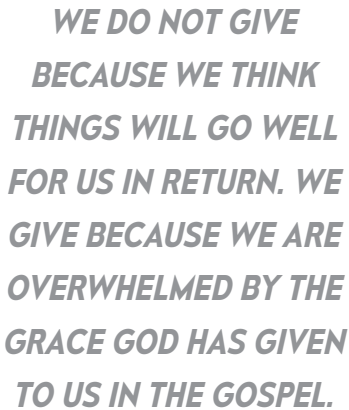
Paul's instructions to the Christians in Corinth applies also to Christians today. Whether you are a retiree, a business professional, or a student at a university, these instructions are for you. Whether you are single or married, doing well financially or struggling to make ends meet, God's instructions on giving are relevant to your life. Below we'll think of these instructions by answering some important questions about biblical giving.

Why Do We Give?

First, we give as an expression of God's worship. The church at Corinth was instructed to give "on the first day of the week" (1 Cor 16:2). The church met on Sundays to worship, and God instructed them to set aside an offering when they gathered. The church does not receive an offering on Sundays simply because it is convenient. The church receives an offering on Sundays because it has been the practice of God's people since the church was first formed nearly two thousand years ago.

Since an offering is taken each week, it can easily become a mindless routine. But what is happening is far more powerful than that. In the middle of the gathering, the church stops to acknowledge that God is Lord over its money and that He is much more valuable than gold or silver. The church gladly gives its money in worship to

God because He is more satisfying and more wonderful than anything money can buy. The offering, in other words, is an act of worship. In the midst of a materialistic world, we set aside our money and say to God, “We do not worship money . . . we worship You.” Whether it is offered in a wealthy culture or an impoverished one, Christians worship God through their giving.



***WE DO NOT GIVE
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TO US IN THE GOSPEL.***

Second, we give as the overflow of God’s grace. The word translated “gift” in verse 3 is the Greek word *charis*, which means “grace.” This passage does not demand an obligatory offering in the church but rather giving compelled by grace. We do not give because we have to but because we want to. We do not give because we think things will go well for us in return. We give because we are overwhelmed by the grace God has given to us in the gospel.

We have rebelled against the Creator of the universe, and we deserve separation from Him forever in hell. But God loves us so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to come and live the life we could not live and die the death we deserve to die. Then, three days later, Jesus rose from the grave, conquering the enemy we could not conquer. Now, through trusting in Jesus, God has graciously forgiven us of our sins and given us eternal life. His grace freely poured out on us is why we give of our money to God when the church gathers.

Who Gives?

Every follower of Jesus is called by God to give. Paul says, “. . . *each of you* is to put something aside” (v. 2, emphasis added). This letter was not written only to members of the church with a certain economic standing or financial status. It was for everybody. In the

church at Corinth, there were members at both ends of the economic spectrum, some very poor and some very wealthy, yet all were instructed to give. So also today, all Christians should give because the same grace has saved all of us, and the same Lord reigns over all of us.

Whatever God says, His people do. After all, a Christian is one who follows Christ as *Lord*. This is not a one-time decision, but rather a commitment to follow Christ as your life. Everything you have, including your possessions, plans, dreams, and even your kids, belongs to Jesus. And He has commanded His people to give.

Where Do We Give?

Christians give to and through the local church. The offering mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16 was *for* the saints at Jerusalem, and it was collected *in* the church at Corinth. Each Christian would bring his or her gifts to the church weekly, and the church would then set aside the gifts for this specific purpose.

Sometimes we have the idea that we are on our own in the Christian life, and we can each give wherever and however we want to. It is not wrong, at various times and for various reasons, to give outside the church. However, the New Testament puts a clear priority on giving *to* the church for ministry *through* the church. This is what we see the first Christians doing in the early chapters of Acts. They brought their gifts and offerings to the gathering of the church and laid them at the apostles' feet. These followers of Christ were pooling their resources for purposes far greater than any one of them could accomplish individually. Their generosity fueled unity in the church and unity between churches. This is another reminder that God has not called us to be isolated givers. We give together in the church, and as the church we decide together how that money is used.

It is important for churches to steward their resources faithfully and with integrity. Resources should be handled in a way that honors

God and the purposes for which the members have given them. Paul promised to send a love gift with those whom the church accredited by letter (vv. 3–5), for it was vital to put this gift in the hands of responsible members who would carry it to Jerusalem. Sadly, there are innumerable examples of money being misused by churches, which is why the church needs to be financially responsible, not only in terms of *what* is given, but also in terms of *how* those gifts are handled and *who* is handling them. The end goal is for Christians to give to and through the church for the support of the church, for the spread of the gospel, and for the relief of the poor.

When Do We Give?

In short, we give regularly. The expectation in the church at Corinth was that followers of Christ would give “every week” (v. 2). Now that does not mean if your paycheck comes bi-weekly or monthly that you are biblically required to space out your giving to fit a weekly schedule. But it does reveal a clear pattern: the Bible expects Christ-followers to give regularly. We do not wait for an emotional appeal to come our way or for a bonus check to land in our lap, nor do we give sporadically based on whether we *feel* like we can afford it. Regardless of what our financial situation is, we should regularly put something aside to give.

How Much Do We Give?

Paul knew different members of the church had prospered (or not prospered) financially in different ways, and so he instructs them to give accordingly (v. 2). But that still doesn’t tell us *how much* to give. Some Christians claim that we are supposed to give a fixed percentage, such as a tithe; others claim that Christians are no longer obligated to give a specific amount. To answer this question, we need to consider its Old Testament background.

The word “tithe” means “a tenth,” and in the Old Testament

tithes were given to support God's people, Israel (Lev 27:30; Num 18:21–24; Deut 14:22–23, 28–29). Keep in mind that Old Testament Israel was unique. They were not simply a spiritual community, like the church is today; they were also a political nation, so some of the funds they would collect were similar to what we would classify as taxes today. For example, God commanded the Israelites to give a tithe of all the produce of their land and flocks (Lev 27:30), which would be used to support the priests and the Levites who worked at the temple (Num 18:21–24). A second tithe was taken to support festivals and celebrations among God's people (Deut 14:22–23). In the third year, another tithe was taken that would be distributed not only to the Levites but also to the poor, the marginalized, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widows (Deut 14:28–29). When you add it up, the Israelites gave about 20% of their yearly income, and then every three years they gave another 10%. The average, then, came to about 23% per year, and even that was not the total sum of their giving. The tithes were only a portion.

The Old Testament also describes a firstfruits offering, a presentation of the best of the year's harvest to God (Ex 23:16; 34:22; Lev 19:23–25; Num 15:20–21). Then, in addition to the tithe and firstfruits offerings, the Israelites were given instructions for freewill offerings. Freewill offerings were voluntary contributions that went above and beyond tithes and firstfruits offerings (Ex 35:29; 36:3–7; Deut 12:5–7). In sum, then, the tithe was just the beginning point. It was a floor, not a ceiling. There was no ceiling.

As we think about giving as an important trait of a biblical church, it's also important to remember that Israel's tithes and offerings had a purpose. God was training His people to put Him first in their lives, as they were constantly reminded that the first and last (and everything in between) ultimately belonged to God. These tithes were also the means of God's provision for His people. God provided for the priests, for His people's worship, and for the poor and needy. These tithes were reasons to celebrate God's blessings.

Giving in the Old Testament was never intended to be a du-

tiful, dreary set of offerings that weighed down God's people. It was, instead, an opportunity to gladly acknowledge the Giver of all good gifts. When, for example, Moses encouraged the people to bring freewill offerings for the building of the tabernacle, the people brought more than was needed—so much more that Moses had to command them to stop because they were giving too much (Ex 36:6–7)!

In the New Testament, we do not find a specific command to tithe. Instead, we see many examples of giving that go beyond the tithe. Jesus says, “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy” (Lk 12:33). He tells one man to sell every single thing he has (Lk 18:22), and in the very next chapter, a new follower of Christ gives away over half of his possessions (Lk 19:8). And, as we've already seen, the early church in Acts did what Jesus said to do: they sold their possessions and belongings and distributed the proceeds to the needy (Acts 2:45; 4:34–35). Moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament, then, we see expanded giving, not diminished giving. This makes sense when we remember what compels us to give, namely, the overflow of God's grace. If people were compelled to give generously before Jesus came, then it would not make sense for people to give less generously *after* Jesus came, died on the cross, and rose from the grave. It makes complete sense, though, that we would now give more than God's people gave in the Old Testament.

If you're still wondering where to begin, then *start* your giving with a tithe. Some, due to serious financial difficulties, may need to take some steps over time to get to that point, but the general practice for Christians should be to at least start their giving with a tithe. Tithing honors a biblical principle, one that the Old Testament explained, Jesus endorsed, and the early church practiced. Jesus, while rebuking and denouncing the religious leaders, commended their giving of the tithe (Lk 11:42). The early Christians also commended the practice of tithing. Consider the testimony of Irenaeus, an early defender of the Christian faith:

The Jews were constrained to a regular payment of tithes; Christians, who have liberty assign all their possessions to the Lord, bestowing freely not the lesser portions of their property, since they have the hope of greater things.¹²

A few hundred years later, Augustine reported how tithing was still practiced:

Tithes are required as a matter of debt, and he who has been unwilling to give them has been guilty of robbery. Whosoever, therefore, desires to secure a reward for himself . . . let him render tithes, and out of the nine parts let him seek to give alms.¹³

For the first 400 years, the church considered the practice of tithing a minimum standard for giving.


Consider the effect of tithing on your heart. Part of the original purpose of the tithe was to remind God's people that everything they had came from God and ultimately belonged to Him. We too need the reminder that our money is not really ours. It is God's—all of it. And every one of us is going to stand before God to give an account for how we have used the money He has given us. Tithing is a weapon in the battle against materialism in our hearts.


Again, do not let tithing be the finish line but rather the starting block. As the Lord prospers, resist the temptation to live more comfortably and accumulate more luxuries. We are programmed by our culture to think that whatever salary we make, we should live at that level (or beyond). As our salaries rise, so does our standard of living. But this kind of thinking is unbiblical. It may be The American Dream, but it is not the biblical truth.

The Bible says godliness with contentment is “great gain” (1 Tim 6:6). Therefore, live a life of contentment, and as God gives you more, give more away. God gives us more money not so that we can increase our standard of living, but so that we can increase our standard of giving.

What Happens When We Give?

When we solicit financial advice, we look for the closest thing possible to a guarantee. We want to make sure that our money


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STANDARD OF LIVING,
BUT SO THAT WE CAN
INCREASE OUR STANDARD
OF GIVING.***



will bring a good return. If you give in obedience to Scripture, then you have at least three guarantees. First, your heart will be changed. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21). If you spend your money on the things of this world, then that is where your heart will be. But if you spend your money on the things of God, then your heart will be with Him and the things that honor Him. Second, giving

guarantees that the church will be edified. As we give to the church and through the church, the church is further strengthened to become that which God designed it to be. Third, giving guarantees that God will be glorified. How do we fight the idolatry of money in our culture and the love of money in our hearts? We give as God has called us to give.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

*Why are we so quick to associate
wealth with blessing?*

2

*According to the New Testament, what's
the danger of pursuing wealth?*

3

*What are some stumbling blocks that
hinder your giving?*

4

*Why is it important that we think about
giving primarily through the local church?*

5

*What are some ways we can fight the love
of money in our hearts?*



MEMBERSHIP

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

— 1 Corinthians 12:12–27



— TRAIT 6 —

I was a junior in high school and had little success on the relationship front. Truth be told, I had no success on the relationship front, not until this one girl came to church camp. Word spread around camp that she thought I was cute, and I thought, “Wow . . . a girl thinks I’m cute!” I started talking to her and eventually got up enough nerve to ask her to go out with me and some friends. She said yes, and we started dating, mostly in settings where we would hang around with our friends. Everything was going well until one phone conversation.

I decided I was tired of having to talk on the phone every night, so I told her that God, my family, and my schoolwork were more important to me than her. She was not thrilled at my priorities, and our dating experience came to an abrupt end. I was fine with the relationship ending, that is, until she started dating a close friend of mine, at which point I wondered what in the world I was thinking. I blew it. That moment of realization began the process of getting to know this girl all over again, becoming best friends with her, and eventually marrying her.

It is often said that Christians approach church attendance like dating relationships. In our contemporary church culture, we hop from one church to the next based on how we feel on that particular Sunday morning. We attend one church one week and a different church the next. Being a Christian is what matters most; we are part

of the global church, after all. Why would we need to commit our lives to one local church? What's the point of becoming a member—to vote in business meetings? That certainly doesn't seem worth it, so we end up dating a church (or multiple churches) for years, never really making a commitment.

REASONS WHY WE DATE THE CHURCH

1. We are independent people who live in a very individualistic culture.
2. We are indecisive.
3. We are immature in our faith.
4. We have an incomplete view of the church.
5. We are inundated.
6. We are indifferent to the church.

There are a lot of reasons why we date the church. At least six are worth noting.

1. We date the church because we are independent people who live in a very individualistic culture.

We are self-made, self-reliant, and self-sufficient. The thought of mutual commitment, submission, accountability, and interdependence in a church seems foreign and frightening

to us. A lot of us are skeptical: if we have experienced hurt at a church in the past or been burned in some way, then we may be guarded. Many of us are skeptical of *all* institutions these days. We look around at the world and see scandals, corruption, and abuse, including inside the church, which makes the thought of commitment to an institution feel scary. In the end, we like our independence, so we keep our distance.

2. We date the church because we are indecisive.

We cannot decide which church we really like. We apply the consumer mentality to the church, shopping for the best package for the best price on Sunday morning. We like the music at one church but not the preaching. Or we like the preaching but not the programs for our kids. We are always looking for a better deal, which often leads to a critical attitude toward the church. We can find something wrong with every church we visit, and even when we

begin to settle down in one place, we keep a mental list of the things we do not like.

3. We date the church because we are immature in our faith.

Oddly enough, I have often heard people use their supposed maturity in the faith to explain why they date the church. They believe they can grow in Christ and accomplish more on their own. Some even admit, “I love Christ . . . I just can’t stand the church.” But the Bible calls the church the bride of Christ (Rev 19:7; Eph 5:23). Imagine walking up to a husband and saying, “I like you, but I can’t stand your wife.” He probably would not receive that well. The Bible also calls the church the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27). What if a wife said to her husband, “Honey, you know I love you, but have I ever told you that I can’t stand your body?”

4. We date the church because our view of the church is incomplete.

Sometimes the church is reduced to a place where you simply sit and listen to a sermon. We ignore the many other ways God has designed the church for our good, as well as the many ways we can be useful in serving others and in obeying the Great Commission. With such a truncated view, it’s little wonder that we don’t feel compelled to invest our lives in a body of believers.

5. We date the church because we are inundated.

Church gets choked out because our lives are tied up with all sorts of events, obligations, etc. Whether it’s our job or our kids’ travel sports teams, we feel pressure to get other things done. Committing time to the church just seems like too much for our already busy lives.

6. We date the church because we are indifferent to the church.

Many have never really thought about why committing themselves to a local church is important. Churches have contributed to this indifference by treating church membership as insignificant. But it

hasn't always been this way. There have been times in church history when membership in the church was highly valued and extremely important.

So what does it really mean to be a member of a local church? Is it something more than the ability to vote in a meeting? If so, many people are uninterested in that kind of commitment. The

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THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST ARE NOT CHURCH AVOIDERS OR ATTENDERS, HOPPERS OR SHOPPERS; FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST ARE CHURCH MEMBERS.

name of the game in the church today is to make it as easy as possible for people to follow Christ and be members. According to many church growth experts, the last thing the church should talk about is church membership, that is, unless it hopes to *decrease* in size. But this kind of thinking is out of step with God's Word.

The Bible teaches that committing yourself to meaningful membership in a local church is critical to your life as a

follower of Christ. Commitment to a church should be a high priority, a priority that shapes your other priorities. It should shape the way you think about work and sports and a million other things. Amidst busy lives and families, commitment to the church is designed by God to be a revolutionary reality.

Expectations of Church Membership

The Bible teaches that followers of Christ are not church avoiders or attenders, hoppers or shoppers; followers of Christ are church members. We see the importance of church membership in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 (see pg. 70). In these sixteen verses, Christians are referred to as a “member” or “part” of Christ's body thirty-six times, with each individual having an important function in the overall life of the body. And this is not simply about the global church. The Bible has a number of expectations when it comes to followers of

Christ and the *local* church.

The Bible expects followers of Christ to identify with and belong to a local church.

The primary word for church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which means “gathering.” The church is a gathering of believers. Though there are times when the New Testament refers to all Christians as the (global)

“church,” most of the time this word refers to a specific group of Christians in a particular location. Out of the 114 times we see *ekklesia* in the New Testament, at least 90 of them refer to specific local groups of believers. For example, Paul writes to “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2), a reference to a specific group of believers in Corinth. In Romans 16 Paul refers to his fellow workers Prisca and Aquila, and he sends greetings to “the church in their house” (v. 5). In the book of Revelation, Jesus writes letters to seven churches, that is, seven letters specifically addressed to Christians who are members of local churches.

Notice that the Bible calls these local gatherings of believers in particular places “churches,” not “parts of the church.” Each local gathering is a church. The Bible expects followers of Christ to identify with and belong to a local church. While local churches are part of the global church, there is clearly a distinction between the two. Therefore, as we read through the New Testament, we should find ourselves asking a question: “Which local church am I a member of?”

The Bible expects followers of Christ to be served by and submissive to local church leaders.

In the book of Hebrews, Christians are given this command:

MEMBERSHIP EXPECTATIONS

1. Identify with and belong to a local church.
2. Be served by and submissive to local church leaders.
3. Yearn for and yield to local church accountability.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb 13:17).

A pastor preaching on this verse could sound self-serving or authoritarian, but that would ignore the second part of this verse: “They [church leaders] are keeping watching over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Each pastor will stand before God to give an account for the people he leads. But notice: he will not be responsible for every believer in the global church spread out around the world. He will give an account for the members of his local church (see also Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:2–3). This is one reason why it is very important for pastors to know who the members of their church are.

On the other hand, God’s Word commands every follower of Christ to obey and submit to church leaders (Heb 13:17). This doesn’t mean Christians are obligated to obey and submit to every church leader in the global body of Christ. Rather, we are supposed to obey and submit to the pastors of our own local churches. In order to carry out this biblical command, we need to identify with a church led by pastors who teach God’s Word.

The Bible expects followers of Christ to yearn for and yield to local church accountability.

There was a member of the church in Corinth who was having an affair with his stepmom. Even though the Bible condemned this man’s actions as sinful, he refused to repent. Paul instructed the church to “remove him from among you” (1 Cor 5:2). He then wrote, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor 5:12–13). It’s worth noting that some people were identified as being “inside” the church while others were “outside” the church. Some were members, and

others were not members. If a member of the church continues in willful, blatant, deliberate sin, then he or she needs to be removed from membership in the church. Jesus Himself taught this (Matt 18:15–17).

Followers of Jesus should yearn for and yield to accountability like this in a church. If I am tempted to wander off into unrepentant sin in a way that will destroy my life, my marriage, my family, and the reputation of Christ, then I want brothers and sisters in Christ who will warn me not to go that way. I yearn for a church that will love me enough to call me back whenever I wander away from Christ, which I am prone to do in my sinfulness. Part of the biblical definition of being a member of a church is a commitment to carry out this responsibility with others and to pursue others in love. This is one of the clearest ways we care for one another in the body of Christ.

Members of the church are not just accountable to each other, but we are also accountable before God. Church members are accountable for choosing and appointing leaders who honor God and are good for the church (Acts 6:2–6); for making sure the gospel is being preached in the church (Gal 1:6–9; 2 Tim 4:1–2); for commissioning missionaries to be sent out from the church (Acts 13:1–3). These expectations fly in the face of American individualism, our skepticism, and many other assumptions in our contemporary church culture. They force us to ask, not just where my name is on a church roll or where I attend corporate worship, but rather, *Where am I committed to gathering every week with a group of believers? Where am I mutually submitting to the Word of God and to others? Where am I taking responsibility for helping other members grow in faith?* That is what it means to be a church member.

Outcomes of Church Membership

By God's design, the church is made up of members who are committed to one another. He has not designed the church to be an

event where we passively sit and watch a stage together and then move on to everyday life on our own. The church is designed by God to be a community that shares the gospel together, makes disciples together, prays together, gives together, hurts together, laughs together, and shares life together.

Membership is not primarily about voting or attending a meeting but rather about being committed to a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. God desires for every follower of Christ to experience this kind of meaningful membership in a local church. So what happens once we commit to the church rather than date it?

You experience God's love in your life.

Right after Paul's description of the church as a body (1 Cor 12) comes one of the greatest chapters in the Bible on love (1 Cor 13). Love follows membership because this kind of love is experienced in the context of life with other members of the body of Christ. Your life and your experience of God's love are incomplete without the body of Christ around you. The whole point of the body imagery is that on your own, without other members of the body of Christ around you, you are like a hand without a foot or an eye without an ear (1 Cor 12:14–20). God designed the local church to be a place where you experience the fullness of His love in your life.

Other Christians experience God's love through your life.

Christianity is not just about you. You are designed by God to love others in committed community, and you are critical to this kind of community in a church. Your church without you might be hand-less, foot-less, ear-less, or eye-less. Do not underestimate the role every follower of Christ has in the church. God has designed your participation in the church to be a reflection of His love for others.

Non-Christians see God's love for them.

Jesus said, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). God has designed our communi-

ty in the church to be a display of His love in the world. When the world sees the sacrificial love God's people have for one another, they will be drawn to Christ. Unfortunately, that is often *not* what the world sees in the church. We want to love one another so well that non-Christians will look at our local churches and see the power of God's love at work.

God receives the glory He deserves.

God's glory is displayed most clearly not through your individual commitment to Christ, but through a community's commitment to Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, God is calling a people,

not just individuals, to Himself. In the New Testament, we find that Christ did not only die for you and me, but for the church (Eph 5:25).

How will we display the glory of the One who sacrificed His life for the church if we sacrifice nothing for the church? How will we display the beauty of the bride of Christ if all we do is date the church, constantly looking for something better to come along, something that appeals more to our preferences? Your purpose in the world is so much larger than your individual life. You were made for a community that is united together in Christ in order to take on the world with the gospel. This community is made up of people with different backgrounds, gifts, skills, and passions, and they all come together in Christ to display His greatness to a watching world.

Why would any follower of Christ not want to be committed to this kind of community? Leave church-dating behind and commit yourself to a local body of Christ where you can lock arms with other disciples for the glory of Jesus in the world.



***DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE
THE ROLE EVERY
FOLLOWER OF CHRIST
HAS IN THE CHURCH.***



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Respond to the following statement: “I don’t need to be a member of a local church because I am part of the global church.”

2

What did commitment to the local church look like in the New Testament?

3

Why is it essential for church members to submit to their church’s leadership?

4

In your experience, why are people hesitant to commit to a local church?

5

How has membership in a local church strengthened your faith? Make a list.



ORDINANCES

Now when they heard this [Peter's proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. — Acts 2:37–41

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come. — 1 Corinthians 11:17–34



— TRAIT 7 —

Mention the word “ordinance” in the church today and you’re likely to get some puzzled looks. The word is usually associated with something handed down by a local government. However, the word “ordinance” simply means “prescribed practice,” and in the context of the church it refers to a practice that God has prescribed for His people. The two ordinances we see in the Bible are baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Many churches downplay the importance of these ordinances, but as we’ll see, practicing baptism and the Lord’s Supper are important aspects of what it means to be a New Testament church. We see this in the practice of the early church in Acts 2:37–41 (see pg. 82). For example, after Jesus ascended to heaven, He sent His Spirit to His people, and His people started to proclaim the gospel. As soon as the first Christian converts put their faith in Christ, they were baptized (v. 41). Then these new believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (vv. 42–47). Many biblical scholars believe the reference to the “breaking of bread” (v. 42) includes the Lord’s Supper, which was a regular part of the church’s gathering. At the outset, then, believers were baptized and they celebrated the Lord’s Supper together. The church has continued to practice these two ordinances ever since. We’ll begin by looking at baptism.

Baptism

Baptism is a public demonstration of our initial identification with Christ and His church. This is not something you do alone. Baptism is a public act. It is also an initial act, for baptism was part of the invitation to follow Christ. The crowds were instructed to



**BAPTISM IS A PUBLIC
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repent and be baptized in the name of Christ (Acts 2:38). Being baptized in Christ's "name" (Acts 8:16; 10:48; and 19:5) points to identification with Him and His church. The church is the community of men and women who are identified with the name of Jesus. Below we'll consider more of the Bible's teaching on baptism by answering some basic questions.

Why should I be baptized?

The Bible gives us several reasons to be baptized. First, we are to be baptized in order to *follow the example of Christ*. Christ's baptism is recounted in Matthew 3:13–17:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Baptism is a picture of repentance and turning from sin, but Jesus was sinless and had no need to repent. What He did that day in the Jordan River served as an example of righteousness to all who

would follow Him. Jesus was identifying with all those who would repent of their sins and trust in Him. See the gravity of grace and humility here: Jesus identifies with sinners like you and me, even though He has no sin.

Second, we should be baptized in order to *obey the command of Christ*. Jesus’s ministry starts at His own baptism in Matthew 3 and ends with His command to baptize in the Great Commission. He commissioned His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). This command from Christ is why everyone who places their faith in Christ in the book of Acts was baptized—everyone without exception. How can a Christian carry out the commission to share the gospel and lead people to be baptized if he is not baptized himself? Baptism is an obedience issue for every follower of Christ. If you are a follower of Christ and have not been baptized, then you are disobeying God.

Third, we are baptized in order to *unite with the body of Christ*. Here’s how Paul talks about the unity that believers share:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:4–6)

An unbaptized member of the church is an oxymoron. Baptism is a prescribed practice for uniting believers in the church, and it contradicts that unity to say that we have one Lord and one faith but not one baptism. We are unified and identified, not only with Christ, but also with the church.

What is the meaning of baptism?

The meaning of baptism is multifaceted. First, it is important to see it as *a celebration of the grace of Christ*. Baptism is not necessary for salvation, but it is very important for our relationship with Christ.

Some belief systems, including Catholicism, teach that one is justified before God by faith *and* by works, including baptism.¹⁴ But that is not what the Bible teaches. A simple look at the thief on the cross



**WHEN SOMEONE IS
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CHRIST.**

makes this plain. He was not baptized, but he did go to be with Jesus in paradise (Lk 23:43).

Baptism does not earn God's grace in salvation, otherwise it would completely undercut the biblical idea of grace. We are saved from our sin by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and baptism is a *physical* celebration of that *spiritual* transformation.

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”
(Rom 6:3–4).

Immediately preceding these verses on baptism, Paul reminds us that Jesus died on a cross as a substitute for our sins and that He rose from the grave as our Savior. Baptism is a celebration of Jesus's saving work. When someone is baptized, they are not being made right before God; they are celebrating the reality that they have been made right before God through Christ.

Baptism is also an *illustration of the gospel of Christ*. Romans 6:3–4 teaches us that baptism is a picture, which means it is not your salvation. It is a representation of your salvation. When we go into the water, we show our identification with the death of Christ for our sins. We illustrate the fact that we are no longer slaves to sin but are now dead to it. Yet, we do not stay underwater for long because Jesus did not stay in the grave for long. When we come up

out of the water, we show our identification with the resurrection of Christ. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, we have been raised to live a new life. Baptism is a glorious illustration of the grace we have received in Jesus Christ.

Finally, baptism is a *declaration of the glory of Christ*. When Paul talks about baptism in Colossians 2:11–15, he says that Jesus took our sins away and made a public spectacle of the spiritual forces of evil. So when we are baptized, we are proclaiming Christ’s glory and supremacy in the church, which is why we love celebrating baptism.

How should I be baptized?

You would get different answers to this question depending on who you asked in church history. Some of my greatest heroes in the faith would disagree with one another on the answer to this question. This is why we must take an honest look at Scripture to discern what it says. I write this humbly, for I am not saying that some of my heroes in Christian history ignored Scripture, nor am I saying that anyone who comes to a different conclusion than me is ignoring Scripture. Nevertheless, the goal is to look to Scripture to see how Christians were baptized then (and how they should be baptized now). And when we do, we see that the most biblical mode of baptism is immersion.

Almost all biblical scholars would agree that the Greek word for baptism (*baptizo*) predominantly means “to immerse, submerge, or dunk.” This is how John the Baptist got his name; he was John the Baptizer, or John the dunker. The case for immersion is bolstered when we consider the precedent of Christ. He “went up from the water . . .” (Matt 3:16). Jesus was not sprinkled with water nor was it poured over him. The pattern of early church leaders also strengthens the case for immersion. For example, Philip did not go into the water to get a cup and bring it back to the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip and the eunuch “went down into the water” and then they “came up out of the water” (Acts 8:38–39), with the eunuch emerging as a new believer.

Baptism is a picture of the gospel, and the gospel is most clearly portrayed through immersion. There are certainly situations where, for physical or other reasons, a follower of Christ is not able to get in and out of water, but even then we would still want to baptize them as closely as possible to the biblical pattern in order to carry out the purpose of baptism. The biblical precedent, pattern, and picture is immersion.

Who should be baptized?

The Bible teaches that everyone who has been born again should be baptized. The key word is “again.” Baptism is not just for everyone who has been born but for those who have been born again (Jn 3:3–8; 1:13). This is different from what my Presbyterian brothers and sisters say about baptism. They believe the same gospel that I believe, yet they baptize infants soon after birth. But, as we’ve already seen, baptism is an act of obedience to the command of Christ; it unites us with the body of Christ, celebrates the grace of Christ, and identifies us with Christ and His church. None of these things are possible without faith in Christ. Infants do not have saving faith. Saving faith can only come when we are born again, when we become followers of Christ.

When should I be baptized?

You should be baptized *as soon as you trust in Christ for salvation*. In Acts, believers were normally baptized immediately (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12–13, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 11:16; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 22:16). Baptism is not something you grow into; it is something you do when you trust in Christ for salvation. And once you are baptized as a believer in Christ, you never need to get baptized again. Sometimes people use the phrase “re-baptized,” or they say “I need to be baptized again” when they come to the realization that they were baptized prior to placing their faith in Christ. But if that is the case, then those people were not really “baptized” as followers of Christ. The Bible knows nothing of “re-baptism.” Baptism is a believer’s ini-

tial identification with Christ, and it happens once, soon after you trust in Christ for salvation.


The fact that baptism should occur soon after you put your trust in Christ does not mean you should find the nearest swimming pool and ask a friend to baptize you under the watchful care of a lifeguard. Baptism is not only a public demonstration of your initial identification with Christ, but it is also a public demonstration of your identification with the church. You should be baptized *as soon as you can best publicly proclaim your salvation*. Let the church know of your desire to be baptized. The church, in turn, should walk you through a process that explains baptism and ensures that you are ready for it.

There are many followers of Christ who have not been baptized, and they will give you many reasons for their reluctance to follow through on this ordinance. However, none of those reasons outweigh what God says in His Word. God calls His people to publicly declare that they belong to Jesus, and the most important and fundamental way they do this is through baptism. You might think of baptism like a wedding ring. At my wedding, I stood at an altar next to my wife, and we pledged our lives to each other and exchanged rings. My wedding ring is not my marriage, but it is a picture of my marriage. My ring is also a declaration that says to every person I meet, "I belong to her." In a much deeper way, the God of the universe has pursued you with a passion that resulted in Him sending His Son to die for your sins. Through Christ's death and resurrection, God has forgiven your sin and united you with Himself. Now, through baptism, He has given the church a practice and a picture that tells the world, "We belong to Him." When you are baptized, you celebrate the grace that God has freely given you, you illustrate the gospel, and you proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord. This identifies you with God's people and lets the world know of God's goodness.


So why would any follower of Christ *not* want to be baptized?

The Lord's Supper

In addition to baptism, God has given His church another ordinance, the Lord's Supper. *The Lord's Supper is a public celebration*

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**THE LORD'S SUPPER IS A
PUBLIC CELEBRATION
OF OUR CONTINUAL
IDENTIFICATION WITH
CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.**



of our continual identification with Christ and His church. Unlike baptism, the Lord's Supper is not something we do once but rather something we do over and over again. If baptism is like a wedding ceremony that celebrates initial identification with Christ, then the Lord's Supper is like an anniversary celebration where we renew our vows

continually before God.

We have been given specific instructions about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 (see pg. 82). It is also called “communion” (see the idea of “participation” in 1 Cor 10:16), the “Lord's Table” (1 Cor 10:21), and “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42; 20:7). Jesus celebrated this meal with His disciples before He went to the cross (Lk 22:14–23), the early church celebrated the meal on a consistent basis (Acts 2:42; 20:7), and Paul reminded the church of its significance (1 Cor 11:23–32). Therefore, it's worth answering some important questions about how the Lord's Supper should be celebrated.

Who should participate in the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper is only intended for followers of Christ. Jesus shared this meal with His disciples, and it was the church in Corinth—not the community at large—that received instructions on how the Supper should be administered. However, restricting this meal to believers is not a case of the church being inhospitable. The bread and the cup symbolize Christ's death, so it only makes sense that those who partake would be those who have put their trust in the One who gave Himself for our sins. In that sense, the meal clearly distinguishes who is and who isn't a part of God's family. At the same time, we hope that God will use this celebration to

open the eyes of unbelievers as they see God's people partaking of the elements and rejoicing in the sacrificial love of Christ.

Where should we have the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper should be taken during the gathering of the church (rather than another type of gathering or in solitude). Four different times in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul talks about the church *coming together* (vv. 18, 20, 33, 34). The Lord's Supper is not something we do alone, privately; it is something we do together, publicly.

When should we have the Lord's Supper?

Scripture does not give an explicit answer as to when the Lord's Supper should be taken, nor does it command certain intervals of time between celebrations. It simply says that "as often" as we take it we are to remember the Lord's death and proclaim His coming (1 Cor 11:25–26). It was the practice of Christ-followers in the first century to observe the Lord's Supper often. Though Scripture does not command this, Acts 20:7 implies that the disciples in Troas observed the Lord's Supper weekly. Some Christians wonder if celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly would cause it to feel too routine. That's possible, but the same rationale could be used to forbid weekly singing, preaching, or praying. As the only act of worship for which the church has received specific instructions, the Lord's Supper should be a central component in our worship. We should anticipate it eagerly, not as a special event every once in a while, but as a regular component of our continual identification with Christ and His church in worship.

What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?

Unfortunately, there has been a lot of confusion and division over what happens during the Lord's Supper. *A traditional misunderstanding is that the Lord's Supper is a change of substance (in the elements) that results in salvation.* The big theological term for this false teaching is *transubstantiation*, which is the official Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper. According to the Roman Cath-

olic Church, in the Eucharist (or Mass) the bread and wine actually *become* the body and blood of Christ. For centuries, no one but the priest was allowed to drink from the cup because they feared that the blood of Christ would be spilled. This teaching that the body and blood of Christ is actually present in the elements raises the stakes, for if Christ is literally present in the elements, then to receive communion is to receive Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us.”¹⁵ And for the one who partakes of the body and blood of Christ, communion “. . . increases union with the Lord, forgives his venial sins, and preserves him from grave sins.”¹⁶ To take the meal is to receive Christ and obtain forgiveness. “As sacrifice, the Eucharist is offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead (and) to obtain spiritual or temporal benefits from God.”¹⁷

How you view the Lord’s Supper is key to a biblical understanding of the gospel and salvation. If we see the Lord’s Supper as a means by which we actually receive Christ’s salvation, then we are fundamentally altering the gospel.

On the other hand, *a biblical understanding is that the Lord’s Supper is a symbolic meal that reflects salvation.* When Jesus said, “This is my body,” He meant that the bread represented His body (1 Cor 11:24). When He said this to His disciples, His body was still present in front of them, and His blood was still in His veins. Nothing in Scripture would lead us to believe that the elements actually became Christ’s body and blood in a way that we receive Him and His forgiveness simply through eating and drinking in the Lord’s Supper. However, in an attempt to make clear that Christ is not physically present in the bread and the cup, we need to be careful that we do not go too far and treat the Lord’s Supper as if Christ is not present at all. He is present in a very real way.

Why should we celebrate the Lord’s Supper?

As we take the Lord’s Supper, *we remember the body and blood of*

Jesus. At the core, the Lord's Supper is about remembering (1 Cor 11:24–25). When we eat the bread, we remember the body of Jesus. We remember that God (the Son) became a man, suffered as a man, and died as a man. We remember His body given for us. Then, when we take the cup, we remember the blood that has covered all our sins. We remember the price Jesus paid so that we could be forgiven of our sins.

This ordinance is not about imagining something in our minds but about remembering real events in history. It is not about dreaming but about deliberately directing our thoughts back two thousand years to a body given and to blood shed on a cross. It is about remembering the past with such vividness that it affects the present.

We reflect on our sin and God's forgiveness.

God's Word warns us not to come to the Lord's table in a callous or careless manner (1 Cor 11:27–32). We are to come humbly as we reflect on our need for Christ. "Examine yourself" (2 Cor 13:5): lay your heart, life, thoughts, motives, words, and actions before a holy God. If we are not willing to be honest before God, He will expose our sin. We will eat and drink "judgment" upon ourselves, and we may even lose our lives because God will discipline us as a loving parent (1 Cor 11:29–30). Therefore, we must not take the Lord's Supper lightly, nor should we let our unbelieving children eat the bread and drink the cup just to keep them from whining when the elements are passed. Our children need to see the seriousness of this ordinance. Before you eat and drink, reflect on every area of your life that is not pure, holy, and honoring before God. But don't get paralyzed by fear.

Let your reflection on your sin lead you to reflect on God's forgiveness. As you confess your sin and the Lord brings to mind areas of disobedience, let the Lord's Supper remind you of Christ covering your sin with His grace. The Lord's Supper comes alive as we feast on Jesus's forgiveness and faithfulness.

We renew our commitment to Christ, each other, and His mission.

We do not take the Lord's Supper to earn salvation before God, but we do surrender our lives anew to God. When you take the bread and the cup, you testify again that you belong to Jesus, that He is your Savior and Lord, and that you want to follow Him. In 1 Corinthians 11, people thought that if they ate the food and drank from the cup, God would be pleased with them, even though their lives did not reflect commitment to Christ. They missed the whole point. Participation in the Lord's Supper should mirror commitment to the Lord's commands.

In the Lord's Supper, we also renew our commitment to each other. The Lord's Supper is an expression of our unity together in Christ. The Christians in Corinth missed this. When they were getting together, the rich were gorging themselves and even getting drunk, while the poor were going without food (vv. 17–22). Paul reminded them that the church is a body, and when they come together around the table as a body, there should not be racial, social, or economic barriers between them. At the Lord's Table, the plane is level: no one gets preferential treatment. If there are barriers between you and another believer in the body, then you should go and be reconciled to that believer before participating in the Lord's Supper.


Not only do we renew our commitment to Christ and to each other in the Lord's Supper, but we also renew our commitment to Christ's mission. The Lord's Supper is a proclamation of Christ's death "until he comes" (v. 26). We are not just eating and drinking; we are proclaiming. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim that we are a people bought from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

We rejoice because Jesus has set us free and is coming back.

The Lord's Supper is often viewed as a solemn and sober practice, and to some extent, it should be that way. We do not want to treat it casually. It involves time in self-examination, but it does not stop with serious contemplation. We should not think about our sin

and then walk out of the service engrossed in how horrible we are. Instead, we should feast on God’s forgiveness and the freedom we have from the penalty and power of sin in our lives. This leads us to rise to our feet rejoicing! The Lord’s Supper should be the happiest meal we ever celebrate. Jesus has set us free, and He is coming back to get us.

We will not celebrate the Lord’s Supper the same way forever. We will only do so until Christ’s return (v. 26). Jesus told His disciples, “For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Lk 22:18). In the Lord’s Supper, we do not just look back; we also look forward. We look forward to the day when Jesus will return for His people, and we will drink this cup together with Him in His kingdom. Amidst the hurts and difficulties in your life—your struggles with sin, sorrow, and pain—the Lord’s Supper is a reminder that those things will one day be no more. What better reason could there be to rejoice?



THE LORD’S SUPPER
SHOULD BE THE HAPPIEST
MEAL WE EVER
CELEBRATE.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

What is an ordinance? What two ordinances should the church observe?

2

If baptism does not save you, then does that make it unimportant? Explain your answer.

3

What's wrong with taking the Lord's Supper by yourself?

4

What is the danger of seeing the Lord's Supper as a special event that only happens occasionally?

5

What's wrong with taking the Lord's Supper while holding on to sin in your life? What's wrong with taking the Lord's Supper in a manner that is joyless?



FELLOWSHIP

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. — Romans 12:1–21



— TRAIT 8 —

Regardless of whether we're talking about a "mega-church" made up of thousands of people at different campuses or a small church made up of a few dozen people in a single room, every church has members that remain on the fringe. These are people who don't have close relationships with other church members. No one is praying regularly for them by name, nor can anyone care for their needs because no one knows what is going on in their lives. Not surprisingly, they wouldn't feel comfortable confessing their sins and struggles to anyone in the church. These members on the fringe may have a full bank account, but they are poor in terms of their relationships within the body of Christ.

Do you know anyone like that in *your* church? Or does that describe *you*?

Living an isolated existence within the church is, or at least it should be, an oxymoron. God has designed for His people to live in close community with one another. This is what biblical fellowship is all about. Unfortunately, though, biblical fellowship cuts against the grain of the modern church. It is all too easy for people to come to a corporate worship gathering, sit in a seat, participate in a service, and then walk away totally disconnected from the people around them. In fact, many people actually *prefer* that kind of anonymity. But this is not God's design for the Christian life or for the church. There is a better way.

Fellowship was one of the initial priorities of the early church. Acts 2:42 says that the first Christian gatherings were devoted to four things: the apostles' teaching, *fellowship*, the breaking of bread, and prayer. The Greek word for "fellowship" is *koinonia*, and it carries the idea of commonality. The church was devoted to living in community together. So what should this community look like?

One of the best summaries of the kind of community the church was designed to experience comes from Romans 12:3–16 (see pg. 98). This passage is filled with commands, but these commands do not come out of nowhere. Paul, the author of Romans, gives these commands based on "the mercies of God" (v. 1), mercies that were beautifully expounded in the previous eleven chapters. This mercy transforms the way we worship God: we offer ourselves to Him as living sacrifices; we ask Him to take our mind and transform it according to His Word; we ask Him to conform our will to His (vv. 1–2). But God's mercy is not only exalted in worship; it is also expressed in community. Or, to put it another way, our vertical relationship with God has a direct effect on our horizontal relationships with one another.

The "One Anothers" of Biblical Fellowship

In Romans 12:3–16 Paul gives us roughly twenty-five different commands and exhortations concerning the way we are to live out biblical community based on the mercy of God. Most of these commands specifically apply to relationships within the church. We can summarize these twenty-five commands by identifying ten "one anothers" that should characterize biblical fellowship.

1. We belong to one another. (vv. 5–7)

Like the parts of a body, we in the church are "individually members of one another" (v. 5). But our connection is not due to our ethnicity, socio-economic status, politics, or preferences; we belong to each other because we are "in Christ" (v. 5). At the same

time, we *need* to be around people who are different from us in all these areas because it reminds us that the only thing we have in common is Christ, and He is enough.

The Bible also uses the metaphor of a family to describe the church. Actually, God has designed relationships within the church to be deeper, spiritually speaking, than the relationships in our physical families. I was reminded of this after meeting believers in Southeast Asia who were kicked out of their physical families when they came to Christ. Our deepest bonds are in the church, our family of faith.

Admittedly, life with our church family can be challenging, just as it is with our physical family. But this is part of what it means to belong to one another. When you get Christ, you get His church—a community that is sometimes marked by unpredictable dynamics and unwanted drama. Yet even with all its challenges, the church is the primary context through which God has chosen to make His glory known in the world.

THE "ONE ANOTHERS" OF BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP

1. We belong to one another.
2. We are gifted for one another.
3. We love one another.
4. We care for one another.
5. We honor one another.
6. We motivate one another.
7. We share with one another.
8. We rejoice with one another.
9. We weep with one another.
10. We bear with one another.

2. *We are gifted for one another.* (vv. 6–8)

Every Christian, from the eight-year-old to the seventy-eight-year-old, has “gifts” of grace that God has put inside of them by His Spirit (v. 6). And He has not only given us gifts, but He has also given us everything we need to put those gifts into action in the church. We have different gifts, different functions, and we play different parts, but everybody counts. The image of a body is once again helpful, as *every* part of the body is interdependent and necessary for the body’s health. By God’s grace, you are immensely valuable to the body of Christ.

We have an unhealthy tendency to compare our lives and our

faith with others. Individuals with certain gifts get exalted while others with less prominent gifts may be ignored. Paul warns us against this kind of attitude, and he lists seven gifts that are used in building up the body of Christ: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. The purpose is


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not to give an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts—additional gifts are listed in other passages—but to let Christians know that they have been gifted by grace and that they should use their gifts to build each other up in the faith. Regardless of your gifting, you have an important role to play in the church’s mission.

A car is made up of hundreds of parts, but that doesn’t make any single part unimportant. The engine may be running fine, but that won’t do you any good if the tires are flat. And it doesn’t matter how smooth the transmission is if the brakes don’t work. It’s only as these different parts work together that the car is able to do what it’s supposed to do—get you safely from one place to another. In a similar way, the church’s health and mission are affected by the way each member uses, or fails to use, his or her gifts.

If a church is satisfied with 50% participation in the Great Commission—or, in some cases, 30%, 20%, 10%, or even 5%—then it will miss the mission for which God has created it. We are to make disciples and multiply churches among the nations, but we cannot accomplish that goal if half (or more) of our members are inactive. Every member needs to be meaningfully engaged in the mission with the talents, gifts, and abilities God has provided.

3. We love one another. (v. 9)

We are to love one another in a way that is “genuine” (v. 9), without hypocrisy. Real love is not fake, superficial, or surface-level; it is


deep, authentic, real, powerful, and committed. The Greek word Paul uses for “love” here is *agape*, and it’s often used to refer to an unselfish kind of love. We do not love others based on what we can get from them; we love one another selflessly and sincerely. But this is not an undiscerning love: it abhors “what is evil” and holds fast to “what is good” (v. 9).

4. We care for one another. (v. 10)


Not only are we to love each other without hypocrisy (v. 9), but also we are to “love one another with brotherly affection” (v. 10). Paul is speaking of a family affection. When you think about your family, you think about the responsibility you assume for their care. It’s a special responsibility, one that we do not have for non-family members. This is the kind of care and concern we should have for one another in the church, because we are a spiritual family.

One way we take care of each other is by looking for ways to serve. We need to avoid the problems that come from focusing on ourselves, for God has actually designed our needs to be met by focusing on others. This is such a different way to think than the rest of the world thinks. Everywhere else in the world, community is focused on what you can get. But in the church, community is focused on what you can give. Christians should be asking questions like, *How can I glorify God by caring for other people today?*

Contrary to how some in the church act, you and I are not the center of the church. God is. That is good news because God created you to find fulfillment in selfless community in the church, a community unlike any other in the world. It is a community that will totally change your life. What person would not want to gather together with a group of people who are totally focused on loving and caring for one another? This kind of community made a



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profound impression on those who came in contact with the early church. For instance, here's how the philosopher Aristedes describes Christians early in the second century:


***EVERYWHERE ELSE IN
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CHURCH, COMMUNITY
IS FOCUSED ON WHAT
YOU CAN GIVE.***

Now the Christians, O King, by going about and seeking, have found the truth. For they know and trust in God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who has no fellow. From him they received those commandments which they have engraved on their minds, and which they observe in the hope and expectation of the world to come. . . .

They refuse to worship strange gods; and they go their way in all humility and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them. They love one another; the widow's needs are not ignored, and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting. When the Christians find a stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as a true brother. They do not call brothers those who are bound by blood ties alone, but those who are brethren after the Spirit and in God.

When one of their poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear of any of their number who are imprisoned or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free.

If they find poverty in their midst, and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities. They observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah, living honestly and soberly as the Lord their God ordered them.

Every morning and every hour they praise and thank God for his goodness to them; and for their food and drink they offer thanksgiving. . . .

Such, O King, is the commandment given to the Christians, and such is their conduct.¹⁹

5. *We honor one another. (v. 10)*

I am convinced that gossip is one of the deadliest weapons of the Adversary in the church today. It is a community-killer, but the antidote is found in verse 10: “Outdo one another in showing honor.” We need to work hard to outdo one another when it comes to showing honor, both in public and in private. It is a sin to speak about another brother or sister in Christ in a way that does not build them up in Christ. But we need God’s help to obey this; otherwise we will grieve His Spirit (Eph 4:29–31).

6. *We motivate one another. (vv. 11–12)*

We should burn with “zeal” in our spirits for Christ, which means we “serve the Lord,” we “rejoice in hope,” we are “patient in tribulation,” and we are “constant in prayer” (vv. 11–12). We want to spur one another on toward Christ. Have you ever been around someone who made you feel as if hanging around them made you a better person? This should be the commentary on our lives and relationships. We should live so that people are growing closer to Christ because they spend time with us.

7. *We share with one another. (v. 13)*

We are commanded to “contribute to the needs of the saints” (v. 13). The word “contribute” is related to the Greek word for fellowship (*koinonia*), and it is used to describe how we express our fellowship with one another by contributing to each other’s needs. The earliest account of the church in Acts tells of believers bringing their resources together and sharing them for the good of

one another. People were selling homes and lands and bringing the proceeds to provide for each other (Acts 2:44–45).

The church is intended to be a powerful picture of selfless, sacrificial generosity. I recently saw this kind of spirit in the Philippines, where members of the church who were extremely poor had begun savings programs so that they could help one another in the case of a tragedy or emergency. They live on so little each day, yet they set aside some of it for each other.

This concept of caring for each other's needs is one of the reasons for a church to take an offering each week. We provide for the community God has intended us to experience and fulfill the mission He has called us to accomplish together in the world. And all of this resounds to God's glory. It is both right and biblical to share our resources as the church.

In addition to sharing our resources, we also share our homes. We are to “show hospitality” (v. 13). There were few hotels during the time of the New Testament, so there was a great need to give shelter and food to visitors. So also today, we ought to be pursuing hospitality with people in the church, and not just people who are like us. We should open our homes to those of different ages, those at different life stages, those of different ethnicities, and those who are different from us in other ways.

8. *We rejoice with one another. (v. 15)*

We should not envy the success of others but rather “rejoice” with them (v. 15). Unlike so many other communities in the world, we are not competing with one another. Instead, we celebrate with one another.

9. *We weep with one another. (v. 15)*

No one in the church is intended to experience hurt alone, which is why we are instructed to “weep” with one another (v. 15). We should hurt when others hurt, and they should feel sorrow when we feel sorrow. We support one another, particularly in times of grief.

10. We bear with one another. (v. 16)

Living “in harmony with one another” (v. 16) is easier said than done, which is why we need to bear with one another. The church is a community full of sinful men and women, so our harmony will require humility. One of the ways we learn to live in harmony is by getting outside of our comfort zone and associating with those who are different from us, including “the lowly” (v. 16).

The kind of community described in Romans 12 is a powerful testimony to the world. It involves so much more than coming into a building once a week, going through some religious motions, and then returning to our separate lives. When we love one another as family in the church, we will glorify God as our Father in the world.



***WHEN WE LOVE ONE
ANOTHER AS FAMILY IN
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FATHER IN THE WORLD.***



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

What is the difference between community in the church and community in the world?

2

How should the truths in this chapter prevent us from ignoring members whose gifts are not highly visible?

3

How can members of the church honor one another?

4

What is the purpose of the spiritual gifts?

5

How does community foster humility in our relationships with one another?



ACCOUNTABILITY & DISCIPLINE

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

— Galatians 6:1

“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. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed[a] in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

— Matthew 18:15–20




— TRAIT 9 —

We live in a world where it is offensive to say that a particular belief is wrong, and it is even more offensive to tell someone that what they are doing is wrong. Christians and non-Christians alike will quote Jesus: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt 7:1).


“Who are you to point out something wrong in my life when you have plenty of things wrong in your own life?” they ask. “Mind your own business.”

We in the church have convinced ourselves that it is loving, kind, and even compassionate to sit back and ignore sin in each other’s lives. *It’s not our responsibility. Their sin is between them and the Lord.* That may sound spiritual on the surface, and it may sound good to the world, but it is anything but loving according to God’s Word.

If I wander off into sin, the last thing I want is for the men and women around me to allow me to wander away while using super-spiritual jargon. I want somebody who loves me enough to call me away from sin and back to Christ. It is *not* loving for a friend to leave me alone in my temptation to sin. One of the greatest ways we love and care for each other is by holding each other account-

—  —

**ONE OF THE GREATEST
WAYS WE LOVE AND CARE
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ACCOUNTABLE TO OBEY
GOD’S WORD.**



able to obey God's Word.

Growing as a *disciple* in the church necessarily involves *discipline* in our lives.

We know this instinctively when it comes to parenting. When one of your kids does something wrong, it is not loving for you as a parent to sit back and say, "Well, that's your business." It is loving for you to gently tell your erring child that a certain behavior is not good for them. This type of parental love is at the foundation of our relationship with God. The Lord "disciplines the one He loves" (Heb 12:6). We should therefore be glad that God does not leave us alone in our sin. Instead, He comes running after us and offers us freedom and forgiveness. *That* is real love.

So how do we express God's love to one another in the church? Not by lazily consigning one another to sin but by lovingly confronting one another in sin. *Loving one another in the church involves humbly sharing responsibility for one another's holiness.* Being a part of the church means helping one another grow in Christ. The apostle Paul assumes this very point in Galatians 6:1:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Paul speaks to the Galatian church like they are family—because they are. In the church, we belong to one another. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

If anyone in the family is caught in transgression or sin, we are to help them. The word "caught" in Galatians 6:1 implies that a brother or sister in Christ is continuing in sin and not wanting to repent of it. If they do not want to repent, then we who are spiritual have a responsibility to act. The reference to those who are "spiritual" goes back to the previous chapter where Paul talks about walking in the Spirit (Gal 5:16) and the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, good-

ness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vv. 22–23). In other words, those whose lives reflect the fruit of the Spirit of Christ should restore the sinning brother or sister. This restoration requires working to help someone turn from sin back to Christ. But, according to Paul, there’s a right way to do this. We should restore brothers and sisters in Christ in a “spirit of gentleness,” not in a spirit of pride or self-righteousness (Gal 6:3) because we too are likely to be tempted (v. 1). Restoration requires a spirit of humility and gentleness. It is not always easy, but it is our responsibility to help others grow in holiness.

Based on Galatians 6:1, as well as other passages in the New Testament, accountability and discipline are traits of a true church. People who truly love one another in the church will humbly and gently share responsibility for one another’s holiness. This kind of discipline has two levels: a formative level and a restorative level.

Formative Church Discipline

Formative church discipline involves continual encouragement to repent of sin and walk with God. This kind of discipline should be ongoing in the life of every church member and in every relationship within the church. For example, when God’s Word is preached in the weekly gathering, we experience formative church discipline. The Word encourages us in specific ways to turn from sin and walk with God. We also receive formative discipline whenever we read the Bible and whenever we discuss it in our homes, our workplaces, or our small groups. Formative discipline is disciple-making—teaching one another to obey everything Christ has commanded (Matt 28:19). In this sense, the entire Christian life involves formative church discipline. There are times, however, when a different kind of discipline is needed.

Restorative Church Discipline

Restorative church discipline involves corrective care when someone is living in unrepentant sin. If a church member is walking in direct disobedience to God and refuses to repent, then it is the responsibility of the church to love that brother or sister enough to go to them and tell them to turn from their sin and come back to God. This is one of the most important things the church does.

After Jesus promised to build His church in Matthew 16:18, He only used the word “church” one other time in the Gospels. In this second and final reference to the church, Jesus gives some instructions regarding restorative church discipline in Matthew 18:15–20 (see pg. 110). This is a command from Jesus, not a suggestion. He instructs the church to offer corrective care when someone is unrepentant in sin. This kind of discipline is not number 100 on a list of 101 things Jesus says we should address in the church. It is at the *top* of the list, right after the importance of confessing Jesus as Lord. If discipline is not a central part of the life of a church, then that church is not being the church that Jesus has called it to be, and it will not experience life as God has called and created it to experience.

We are all prone to sin, and we all need continual encouragement to repent of sin and walk with God. For the good of our souls, we need corrective care when we are unrepentant in sin. Years ago, I got the following email from a man in the church:

Dear Pastor,

Two weeks ago on a Sunday morning, my wife came to you after church with a dire request for prayer. It was indeed dire, for I was on the verge of making a huge mistake that would have haunted me for the rest of my life. I was in the process of leaving my family in search of who knows what (something better—something straight out of Satan’s play-book). I was on the edge of a cliff with one foot over. My

wife and everyone she knew were calling me back to Christ and praying that I would come back. And because of their prayers and their work, the Lord did NOT leave me to do what I thought I wanted to do, but rather He poured out grace on me and my family and we are once again whole. I wanted to say thank you . . . those prayers [and their work] shielded me from justice until I was shaken to my senses and could ask for mercy.

That could be any one of us.

Sin is so deceptive, and we need people in our lives who are close enough to see when we are stepping over the cliff or even slightly moving toward the cliff. We need people who know our besetting sins—the sins we are prone to struggle with most. We need people in our lives who are a regular source of accountability and discipline for us. Every single follower of Christ needs this.

It should be clear why restorative discipline cannot happen in a context where people come to a church gathering, sit anonymously in a service, and then walk away disconnected from fellowship with the body. We must be in relationships with one another so that this kind of discipline can take place. So what does this kind of discipline look like? Jesus gives us four steps in Matthew 18:15–20.

FOUR STEPS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Step One:
Private Correction

Step Two:
Small Group Clarification

Step Three:
Church Admonition

Step Four:
Church Excommunication

Step One: Private Correction

“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.” (Matt 18:15)

The first instruction Jesus gives is to go to a brother or sister in Christ and talk to them about their sin. At this point the conver-

sation is just between the two of you. And as we've already seen, we are to approach the person with humility (Gal 6:1). Jesus warns against pointing out a speck in someone else's eye when there is a plank in your own eye (Matt 7:3–5). Make sure to examine your own heart first, and keep a watch on your own life and the temptations you face “lest you too be tempted” (Gal 6:1). And remember, we should do this privately instead of talking to everybody else first.

Love is at the root of private correction. When a brother or sister is caught in sin, love them enough to say something rather than allowing them to wander deeper into sin. Love them enough *not* to talk with everyone else about their sin. Love them enough to go to them in private correction, with the goal of winning them over. And go in a spirit of love, humility, and grace, so that when the person sees his sin, he will thank you for helping him, and your communion together in Christ will grow even deeper.

One of the reasons correction is private in the beginning is because you may not have all the information you need about a person's situation. It could be that you have misread the situation, or you may have some wrong information. Have you ever had someone scold you for something that you never did or said? They received bad information, and they blamed you for it. The situation is even worse if that person has misinformed other people about how you acted or how you spoke. It makes sense, then, that Jesus would tell us to go to a sinning brother or sister in private.

Ninety-five percent of restorative church discipline happens in the context of daily, ongoing relationships. But there are some situations when the person you confront will not listen. They will not receive loving, gentle, biblical correction, and they will not turn from their sin. If that is the case, then Jesus commands a second step.

Step Two: Small Group Clarification

“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.” (Matt 18:16)

The second step in restorative church discipline involves bringing along one or two other church members in the process of confronting a member who is caught in sin. Christ’s instructions are rooted in the Old Testament, as the law required two or three witnesses to verify that a crime had been committed (Deut 19:15). However, the other believers involved should be gentle, humble, loving, and willing to go with you to talk to the person who is, or at least appears to be, involved in unrepentant sin. These individuals do not have to be pastors, though they could be. It is best to involve those who know and care for the person.

To clarify, the goal in this second step is *not* to gang up on the person who is caught in sin. You should not try to find people who can help you build your case against that person. The goal is to get help in discerning the right course of action. It’s possible that up to ninety-nine percent of restorative church discipline situations could be handled in these first two steps. But if a brother or sister refuses to listen to a small group, a third step is necessary.

Step Three: Church Admonition

“If he refuses to listen to them [two or three fellow members], tell it to the church. . . .” (Matt 18:17)

If a person refuses to repent after being confronted by you and then by one or two others, then according to Jesus, the matter should be brought to the church. The first stage in this third step would be to go to the elders in the church and let them know about your concern. At that point, the elders can work through how to help the brother or sister.

My guess is that some people think telling the church is too severe, that it goes too far. But we do not really have an option since Jesus told us to do this, and He has told us to do this for a reason. The goal at every step of restorative church discipline is to restore

a brother or sister in Christ. And when the church is told, an entire body of believers in one loving voice calls a sinner to return to Christ. Corporately, they testify of God's love for sinners. What a picture of the love of God!

Sadly, not everyone repents, even when the entire church is pleading for them to turn to Christ. If someone refuses to listen to the loving plea of the entire church, the fourth and final step of restorative discipline is needed.

Step Four: Church Excommunication

“. . . And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17).

If the person who is caught in sin will not repent after being confronted by the church, then a final step is necessary. Jesus tells us to treat this person like an unbeliever. He or she is excommunicated, expelled from the church. And as we saw in an earlier chapter on church membership, the Bible knows nothing of a churchless Christian, that is, a Christian who is not identified with a local church. Those who are expelled from the church are not viewed as members of Christ's body.

If we refuse to practice excommunication on a sinning Christian, then we are disobeying Christ. Sure, this entire process can be difficult to carry out, but we are not left to our own wisdom and strength. Jesus assures us that He stands ready to help as we act under His authority: “. . . if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” (v. 19). This verse does not mean that God will give you whatever you want as long as you find somebody else who agrees with you about it. Remember the context: Jesus has just finished talking about the process of restorative discipline, and He follows it by assuring the church that He will give them all the wisdom, strength, and grace they need in order to confront sin.

In addition to acting on the authority of Christ, He has prom-

ised to be with us in the midst of this often difficult process: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (v. 20). This is one of the most abused verses in the Bible. I cannot count the number of times I have heard someone say, “Where two or three are gathered, Jesus is there. And since there are two of us here, we know Jesus is with us.” Does that mean that if you were praying alone this morning, Jesus was waiting for somebody else to show up before He listened? How many people does it take for Jesus to show up at a prayer meeting? Again, remember the context: Christ is promising His presence in a unique and powerful way *when we obey His command to confront sin*.

These promises of Christ’s presence and authority are especially precious because of the difficulty of carrying out restorative church discipline, particularly the final step of excommunication. It is strange in our context to hear that the church actually kicks people out. What happened to the idea that everyone is welcome? Telling someone that he or she cannot be a member seems to go against everything we’ve come to expect from the church. But this is what Jesus commanded, and it is what we see practiced in the New Testament.

The city of Corinth was known for its loose living and sexual immorality. It was a culture very similar to ours, and, just as in our day, immorality had infiltrated the church. In fact, one individual in the church was committing sexual immorality with his stepmother! Four times Paul commands the church to remove him, and these commands come with forceful language:

- “Let him . . . be removed from among you” (v. 2)
- “. . . deliver this man to Satan . . .” (v. 5)
- “Cleanse out the old leaven . . .” (v. 7)
- “Purge the evil person from among you” (v. 13)

So why would Jesus want us to take such extreme measures? Why remove people from the fellowship of Christ’s body? There

are three reasons why church discipline is vital for every church.

1. For the purity of the church

In the example above, Paul never directly addresses the brother who committed sexual immorality. Instead, he addresses the church because the church was standing by and doing nothing about this brother caught in sin. God was holding the church body accountable for unrepentant sin among its members.

We generally think about sin individualistically. We think of another's sin as his or her business. But sin is the entire church's business. We belong to one another. One person's unrepentant sin is the concern of every member, and if that person fails to repent, it affects the entire body. Paul makes this point with the imagery of yeast and dough (1 Cor 6:6–8). A little bit of yeast spreads throughout all the dough and impacts the entire loaf of bread. We are, then, accountable to God for one another. That means you are accountable before God for the growth in holiness of the brothers and

sisters sitting next to you in church. If they continue unrepentant in sin, then you (along with the rest of the church) are responsible to address it.

According to Paul, the church in Corinth should have been mourning over the sin of the man who was caught in this sexually immoral relationship (1 Cor 5:2). As

one author has noted, “A church that does not mourn over sin, especially sin within its own fellowship, is on the edge of spiritual disaster.”²⁰ For the church at Corinth, pride and arrogance were at the root of their refusal to deal with sin (v. 2). They may not have been applauding the sexual immorality of this individual, but they were ignoring it. Perhaps they were trying to be open-minded, maybe even looking at themselves as welcoming. But that which sounds kind and humble to us, the Bible calls evil and arrogant. It is not

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healthy for the church or loving toward the sinner to ignore sin.

2. For the salvation of the individual

To remove someone from the church is to declare publicly that they do not give evidence of being a follower of Christ. However, according to Paul, this sobering verdict has a redemptive purpose: “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord*” (1 Cor 5:5, emphasis added). The church is to remove this man so that his spirit may be saved on the day of judgment. Paul uses a similar phrase when talking about two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom he “handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1 Tim 1:20). The goal in removing someone from the church is so that they might acknowledge the seriousness of their sin and repent. If they never repent, it becomes clear that they went out from the church because they were never really of the church (1 Jn 2:19). But if they do repent, we should welcome them as a member of the church again.

In 2 Corinthians 2:5–8, Paul mentions an individual who had been excluded from fellowship but had since repented of his sin. He urged the church to “reaffirm your love for him” (v. 8). Jesus makes this kind of loving restoration possible because He is our “Passover lamb” (1 Cor 5:7). This is the gospel, and it should inform the purpose behind our church discipline.

3. For the glory of God

When Paul addresses the topic of church discipline with the Corinthian church, he tells them that the world around them would not condone the behavior they were condoning in the church. This is a major problem, not only in Corinth two thousand years ago, but also in our churches today. The news is filled with accusations of all kinds of immorality in the church, many times involving its leaders. This sends a confusing signal to the culture, which expects the church to take sin seriously. But when we tolerate sins that are not

even tolerated by the world, then it affects what the world thinks about God.

No church will ever be perfect this side of heaven, but every church must lovingly pursue holiness among its members. The way we deal with sin, or fail to deal with it, affects the reputation of Christ among our unbelieving neighbors. Therefore, churches must practice biblical accountability and discipline for the glory of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

What is the goal of church discipline? How has this often been misunderstood?

2

What does Jesus mean when He says that He will be with us when two or more are gathered in His name?

3

What are the four steps involved in restorative church discipline?

4

Why must churches practice discipline?

5

How has church discipline been exercised in churches where you have been a member?



LEADERSHIP

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

— 1 Timothy 3:1–13



— TRAIT 10 —

“A church rarely revolts against or rises above the religion of its leaders.”²¹

Those words from E.M. Bounds are a sobering reminder of why a church should care about the beliefs and lives of its leaders. Rather than rising above its leaders, the church usually reflects its leaders. Thus, our unhealthy church culture in America today is a clear indicator that many church leaders in America are, biblically speaking, unhealthy.

In light of the connection between the health of the church and the health of the church’s leaders, it is vital for a church to make sure that it is being led according to God’s Word. God established two primary groups, or offices, of leadership in the church—elders and deacons. The qualifications for elders and deacons are given in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 (see pg. 124), which means we must pay close attention to this passage if we want healthy leaders and healthy churches.

Elders: Servant Leaders

The word “elder” is a fairly common term in the Bible that is used in various ways. In the Old Testament, for example, it can refer to the leaders who assisted Moses (Ex 4:29). The New Testament also

uses the term “elder” to refer to spiritual leaders in Israel (Matt 15:2). However, about twenty times in the New Testament this word refers to a unique group of leaders in the church. In fact, nearly every church we know of in the New Testament is specifically said to have had elders (Acts 20:17; Phil 1:1).

The New Testament uses other words that are interchangeable with “elder,” such as “pastor” or “overseer.” We know these titles are interchangeable because of the way they are used in Titus 1:5–7, as Paul uses both “elder” and “overseer” to refer to the same group of people. Whenever you hear the word “elder,” you could substitute “pastor” or “overseer.” They refer to the same biblical office.

Almost every time the Bible uses the term “elders,” when referring to leaders in the church, the term is plural. Though certain individual leaders among God’s people are highlighted, we always hear of more than one elder in a church. In Acts 20, for example, the apostle Paul speaks to the elders of the church at Ephesus. His instructions address some of the most important aspects of being an elder:

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; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:28–32)

Based on these instructions, along with Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, we discover four responsibilities of elders.

1. Elders lead under the authority of Christ.

When Paul uses the word “overseer” to describe the leaders in the church, you might think that these are the *ultimate* leaders. But that is not the case. Elders are leaders, but they are subservient leaders. Elders belong to the church.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Jesus Christ holds the entire church accountable for removing an unrepentant sinner (Matt 18:15–20), and Paul instructs the church to remove a man caught in a shocking case of sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:4–5). The church’s authority over elders is also apparent in that it appoints elders. The church recognizes the qualities of an elder (as described in 1 Tim 3:1–7) in an individual and then affirms him as an elder. In short, the church is accountable for its leaders.

While elders ultimately belong to the church, the church ultimately belongs to Christ. Elders are caring for “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). How can anyone approach church leadership lightly when they realize the gravity of the office? Unlike worldly leadership, church leadership is not a power struggle marked by politics and power plays—because Jesus Christ has all the power in the church. Every leader in the church is a servant of the church, ultimately accountable to the One who paid for the church with His life. This brings a sober humility, even fear. There is no place for pride in church leadership.

2. Elders care for the body of Christ.

According to Paul, elders are to pay “careful attention” to themselves and to “all the flock” (Acts 20:28). Peter says something similar to elders: “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you . . .” (1 Pet 5:2). So what does it look like for a pastor to “shepherd the flock”?

Like a shepherd protects sheep from wolves, Paul tells the elders to be on guard—to watch out for false teachers, false doctrine, and “fierce wolves” (Acts 20:29–30). There is an adversary who is always attacking the church, from the outside and from the inside. Elders have a God-given responsibility to guard the spiritual lives

of members in the church, so it makes sense that Paul commends elders to God and to His Word (Acts 20:32). The elder's responsibility as a shepherd is not just to pet the sheep. Caring for the church also involves feeding the sheep.

3. Elders teach the Word of Christ.

The primary way elders lead and care for the church is by teaching the Word of Christ. Most of the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 are character qualifications expected of all Christians. But there is one competency qualification, one ability an elder must have: he must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). That is, an elder must have a gift of teaching. The reason for this qualification is because an elder's leadership is completely tied to teaching God's Word.

Jesus is the ultimate leader of the church, but we do not see Jesus (physically) in front of us. The way He leads His church is through His Word, which means the elder must know God's Word extensively. Elders must study the Word, memorize the Word, and meditate on the Word because they cannot lead the church without it. Elders do not lead according to their own thoughts, opinions, or ideas. They can do that with some other company or organization in the world but not with the church. Paul says that he led the church at Ephesus for three years with God's Word, teaching them the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27).

In addition to knowing God's Word extensively, elders must be able to communicate God's Word effectively. If an elder is not teaching God's Word, then he is not fit to lead the church. We do not follow elders just because they have a position. We only follow elders if they know the Word, follow the Word, and teach others to follow it. Elders who do not teach God's Word accurately and faithfully should lose the right to lead in a church, regardless of their reputation.

The first week I became a pastor, I went into the office on Monday morning, sat down at my desk, and thought, “What do I do now?” It hit me, “I don't have a clue what to do.” I thought, “Well, I

need to preach Sunday,” so I opened up the Bible and started studying. In the days, months, and years to come, teaching and leading according to God’s Word, I saw God do the work. Fast forward almost fourteen years, and I was at our student retreat when a guy at the hotel recognized me. He told me about how he just started pastoring a church for the first time less than a year ago, and he asked me, “What counsel can you give me?” I thought about it, then looked back at him and said, “I still don’t really know what I’m doing, but just let the Word do the work.” Know the Word, teach the Word, live and lead according to the Word, and Jesus will lead His church.

4. Elders model the character of Christ.

There are three lists of qualifications for elders in the New Testament (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet 5:1–3). When you put these three passages together, you find an entire list of character qualifications for elders. Before looking at these character qualifications, notice what is *not* on the list—age, success, and likeability. Just because a man is older does not mean he should be an elder in the church, and just because a man is younger does not mean he should *not* be an elder in the church. Remember, Timothy, the recipient of Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy, was young (1 Tim 4:12). Success in business is also not on the list. Just because someone is successful in the world does not make him able to lead the church with the Word. Finally, this is not a list of “good ol’ boys.” The qualifications do not include men in the church that everybody loves to like.

These passages also teach, or in some cases assume, that a church should only have male elders, or pastors. This teaching goes against the grain of our culture, much like the Bible’s teaching on marriage. Just as God has called husbands to be the leaders in their families (as a picture of Christ’s love for the church), so God has called men to be elders in the church. To do otherwise is to go against God’s Word. However, this does not mean that the Bible views men as superior to women in any way.

Male superiority is not God's design for the husband in the home, and it is not God's design for the pastor in the church. God has called women to all sorts of significant ministry roles in the church, and it is sinful and shameful if a church ever fails to help women flourish in these capacities. There is no such thing as a biblical church in which the men flourish and the women do not, which is one reason the character qualifications of elders are so important. Men who ignore, belittle, or mistreat their sisters in Christ are not fit to serve as elders in Christ's church.

Notice also that the qualifications for elders are, in a sense, not extraordinary. Every follower of Christ should exhibit (or at least be pursuing) these godly attributes. God intends for elders to be models of the character of Christ so that members can observe the lives of their leaders and "imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7). The overriding question for very potential elder is, "What will happen if other church members imitate my way of life and my faith?"

When it comes to the character qualifications of an elder, there are different categories that need to be considered. Here are some of those categories, along with some sample questions:

In his personal life . . .

- Is he self-controlled?
- Is he addicted to alcohol, pornography, food, or anything else?
- Is he wise?
- Is he peaceable?
- Is he gentle?
- Is he proclaiming the truth with conviction?
- Is he a sacrificial giver?
- Is he humble?
- Is he patient?
- Is he honest?
- Is he disciplined?

In his family life . . .

- Is he a servant leader in his home?
- Is he teaching his family God's Word?
- If he is single, is he self-controlled?
- If he is married, is he completely committed to his wife?
- Is he serving and sacrificing for his wife?
- If he has children, do they honor him?

In his business and social life . . .

- Is he kind?
- Is he hospitable?
- Is he a friend of strangers?
- Does he show favoritism?
- Does he have a blameless reputation?

In his spiritual life . . .

- Is he making disciples of all nations (missions involvement)?
- Is he a disciple maker in his own community?
- Is his love for Scripture evident?
- Is he a man of prayer?
- Is he holy?

No elder would get a perfect score on each of these questions, and we should be careful about expecting perfection from church leaders. However, Jesus sets the bar high for elders in the church, and He gives them serious responsibilities. They are to lead under Christ's authority, care for His body, teach His Word, and model His character.

Deacons: Leading Servants

Immediately after giving the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Paul lists the qualifications for deacons in verses 8–13. How-

ever, in comparison with elders, the Bible does not give us as clear a picture of what deacons do. In fact, we rarely see deacons mentioned specifically. But we do see a powerful picture in the word “deacon” (from the Greek *diakonos*). This word is used at least one hundred times in the New Testament, and it almost always refers to some form of service or ministry. We see a deacon-like ministry taking place in Acts 6, where a form of the word “deacon” is used three times in the first four verses (see the words in bold below):

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily **distribution**. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God **to serve** tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to **the ministry** of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1–7, emphasis added)

Though every member of the church is called to serve, deacons *lead* others who are serving, which is why I refer to them as “leading servants.” Notice that a form of the word “deacon” is also used in verse 4 to refer to the apostles, who were *servants* of the Word.

We see two primary pictures of leadership illustrated in Acts 6:1–7. There is a group of leaders responsible primarily for prayer and the ministry of the Word, which is what elders do. Then another group rises up to lead in specific areas of service, which is what

deacons do. This passage outlines the three primary responsibilities of deacons.

1. Deacons meet needs according to the Word.

The primary meaning of the word *diakonos* is spiritual service aimed at meeting specific needs. The church in Jerusalem was growing and sharing its resources, and it needed someone to lead in the distribution of food. In other words, there was a specific need that necessitated these leaders. Part of the reason we do not see many specifics in terms of the responsibilities for deacons in the New Testament is because different needs in the church necessitate different types of leaders at different times in the church.

Deacons not only meet needs that arise from specific circumstances, but they also assume accountability for specific commands. Scripture necessitates that the church look after widows, so in order to carry out God's commands, these deacons in Acts 6 assumed accountability for the church's obedience to God in this area.

2. Deacons support the ministry of the Word.

One consequence of widows being overlooked in the distribution of food was that the apostles would be taken away from their primary leadership responsibilities, namely, prayer and the proclamation of the Word. The mission of the church would suffer. Here we see the balance that God intends for His church—to be fully devoted to the Word and fully devoted to meeting needs in the world.

To put it another way, we might say that deacons serve elders so that elders can lead. Stephen and the other deacons freed the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the Word. The deacons are not a second power-block in the church, a body of leaders competing with the elders to provide overall leadership in the church. No, deacons help to ensure that elders are leading with the Word as God has designed them to, and in the process deacons lead others to serve. Only seven leading servants are selected in Acts 6 (v. 5), which is certainly not a large enough group to handle all the situ-

ations facing a church that contained thousands of people by this time. These deacons were organizing others to make sure the work was done. Everyone in the church was intended to serve, and the deacons were helping lead all these servants.

3. Deacons unify the body around the Word.

In Acts 6 the unity of the church was at stake. Physical neglect was causing spiritual disunity, and Christians were beginning to complain against each other. There was tension, and the deacons were appointed to squelch the rising disunity in the church. They did this by demonstrating a Christ-like character with a mission mindset.

The church in Jerusalem was growing at breathtaking speed, and it needed leaders who would unite together around the church's mission. This means that deacons should not be small-minded, engrossed in turf wars, caring only about their area of service. Rather, they know the mission of the church, and they work to help the church stay focused on that mission. Every facet of their ministry is a part of that mission.

The church exists to glorify God by making disciples and multiplying churches among all nations. Deacons exist to make sure needs are met in the church in a way that keeps the mission front and center. And much like elders, deacons are intended to model the character of Christ as they carry out their responsibilities. Deacons should be honorable, genuine, self-controlled, generous, and devoted to God's Word. A deacon must be faithful in every area of life, though, again, we are not talking about sinless perfection.

One final, and unfortunately contentious, issue needs to be addressed as we think about the qualifications for deacons. We saw earlier that Scripture restricts the office of elder to men. So what about deacons—can women serve in this role? Bible-believing scholars and pastors that I respect greatly differ on this difficult issue. And depending on what tradition you were raised in, you're probably already inclined to one of these positions. But the reali-


ty is that it is not up to our preference on this issue; it's up to the Word. Yet, even while we agree that the Word is the final authority, the Word is not entirely clear or explicit in this instance.

Some believers may look at this passage and think, "This issue *is* clear in Scripture. Can't you read?" After saying that deacons must be "worthy of respect" and that they must have certain character qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8–10, Paul then goes on to say the following in verse 11: "Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything." So both deacons and their wives have to display Christ-like character. Doesn't that pretty well settle the issue? How can women serve as deacons if Paul talks about deacons having wives? This is a valid question, but there's more to consider.


We certainly don't want to succumb to pressures from the culture when we interpret Scripture, and we don't want to come to the text with an agenda; however, based on Scripture, I do believe that it's possible for women to serve as deacons in some settings. Let me give four reasons why I believe this to be so. First, when verse 8 refers to "their wives," the pronoun "their" is actually not there in the Greek, the original language of the New Testament. Some translators think it is implied, but it's certainly not explicit. There's some ambiguity here, though it's very possible that the best translation for verse 8 is not "their wives."

Second, we need to ask this question: "Why would Paul talk about deacons' wives and not elders' wives?" This is especially curious given that more is said about an elder's responsibility in the home according to 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Despite the fact that elders have stricter qualifications, there is no mention of their wives.

Third, the overall structure of the passage seems to lead to the conclusion that Paul is not referring to the wives of deacons



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in verse 8. He uses the word “likewise” to transition from talking about elders in verse 7 to talking about deacons in verse 8. Paul then uses this same word “likewise” in verse 11 (though it is translated differently) to transition into talking about deacons’ wives or, as I am trying to argue, deaconesses. It doesn’t seem natural for the flow of the passage to run like this: first elders—likewise deacons—likewise deacons’ wives. The following seems more likely: first elders—likewise deacons—likewise deaconesses.

A fourth reason for understanding the role of deacon to be open to men and women is the role given to Phoebe in Romans 16. She is referred to as a “servant of the church,” and the word used comes from *diakonos*, which would seem to point to a diaconal role. When you couple this with the picture of women who played integral leadership roles in the mission of the church, the case becomes even stronger. Paul specifically mentions seventeen of these women. The issue is not whether or not women can be leaders but how they can best lead in the context of a local church.

When you consider the responsibilities we have outlined for deacons above—they meet needs according to the Word, they support the ministry of the Word, and they unify the body around the Word—then there is no biblical evidence that these responsibilities should only include men. Even with this understanding, however, we need to be careful. The reality is that many churches have deacons who play an overall leadership role in the church, and if that’s the case, then women should not serve as deacons in those churches because they’re basically serving as elders.

There seems to be much biblical evidence to affirm women who lead in various ways: the hospitality ministry, the children’s ministry, etc. It may be an adjustment for many people to think of deacons in this way, but I think we’re on very safe grounds in the Word. In fact, I think the Word should lead us to make this adjustment if we want to be obedient in this area. In the end, we want everything we do to conform to God’s design for the church.

The End Goal

Imagine a church filled with servant leaders (elders) who are humbly leading under Christ's authority, who are making sure that every single member of the church is cared for, who are teaching God's Word, and who are actively showing what it looks like in their lives, in their families, and on mission in the world. And imagine leading servants (deacons and deaconesses) who are leading in service in all kinds of ways across the church. This is how church leaders exalt Christ, and it is how Christ loves and leads His church—through elders and deacons who serve the church with selfless care.

Church leaders are intended to help us love Jesus more and, in the process, equip and enable us to accomplish our mission in the world (Eph 4:12). Every follower of Jesus is called to make disciples of Jesus, which means that according to God's Word, the church is comprised of elders, deacons, and members who are (together) giving their lives to make the love of Christ known in the world. This took place in the book of Acts, and the result was powerful:

The word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7).

As we pray for this to happen in our own day, our churches must appoint, affirm, honor, pray for, and imitate biblical church leadership.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

What's wrong with a church where deacons and influential businessmen "run" the church?

2

What makes church leadership so different from much of the leadership in the world? (Hint: see Acts 20:28)

3

How do elders protect the church?

4

Why must the church take qualifications for leadership seriously? What are the dangers of a church having unqualified elders and deacons?

5

What role do deacons play in carrying out the church's mission?



WORSHIP

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But 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." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

— John 4:1–26



— TRAIT 11 —

I recently received a letter from a teenager in our church who shared the following with me:

Ever since I was little, my parents have been separated. My dad is a drug addict and abusive. My first memory with him is a time when I was little and his parole officer came to my door to do a drug test on him. To make sure he passed the test, he made me urinate in the cup for him. My mom moved around a lot and married into a gang. My life has many different stories that you probably wouldn't believe. My mom died a year and a half ago, and my dad doesn't like me anymore. I lived with my grandma, but last year I moved in with my aunt and uncle and that's how I started going to your church. Because of everything going on in my life, I lost faith in God, and I didn't like going to church. But God's Word being preached here really got through to me and changed my life forever.

This young lady went on to say that she was recently baptized, and she shared about how much she has changed by being a part of our church. As I read her letter, I was both heartbroken by all the hurt this teenage girl has experienced and exhilarated by what happened when she started worshiping in our church. Having been hurt and let down in so many ways, she came into the worship

gathering, and through the singing and praying and preaching, she found out that God, the One who matters more than anyone else, loves her. She found out that God will never let her down and that He can and will satisfy her like no one else.

This is why biblical worship matters.

This is what we long to see happen every week when the church comes together for worship. We long to see the transformation of teenagers, businessmen and businesswomen, struggling dads and tired moms, senior adults, and a room full of others who have all kinds of hurts, pains, and struggles due to busyness, emptiness, and sickness. Week after week we want to encounter God in worship because God has designed our souls to be satisfied in worshipping Him.

Your soul will never be satisfied apart from worshipping God. It does not matter how big or luxurious your house is; it will not satisfy you. It does not matter how much money you make; it will not satisfy you. It does not matter who you marry, what degree or rank or status you achieve, what job you have or position you attain, how healthy you are, or how comfortable your 401k is. None of these things will satisfy your soul. Your soul is designed by God to be satisfied in worshipping Him. A call to worship God is a call to satisfaction—satisfaction that is deeper, truer, fuller, and longer lasting than anything else this world offers. Jesus made this call to worship and satisfaction at a well in Samaria around two thousand years ago. The story is recounted in John 4:1–26 (see pg. 140).

Jesus encountered a woman who had sought satisfaction in multiple relationships with men, none of whom could ultimately satisfy her. Now she found herself alone, drawing water in isolation. She was a woman who sought satisfaction in her religion, but even that had left her empty. Each of us has those same thirsts. We thirst to believe in something and someone. We want to believe that which is true, right, and good. Each of us thirsts to belong, for loneliness is one of the most painful human emotions. We long not just to be known, but also to be valued. We all thirst to be

loved. Even the most calloused heart among us longs for the affection of a parent, spouse, or friend. Just like this Samaritan woman whom Jesus encountered, we try to quench our thirst in all kinds of ways—in people, jobs, possessions, pursuits, and various worldly pleasures. But we constantly find ourselves coming up empty.

One of the most famous songs written over the last century was written in ten minutes by Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones. He said it summarized his view of the world, as well as his frustration with everything in it. This song became the Rolling Stones' first single to hit number one in both America and Great Britain. The song is titled "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," and the famous refrain goes, "I try, and I try, and I try." Men and women all around us are trying, and trying, and trying. They think, "If I can be with that person, if I can get that job, if I can be in that home, if I can fix that problem, or if I can reach that goal, I'll find satisfaction." But then they get there, and, before long, their eyes are set on something else. Meanwhile, in the middle of it all, Jesus offers them what he offered this Samaritan woman—a different kind of water, the kind that will quench their thirst forever. They will not have to look elsewhere. The kind of water Jesus gives wells up to eternal life (v. 14). It lasts forever.

"Where do you get that living water?" the woman asks Jesus (v. 11). Jesus responds by engaging her in a conversation about worship. Jesus tells her that God is seeking her because God desires to satisfy her; God has designed her soul to be satisfied in worshiping Him, in seeking Him, in knowing Him, and in loving Him. This is the essence of what it means to believe in Jesus, to become a Christian.

Notice how Jesus defines belief in the Gospel of John: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn 6:35). To believe in Jesus is to say, "I have sinned. I have sought my own way in this world apart from God's way in His Word. My sin has left me empty, and it leads to death. I cannot find satisfaction in this world apart from

God. But Jesus died on a cross for my sin and rose from the grave in victory to make it possible for me to be forgiven of all my sin and reconciled to a relationship with God in whom my soul will be satisfied forever.” This is salvation.



**SALVATION IS
FORGIVENESS OF YOUR
SIN ACCOMPANIED
BY SATISFACTION IN
YOUR SOUL.**

Salvation is not just saying some words in order to save your skin for eternity and then living just like the rest of the world, running after all the same stuff this world is running after. Salvation is not forgiveness of your sin accompanied by emptiness of your soul. Salvation is forgiveness of your sin accompanied by satisfaction in

your soul. Salvation is freedom from sin and the pursuit of satisfaction in a person, possession, position, or pleasure. Salvation is satisfaction in knowing and worshiping God.

A true understanding of salvation totally transforms the tenor of what happens when the church gathers. A right understanding of Christianity changes worship from duty to delight. True Christians do not gather together for worship because they have to. True Christians gather together for worship because they want to. We do not meet out of a sick sense of religious obligation where we think we need to appease our God or gain some kind of credit with Him so that He will bless us in return. That is the way religions work in the world, but Christianity is totally different. True Christians do not gather together out of a sense of obligation; true Christians gather together out of a sense of celebration. We have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, and we gather together to feast on His goodness in worship. Is this how you see the worship of God?

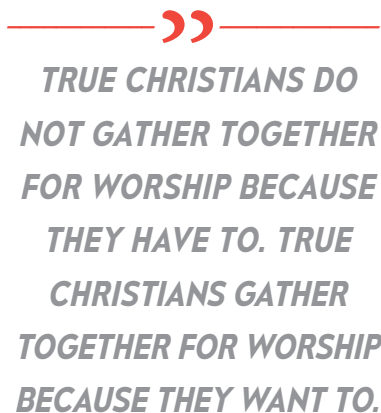
Do you see worship as something you *have* to do or something you *long* to do?

I fear that many professing Christians gather to worship God as religious routine but lack any real desire for God. If you do not desire God, it is worth asking if you really know God. Many pro-

fessing Christians go through a dull, casual, monotonous religious routine and miss the depth of what God has designed for their soul. God designed us to experience worship, not as duty, but as delight. Worship is not an obligation to be fulfilled each Sunday. Viewing it as an obligation allows all sorts of other things to easily drown out worship on our priority list. But when worship is something you long to do on a Sunday, then it becomes the priority around which your week revolves.

There is a sense in which worship encompasses all of life. It is something we do all the time. We are not just satisfied in God when we gather once a week. We are satisfied in God as we are scattered all week long. Everything we do is for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). The Bible teaches that eating, drinking, working, playing, and sleeping are all part of worship. Yet the Bible also calls the church to gather corporately for the purpose of worship. We come together to hear the Word of God; to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; and to pray.

The truth that God has designed our souls to be satisfied in worshipping Him shapes our understanding of worship as a church and our priorities in worship. In our contemporary church culture, we have misunderstood this. We are convinced that the priorities in worship are a killer band with a killer sound system and an entertaining speaker that we can listen to in cushioned seats with the thermostat set at just the right temperature—none of which the Bible says to prioritize in worship. The danger is that we can prioritize all those things, draw a crowd, and think we are worshipping. All the while, we are missing the whole point. But we cannot afford to miss the point, particularly when the satisfaction of our souls is contingent on not missing the point.



TRUE CHRISTIANS DO NOT GATHER TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP BECAUSE THEY HAVE TO. TRUE CHRISTIANS GATHER TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP BECAUSE THEY WANT TO.

If God has designed our souls to be satisfied in worshiping Him, then we want to worship Him the way He has designed us to worship Him. And, as we'll see, God's priorities are often very different from ours. I have been in numerous worship gatherings, here and around the world, where I was sitting on a floor, crammed into a room, in the blazing heat or freezing cold, with no band, or, quite frankly, with bad music, yet I have experienced deeply satisfying worship of God.

So what should we prioritize in worship in the church as people who are designed to find our soul's satisfaction in God? Based on Jesus's conversation with this Samaritan woman in John 4, as well as a number of related passages, let's consider eight priorities of biblical worship.

1. Biblical Revelation

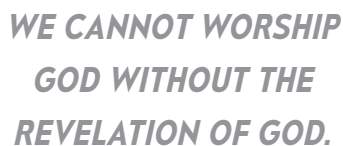
Jesus tells this Samaritan woman that true worshipers worship “in spirit and *truth*” (Jn 4:24, emphasis added). You cannot worship someone you do not know. Knowledge of God is necessary for worship of God, and knowledge of God is only possible because of revelation from God. That's why God's Word should be central in our worship.

The church should take a significant chunk of its time together in worship to hear and learn from God's Word. If God has designed our souls to be satisfied in worshiping Him, then we want to know who He is and how He calls us to live. The more we know of God, the more we will savor Him. The more we see God, the more we will be satisfied in Him. God never gets old. As the psalmist says, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps 16:11).

Do you want to know the path of life? Do you want to experience joy? Do you want to taste pleasures forevermore? Then get off your phone, and get into God's Word. The path to life is not found

on Fox News, CNN, Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat, nor will your constant focus on work, sports, music, or games bring lasting joy. God and His Word are the path to life. Knowing God is the way to fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore, which is why we want to saturate worship with His Word.

In worship, God's Word is primary. We cannot worship God without the revelation of God.



***WE CANNOT WORSHIP
GOD WITHOUT THE
REVELATION OF GOD.***


2. Spiritual Direction

Worship that is “in truth” is, at the same time, “in spirit” (Jn 4:24). We want the Word of God to inundate our worship, and we want the Spirit of God to orchestrate our worship. We want the Spirit to direct, lead, and guide our worship because worship is a supernatural activity. The Spirit of God supernaturally takes the Word of God and penetrates the hearts of people.


I was recently talking with a visitor to our church from a Buddhist background, and he said, “As you were speaking, I could sense something happening in my spirit that made me want to learn more.” That was not the result of my speaking ability. That was the result of the Holy Spirit's authority. What I love about preaching and what I pray for every week is that God's Spirit would take His Word and cause it to land in all kinds of different ways on people's hearts. This Sunday millions of people around the world will hear the Word, and the Spirit of God will take the Word in millions of different directions according to millions of different circumstances—not just in preaching, but in singing and in hearing testimonies. For this reason, we must prioritize the work of God's Spirit in our worship gatherings. Sometimes the Spirit leads in directions we had not planned, but we want to be sensitive to Him. Worship is not a show to put on or a program to get through. It is a meeting

with God, and He can take the meeting in whatever direction He wants to take it.

3. Community Participation



WE DO NOT WANT OUR WORSHIP GATHERINGS TO BE DOMINATED BY ONE STYLE, PREFERENCE, OR ETHNICITY. WE WANT OUR WORSHIP TO BE A CLEAR EXPRESSION OF THE DIVERSITY IN OUR COMMUNITY.



There is an obvious difference between worshipping God alone and worshipping God with the church. One is primarily about an individual with God, and the other is primarily about a community with God. Both are needed, but they are different.

We need to beware of approaching worship individualistically, thinking primarily about ourselves and our preferences. Our only thought is about whether or not we like a certain song or enjoy the sermon. But worship as a church is about a community of faith

that comes together for worship.

When I have traveled and preached in different places, I have heard musical worship leaders say, “Just imagine a box around you and pretend like the people around you aren’t even there.” That is the last thing we need to do. When we worship as a church, we do not ignore each other; we value each other. We actually prefer one another. We want younger people in the church thinking, “Don’t turn the music up too loud, we do not want to offend older brothers and sisters.” We want older people in the church thinking, “Turn the music up louder. I know that connects more with younger people.”

We do not want our worship gatherings to be dominated by one style, preference, or ethnicity. We want our worship to be a clear expression of the diversity in our community. I am from a particular ethnicity with a particular background and particular

experiences, and it is always helpful when someone from a different ethnicity or background comes to me and says, “The way you shared that landed on my heart in this way.” Often it was in a way I never meant it to land, but it is helpful for me to hear that and to learn from those with different backgrounds.

In addition to individualistic approaches to worship, we also need to beware of spectator approaches to worship. A church service is not like the Super Bowl, the World Cup, or the Stanley Cup, where we gather together in a room to *watch* the action. We gather together to *participate* in the action. The church is not an audience of spectators but a community of worshipers. This is why we sing God’s praises together, read Scripture together, pray together, and study the Word together. Even when we listen to preaching, we should all be worshiping. We must never let worship decompose into a vicarious experience where the many in the congregation merely watch the few on stage who are best at performing. If you ever find yourself slipping into spectator mode in the church, consciously remind yourself that you are a participant.



**THE CHURCH IS NOT
AN AUDIENCE OF
SPECTATORS BUT A
COMMUNITY OF
WORSHIPERS.**

4. Reverent Affection

The God we gather to worship is the God who rules over the entire world, the God who spoke and the entire universe came into being, the God who created *you* and is sustaining you right now. And this God is sovereign over every minute detail of His creation.

I was recently talking with a neurosurgeon in our church, and he told me that at any moment, more than 100 billion neurons are firing on a few hundred trillion synapses in our brain. Amazingly, God is in control of each of those synapses in more than 7 billion people in the world. And it’s not just people that He knows exhaus-

tively: fruit flies have 100,000 neurons in their brains, and there are untold number of fruit flies in the world. Yet God knows exactly how many there are, and He is causing all 100,000 neurons in each of one of their brains to work. What a reminder that the God we serve is infinite in His knowledge and power! He deserves our reverent affection.

We must be careful not to be casual with God, which is all too easy for us to do. We can walk into corporate worship on a Sunday morning, find our seats, look around, start singing, bow our heads in prayer, even open up our Bibles, and all the while, we never come face-to-face with the reality that we are gathered together before God. No one watching our worship should think, “Those people are bored with God.” Instead, they should be thinking, “Those people are blown away by God.” But this won’t happen until we realize that we are not the audience of the worship service—God is. Therefore, we must never walk away from a corporate worship gathering critically assessing the service. Instead of asking “Did worship today please me?” our main concern should be, “Did worship today please God?” Let us put our entire focus on God with awe-filled love.

Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:30). We gather together to express love for God. The most important component of worship is not our mouths that sing and pray and preach, nor our ears that hear and listen, nor our hands that clap or rise, nor our legs that stand or kneel. The most important component of our worship is our hearts. We are commanded to sing and make melody “with your heart” (Eph 5:19).

In His conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus shifts the focus from externals (where you worship) to internals (who you worship and how you worship). This shift makes sense when we remember the truth at the heart of worship: God has designed our souls to be satisfied in worshipping Him. It is evident in our worship whether or not our souls are satisfied in God. For those who have

experienced that satisfaction, it makes sense that we would sing and shout and lift our hands and bow our heads and express our reverent affection for God.

5. Honest Confession

Biblical worship also involves honest confession. When Jesus asked the Samaritan woman to call her husband, she confessed that she did not have a husband. To which Jesus responded, “You have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true” (Jn 4:18). This may seem bold, even insensitive, for Jesus to call out this lady for her sin. But Jesus wants to do this same thing in each of our lives, and He wants to do it for two good reasons.

First, Jesus calls out our sin because He desires to cleanse us from our sin. Jesus does not expose this woman’s sin for her condemnation; He does it for her salvation. He delights in taking the dirtiest of sinners and making them clean. However, we cannot truly worship God with our lives if we are not honest with God about our lives. But dishonesty is a constant temptation.

We are tempted to come into a worship gathering harboring sin in our hearts and minds and lives and relationships yet pretending that it is not there. We go through the motions, singing songs, listening to sermons, and then, after the service is over, we move on with our lives. But it is foolish to try to hide your sin from God. He already knows it, for He is omniscient! Besides, why would you hide your sin from a God who has made the way for you to be forgiven of it? Come before Him in honest confession of your sin.

A worshiping church is a church that lovingly confronts one another’s sin in worship. Admittedly, it is more uncomfortable to call out sin and idolatry and immorality in our lives and in the culture than it is to stay silent, particularly for me as a pastor. The church could probably draw more crowds if we would remain quiet about sin and preach sermons about how people are generally okay. But if

you call out sin, if you confront nominal, half-hearted Christianity, if you point out impurity and immorality and idolatry in our lives and our families and our culture, then the crowds may dwindle. That's one reason we must not buy into the lie that the more people we have in seats, the more successful we are in the church. God is

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**GOD IS MORE CONCERNED
ABOUT THE SANCTITY OF
OUR LIVES THAN HE IS
ABOUT THE SIZE OF
OUR CHURCHES.**

more concerned about the sanctity of our lives than He is about the size of our churches. We are fools if we think we can worship God without honesty before God, for honesty paves the way for grace from God. Let Jesus confront you *in* your sin so that He can cleanse you *from* your sin.

A second reason Jesus calls out sin in our lives is because He desires to comfort us in our sorrow. We see this in John 4, as Jesus directly addresses the pain in the Samaritan woman's life. Multiple men had abandoned her, and Jesus wanted her to be honest with Him so that she could experience the comfort her soul needed. Christ's comfort is good news in a hurting world, and it's also an important aspect of worship. Worship is not about putting all your problems aside in order to praise God. It's about bringing everything in your life before God as a part of your worship. God is big enough to handle it all. Cast your cares on Him "because he cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7).

On any given Sunday, some followers of Christ barely make it into the church building because their hearts are so heavy. Worship is designed by God to meet you where you are—because the God you worship meets you where you are. We worship God and we experience the depth of satisfaction He has designed for our souls when we are honest before Him with our sins and struggles.

6. Gospel Celebration

It may sound counter-intuitive, but worship that involves honest confession also involves gospel celebration. We celebrate the good news that the Messiah has come (Jn 4:26). Jesus has died on the cross to forgive our sins, He has risen from the grave in victory over sin, and He has guaranteed us eternal life in Him. That is the gospel, and that is worth celebrating every single week.

When we confess our sin honestly before God, He is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (Jn 1:9). And why does He forgive us? Because of the gospel. Because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we confess our struggles honestly before God, when we bring all our hurts and our pain, our worries and concerns, God meets us with the hope we have in Christ and reminds us that we are safe and secure in Him. We sing this gospel message, we preach this gospel message, we pray according to this gospel message, and we celebrate this gospel message in stories from each of our lives.

As we saw in the third trait of a biblical church, God has given us two visible pictures of gospel celebration in our worship: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is a celebration of someone coming to faith in Christ, and the Lord’s Supper is a regular reminder that we have salvation from sin and satisfaction in our soul because of the body and blood of Christ. As those who are in Christ, we have every reason to celebrate God’s grace toward us.

7. Intentional Intercession

We are clearly commanded in God’s Word to pray with and for one another, so we must do this when we gather together for worship. And this kind of prayer must be intentional. Prayer must never be something we do to make a smooth transition from one part of the service to another. It’s purpose is not to allow us to rearrange things on the stage nor is it a time for us to check out mentally.

We can easily forget that we are talking to God, as our minds lose focus and go in any number of different directions. This type of distracted prayer is not pleasing to God. Prayer should be focused and intentional in our worship gatherings.



**TRUE WORSHIP ALWAYS
LEADS TO MISSION.
ALWAYS.**

8. Global Commission

Finally, our worship is not solely about what happens in a room on Sunday morning. When the Samaritan woman leaves her encounter with Jesus and

the disciples reunite with Him, He immediately starts talking with them about His mission (Jn 4:34–38). Then, when the woman returns, she brings other Samaritans with her to meet Jesus. True worship always leads to mission. Always. When your soul is satisfied in God, then His satisfaction is not just welling up in you, it is overflowing *from* you. The Christ we worship has given us a global commission (Matt 28:18–20).

Worship is both the fuel and the goal of mission. We share the gospel with others because we want them to experience gladness in God. Mission, both here and around the world, would make no sense if God were not all-satisfying. But He is, so mission makes sense. However, mission will come to an end.

We will not always read the Great Commission to one another because one day disciples will have been made among all nations. On that day, we will gather around the throne of God with every nation, tribe, and tongue (Rev 7:9–17). We will worship God forever, not just with our songs, but with every aspect of our lives. He has designed our souls to be satisfied in worshipping Him for all of eternity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

How has God designed your soul to be satisfied?

2

What are some areas in your life where you are constantly tempted to look for satisfaction outside of God?

3

*What's wrong with the following statement: "The most important aspect of worship is how it makes me feel."
What is the most important component in our worship?*

4

How does the kind of individualism prized by our culture clash with a biblical view of corporate worship?

5

How can we fight the temptation to become casual with God in worship?



MISSION

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name."

And again it is said,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."

And again Isaiah says,

"The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by

the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,

"Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

— Romans 15:8–27



— TRAIT 12 —

God did not save us and take us straight to heaven. He left us in a world of urgent spiritual and physical needs for a finite amount of time, which is why our churches must give themselves sacrificially for the spread of the gospel. We do not exist merely to coast through casual Christianity on a week-by-week basis; we were created for so much more than that.

The church exists for the accomplishment of global mission, a point made clear in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In Romans 15:8–27 Paul lays out his plans to take the gospel to peoples and places where Christ was not yet known (see pg. 156). In this passage, Paul gives us a picture of God's purpose in all of history. When God called the people of Israel to be His treasured possession, His purpose was never to receive praise solely from them. God's purpose from the very beginning was to receive praise from all the peoples of the world. To make his point, Paul quotes four different Old Testament passages in verses 9–12:

- “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” (Ps 18:49)
- “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” (Deut 32:43)
- “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.” (Ps 117:1)

- “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” (Is 11:10)



**GOD IS MOST FULLY
PRAISED WHEN EVERY
TYPE OF PEOPLE IN THE
WORLD IS PRAISING GOD
FOR HIS SALVATION.**

The last quotation is from Isaiah 11:10, and the picture is Jesus, referred to as the root of Jesse, rising up and receiving praise from among all the nations, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Notice the progression that unfolds in these verses. Paul moves from speaking about Jews praising God

among the Gentiles, to Jews praising God *with* the Gentiles, to Jews *calling on* the Gentiles to praise God, and then to *all the peoples* (Jews and Gentiles alike) praising God through Christ. Everything God has done throughout the Old and New Testaments has been to form a people from among all peoples for the praise of His name. Jesus came and died to fulfill that purpose.

So, you may wonder, what is God doing in the world right *now*? He is doing what He has been doing from the beginning of history, from the dawn of creation. It's the same thing He sent Christ to do two thousand years ago. God is saving a people from among all the peoples of the earth for the praise of His name. God is not fully praised when only one type of people worship Him, whether that be Jewish people or Anglo-Americans or African-Americans or Latin Americans or Ethiopians . . . or any other people. God is most fully praised when every type of people in the world is praising God for His salvation. God loves all people, and He wants His love known among all peoples. Therefore, this is the purpose for which we live, and it is the purpose for which the church exists.

We have taken the worldwide purpose of God and turned it into a compartmentalized program in the church. We say this concern is only for the “missions people,” the people who care about the glory of God in the world. But the question we should be asking is, *Who in the church does not care about the glory of God in the world?* We

should *all* want to see *all* the peoples of the world enjoying gospel grace and praising our great God. Surely none of us has been saved by the grace of God and filled with the Spirit in order to ignore the purpose of God in the world. We exist, as individual Christians and as the church, for the spread of God's praise through the gospel among all the peoples of the world.

After hearing about God's global purposes, some Christians wonder whether every follower of Christ is supposed to move to another country to serve as a missionary. I suppose the Spirit could lead us all in that direction, but God has not commanded us to do this in His Word, and I doubt He is going to call *all* of us to move to another country. So, then, what *does* God's global purpose mean for us? We need to think in two general categories: what is common for all of us and what is a calling for each of us.

What Is Common for All of Us

Every follower of Christ should live for the spread of God's praise among all the peoples of the world. We have been commanded by Jesus to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Out of over 11,000 distinct people groups in the world, more than 6,000 of them are still classified as *unreached*. Unreached means they are less than 2% evangelical Christian, which means there is hardly any church presence there to sustain the spread of the gospel within that people group. Practically, this means that most people in these people groups (and there are close to 2 billion people in those 6,000 people groups) live and die without ever hearing the gospel. It's not simply that they are lost but that they have no access to the gospel. This should affect our missions strategy, though it may be in a way that is counter-intuitive for a lot of people.

Imagine that a tornado hits your city, and the head of rescue operations puts you in charge. As you and the rescue teams set out to save lives, you find that the first neighborhood you come to is in dire need. People everywhere are dying, and they need to be

rescued from the rubble of their homes. It is far more work than your teams can handle. However, you know that there are other neighborhoods—close by and far away—that also need rescue



COMMITMENT TO THE GREAT COMMISSION IN OUR LIVES AND IN OUR CHURCHES NECESSARILY INVOLVES COMMITMENT OF OUR LIVES AND OUR RESOURCES TO GET THE GOSPEL TO PEOPLE GROUPS THAT STILL HAVE NOT BEEN REACHED.

teams. But you are overloaded right where you are. If you send some of the teams to other neighborhoods, then they will lose valuable time when they could be saving people in the first neighborhood. Add to that the reality that some of these other neighborhoods are difficult to reach, and some are actually resisting help. What would you do?

Contemporary wisdom, and even compassion, might lead us to stay in the first neighborhood and help as many people as possible. This would seem to be the best use of our resources. It will

take far more time, far more resources, and much greater risk to try to get to those other places. The only thing that would cause you to do anything different than that would be if the rescue commander said to you, “I don’t want you to just rescue as many people as possible. Instead, I want you to rescue people from every single one of those communities.” If that was the command, and it was clear, then you would use the resources at your disposal to make sure that people from every community were rescued.

This is the command given to the church, and it is clear. God wants people from every single people group to be rescued and ransomed by Christ. Therefore, commitment to the Great Commission in our lives and in our churches necessarily involves commitment of our lives and our resources to get the gospel to people groups that still have not been reached. Consider three ways this should be playing out in the lives of all believers.

1. We all pray for the spread of God's praise among all the peoples of the world.

Every day we have the opportunity to be a part of what God is doing around the world from our knees. Is a passion for God's praise among all the peoples of the world evident in your prayer life? Prayer for global mission is not for a select few but for all of us. There needs to be a global component to all of our praying on a continual basis. Every Christian needs to pray for the spread of the gospel to the nations, for the church globally, and for the lost around the world. This is non-negotiable for all of us.

2. We all give for the spread of God's praise among all the peoples of the world.

In Romans 15, Paul talks about collecting an offering to help him take the gospel to Spain where people have never heard it. He hopes the church at Rome will help him on his journey (v. 24). The book of Romans is one long missionary support letter that says, in essence, "Here is the glory of God in the gospel—now please help me get this gospel to people who have never heard it before."

At the same time, as important as it was to get the gospel to Spain where people had not heard it, and as much as he wanted the church at Rome to give toward that end, Paul tells them of his plan to go to Jerusalem first in order to deliver financial assistance to the church there (v. 25). The church in Jerusalem had experienced a famine and was physically struggling, so Paul had rallied churches all across Asia, including poor churches, to contribute. He had collected an offering to take to a suffering, impoverished, struggling church in Jerusalem. He gives attention to both urgent spiritual needs (the gospel) and urgent physical needs (famine). Concern for both types of need should be evident in our giving as a church.

As an American, I live in one of the wealthiest places on planet earth. God has given many of our churches an abundance of resources, but He has not intended for us to spend it all on ourselves. He has blessed us for the sake of His name among the nations (Ps

67). He has given us worldly wealth for His worldwide worship. And, as we give toward that end, we should also be asking how we can give to serve the poor, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling and, in some cases, starving.

3. We all go for the spread of God’s praise among all the peoples of the world.

Every follower of Christ should go and make disciples right where he or she lives and wherever God leads. This involves making disciples where we work, where we play, and where we worship. Every Sunday, we send each other out of the worship gathering on this mission. Going is not just for some of us; going is for all of us. We are all involved in making disciples who make disciples who make disciples because we know the Great Commission is not just for special Christians. It’s the mission of every Christian and every church.

While praying, giving, and going are common ways for all followers of Christ to participate in the Great Commission, there is also a calling for each of us.

What Is A Calling For Each Of Us

In Romans 15:25, Paul makes it clear that his ambition is to preach the gospel where it has never been heard. Shockingly, though, he says he will go to Spain since he no longer has any “room for work” in the regions from Jerusalem to Illyricum (v. 23). So does that mean everyone in those cities had been saved or at least heard the gospel? No, what it means is that in those cities the gospel had been proclaimed, disciples had been made, the church had been founded, and the work was going on.

Although it was time for Paul to move to a new city for the spread of the gospel, we know from the rest of the New Testament that there were other people Paul told to stay. For example, he told Timothy to stay and pastor the church in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3), and he told Titus to stay in Crete (Titus 1:5). Likewise, Paul did not tell

every person in the church at Rome that God was calling them to go with him to Spain, but he did indicate that the entire church was involved in his mission.

In Romans 16:1–16 Paul mentions twenty-six different people with different backgrounds and different gifts who were playing different roles and doing different tasks in the mission of the church. The entire church is represented: men and women, single and married, young and old, rich and poor. What unites them all is that they are living for the praise of God among all the peoples of the world. This should still unite our churches today. In terms of our specific roles, it may be helpful to consider God's call in three areas: where we go, how long we stay, and what kind of work we do.

1. Where we go

God leads many of us to do ministry primarily inside our own communities, though this may also include engaging other cultures that live near us. Others will be led by the Spirit to go out from their hometown into other places in North America. Still others will go to places and people groups beyond North America. The ultimate issue is not whether you stay where you are or move somewhere else; the ultimate issue is whether you are obedient to go wherever God calls you to go.

2. How long we stay

God sends His people out on short-term trips, often less than two weeks, not only to help others but also to experience change in their own lives. Giving two percent of your time (about a week a year) taking the gospel outside of your community can transform the other 98% of time that you live in your community. God sends out some brothers and sisters to serve longer, between two months and two years, in different places and among different peoples for the spread of the gospel. For example, I encourage every college student to spend at least a summer or semester serving somewhere else among the nations. Even if the Lord does not lead them to live

long-term among unreached peoples, this experience will radically transform their perspective on the mission of God among the peoples of the world. This option is sometimes possible for teachers and other vocations that have longer vacation times, and it may also be possible for those who can work remotely. Retired and semi-retired believers may also be able to serve for up to two years to spread the gospel among another people group.

Finally, the Lord also leads some Christians to go long-term, to move somewhere for more than two years. These brothers and sisters may even make a permanent move to live and work among unreached peoples and places.

3. What kind of work we do

Part of the benefit of God's material blessing is that we are able to provide financial support to brothers and sisters in Christ who cross cultures for the sake of the gospel. This giving allows some missionaries to go to unreached peoples and places while being fully supported by other Christians in the church. But reaching over 6,000 unreached people groups in the world is unlikely to happen solely through men and women who are fully supported financially. We must intentionally explore ways the Lord might be sending self-supported brothers and sisters to unreached peoples and unreached places.

The three great church planting centers of the ancient world (Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome) were not founded by apostles but by workers who used their vocations as platforms for making disciples in pioneer areas. The current unreached people groups are very difficult to reach, and you cannot go into an unreached place like Saudi Arabia with a Christian missionary visa. However, Christian businessmen and businesswomen *are* able to get into some of these areas.

When I talk about missions, the last thing I want people to think is, "I need to leave my work, my job, my skills, and my education behind." Instead I want them to ask, "Is there a way that my work,

my job, my skills, and my education could be used to make the gospel known in one of the neediest places in the entire world?” We need every Christian to begin asking these questions, and we need parents to train their children to think this way. What if we encourage our children to work hard in school, not so that they can get a good job and make good money and coast out a comfortable life in a Christian setting, but rather so that they can be ready to go to peoples around the world with their skills and their training and their degrees and make the gospel known among those who have never heard it before?

It may be that God has designed the globalization of today’s marketplace for the spread of His gospel through His people for the glory of His name.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Why does the church exist?

2

What is God doing in the world right now?

3

*What role does prayer play in the spread of God's
praise among the peoples of the world?*

4

*How does a biblical view of mission change
the way we give?*

5

*How might the church's mission affect the
way you view your job?*



CONCLUSION

BY DAVID BURNETTE

Hopefully many people will walk away from this study convinced that they should embrace God’s design for the church. They will be motivated to partner with their fellow church members for the glory of Christ and the spread of His gospel. That’s certainly the goal of this resource.

At the same time, a resource like this can leave some feeling a little discouraged. God’s Word has highlighted many blind spots in their own church (and in their own life), and they don’t know what to do next. They see their church’s shortcomings in giving *and* preaching *and* fellowship *and* evangelism *and* worship *and* church discipline. Not to mention the other six traits.

Still others will be tempted to become critical of their church and its leaders. They may even consider joining a new church, one that “has it all together.”

Before you give in to discouragement or make any rash decisions, allow me to let you in on a little secret: *no church has it all together*. That’s not to say that some churches aren’t in need of serious reform, but it is to say that the search for a perfect church will always leave you disappointed. Because it doesn’t exist. Every church has room to grow in each of the twelve traits.

Thankfully, God uses imperfect churches to carry out His purposes.

Imperfect Churches

The early church provides a great model for us in terms of the church’s priorities (see Acts 2:42–47). Our congregations would undoubtedly be healthier and more effective in bearing witness to the gospel if we followed their example. However, the book of Acts

makes it clear that the advance of the gospel was not based on the church's faithfulness.

For example, one couple was struck dead for lying about their offering (Acts 5:1–11). Then, despite the generosity of these early believers, the needs of the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected (Acts 6:1). And the problems weren't confined to the book of Acts.

A quick read through the letters of the New Testament reveals a host of problems among churches in various locations, problems such as false teaching (Gal 1:6–9), quarreling (James 4:1–12), adultery (1 Cor 5:1–2), and abusing the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17–22), just to name a few. Yet, despite these sins and shortcomings, God used those churches to spread His gospel to the ends of the earth. And He is still using imperfect churches today for that same purpose. That doesn't mean our obedience is unimportant, but it should caution us against the idea that the power of the gospel is dependent on our ability to master the twelve traits covered in the previous chapters. "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).

So, given that our churches will never reach perfection this side of heaven, how should we respond in light of our shortcomings?

What Now?

Before becoming a cynic because of all the ways our churches are falling short of the biblical pattern, we should begin by confessing our own sins and shortcomings and by thanking God for the privilege of being a part of His church, a church He bought "with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Then we should pray that God would work in and through us, our fellow members, and our church leaders. That would be a good place to start.

In most cases, our default should be to stay put and serve faithfully where we are. However, if your current church does not hold to the gospel, to the authority of Scripture, or to other foundational doctrines of the Christian faith (Christ's divinity, the

Trinity, justification by faith, etc.), then, for the sake of your soul, you should move your membership to a church that does. You can overlook a bad paint job, missing shingles, and some broken windows, but a house with a bad foundation is dangerous. There may be other scenarios in which moving your membership would be wise, but such a decision should only be made after much prayer and with the counsel of trusted Christian friends who know you well. Regardless of your decision, treat your fellow members with love and humility, and resolve not to be a cause of disunity.

Chances are, many of our churches fall somewhere along a spectrum. We are eager to share the gospel, but we need to start practicing biblical accountability and discipline. Or perhaps we rightly emphasize fellowship and community, but we don't consult Scripture when it comes to identifying qualified leaders. Maybe our church is known as a people of prayer—a wonderful testimony!—yet we haven't taken the Lord's Supper together in over a year. And there are a thousand scenarios in between.

If you notice a significant issue that needs to be addressed, don't complain or spread your discontent to others. Instead, ask one of your pastors if you can talk to him about the issue privately. Use Scripture to humbly share your concerns, and let him know that you're praying for him and for the church. Regardless of his response, resolve to be a committed church member and to serve Christ faithfully where He has placed you. Let your example influence others.

If you're a church leader, there may be difficult areas that you need to address. Pray for God's wisdom and strength, and remember to be patient with your people, even as God has been patient with you. Discerning which issues are most pressing, as well as how quickly to address them, is not always easy. Share your concerns with your fellow pastors, and ask for their counsel. You might also consider asking for the counsel of a trusted pastor in another church who has faced similar challenges.

Thankfully, the faithfulness of our churches isn't finally up to us.

The One who began a good work in us has promised to finish what He started (Phil 1:6). Therefore, we can rely on His power and lean on His wisdom. Our sufficiency is not in ourselves but in the One who promised, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

NOTES

1. Amy Carmichael, *Thou Givest . . . They Gather: Truths Gleaned From The Word of God* (Fort Washington: CLC, 2013), 13.
2. This study was carried out by Back to the Bible and can be accessed at https://www.backtothebible.org/files/web/docs/cbe/Research_Synthesis_Bible_Engagement_and_Spiritual_Growth_Aug2012.pdf
3. R.A. Torrey, *The Divine Origin of the Bible* (London: James Nisbet & CO., 1903), 32.
4. Matthew Levering, *On Christian Dying: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 11.
5. J.C. Ryle, *What is the Church? A Question For The Times* (New York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1856), 13.
6. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 200-201.
7. Many other examples could be given, including Deut 4:9–10, 14, 40; 5:1, 32–33; 6:24–25.
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10. George Müller, *A Narrative of Some of The Lord's Dealings with George Müller* (London: J Nisbet & Co, 1855), 147.
11. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 41.
12. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2003), 173.

13. Ibid.
14. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1987, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm). See also Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 2, 9, 12.
15. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1336 (accessed at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm)
16. Ibid., 1416.
17. Ibid., 1414.
18. The following passages mention other spiritual gifts as well as roles in the church that require special gifting: 1 Cor 12:4–11, 28–30; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 4:10–11.
19. The Apology of Aristides, translated by Rendel Harris (London: Cambridge, 1893); as cited in John MacArthur, *Acts 1–12*, MacArthur New Testament Commentaries, 90–91.
20. John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentaries (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 124.
21. E.M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds* (Radford: Wilder, 2009), 41–44.

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ABOUT RADICAL

Jesus calls us to make his glory known among all nations by making disciples and multiplying churches. Being on mission is not simply a compartmentalized program in the church, but the calling of our lives as Christians.

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Unfortunately, many Christians never stop to ask what God's Word says about how the church should function and what it should be doing. They assume that the church's mission is dependent on our own abilities and creativity. In this resource, David Platt highlights twelve traits from God's Word that should characterize every church.

Preaching & Teaching

Evangelism

Discipleship

Prayer

Giving

Membership

Ordinances

Fellowship

Accountability & Discipline

Leadership

Worship

Mission

No church is perfect, but as we embrace God's design, we will find that His wisdom and His power are more than sufficient for the mission Christ has given to His people—to make disciples of all nations.

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