

Theology for Life

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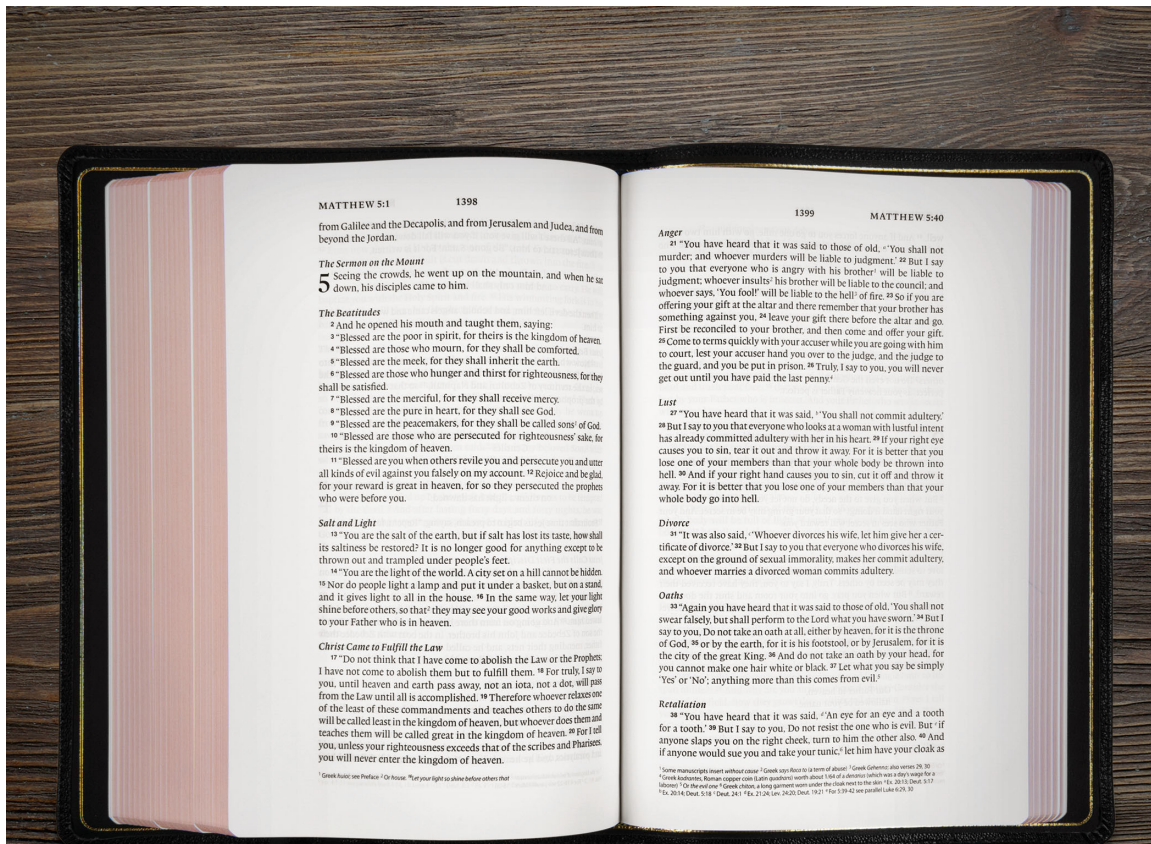
What is Church Membership?

And Why Does it Matter to Me?



Inside this Issue...

- **Six Reasons to Be a Member of a Local Church**
- **United Disagreement**
- **Spiritual Friendship in the Church**

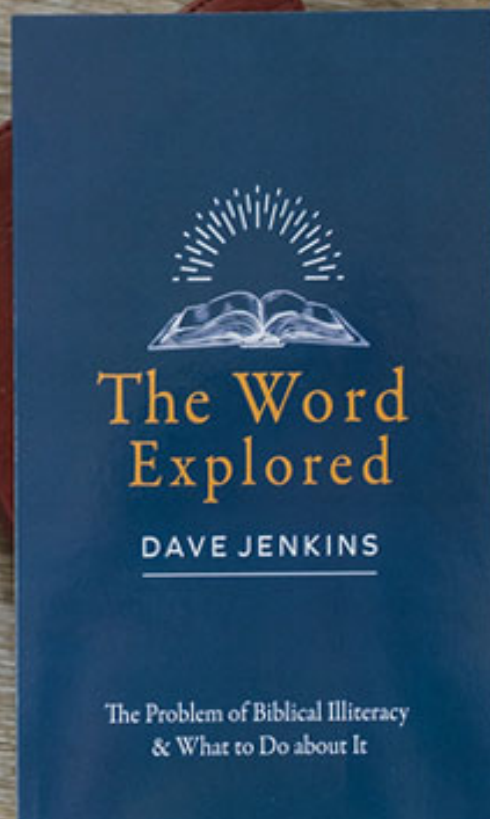


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Editor's Corner

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During my years attending Seminary, I would often frequent coffee shops around the Boise, Idaho area, near my home. I would spend all day working on reading various theology books, working on assignments, and writing papers. Seeing the mounds of books on my table, people would often ask me, "What are you studying?" This question led to many a theological discussion when I explained that I was studying for my Masters of Divinity. Often, questions such as, "Are you a Christian?" and, "Do you go to church, and if so, which church do you go to?" led the way to long discussions. At first, I was surprised by some of the answers; not their responses to if they were a Christian or not, but that the majority of people said that they were "going to church" right there in the coffee shop, and then proceed to point to their table. I would gently explain to them that what they were having was called a Bible study and not church, but so many times my words fell on deaf ears and often led to an abrupt end to our conversation.

Church membership and church life have fallen on hard days in recent years; not only from those who think that the lone-ranger view of Christianity is right, but also from many in the Church who don't see church attendance or fellowship (nor the Church itself) as essential. The Church, however, is essential because it is the only institution for which Jesus has bled, died, and rose again. Further, the Church is essential because it is the primary instrument through which the gospel is preached, the lost are saved, and the saints equipped for the mission of making disciples for God's glory.

Even some professing Christians think they don't need the preached Word of God. To their way of thinking, all they need is regular Christian fellowship. Yet, if you ask these same Christians if they go for a regular check-up to the doctor, they would tell you yes. When we gather to hear the week preached, week in and week out, the Word does its surgery on us by the Spirit bringing conviction, comfort, and encouragement into our lives. So, when we say we don't need the preached Word, we are saying we don't need to continue to grow spiritually, which is absurd because every Christian is to be growing

in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2nd Peter 3:18).

But of even greater significance is the need to take off our masks (at least metaphorically) and be who we are in Christ as the Church, His Bride. I remember meeting often with a pastor while serving in a campus ministry as I attended college in Washington (my home state). We would sit around for about an hour talking, and it would frustrate him that I would wait until the last fifteen minutes to open up and share. One time he even mentioned this to me, and it struck me later that what he wanted wasn't a little theological conversation, but to get to know me and enjoy genuine Christian fellowship. At this time (around 2000-2001), I was holding people at arm's length because I was enslaved to pornography. I couldn't take the chance that the pastor (or others) would find out about this dark sin in my life. I lived my life behind a mask, but have since repented of my enslavement to pornography.

Church is the best place to take off our masks, drop our guard, and be who we are in Christ. That doesn't mean that you have to like everyone or that you'll get along with everyone. It means that you will, because of Christ, be who you are in union with Jesus. Over fifty times in the New Testament, we are taught to "one another" each other (love one another, care for one another, etc.); and that ministry is vital because I need you, and you need me. Charles Spurgeon once said, "I have a great need of Christ and a great Christ for my need." Now that is true, but it's also true that we have a great need for one another as members of one Body.

And that's what brings us to this issue of *Theology for Life*. I need Christ, but I also need the Christ in you. I need you to encourage me, and you need me to encourage you, to walk alongside you. When I'm hurting and struggling, I need an arm around the shoulder. When I'm in sin, I need rebuke and correction. So, in this issue of *Theology for Life*, we are discussing the matter of church membership and what it means to "one another" each other. This topic is vital for us as Christians because it's within the Church that we can share openly, honestly, and fellowship with one another. It's in the Church where, because of Christ, we are the people of God, indwelt by the Spirit, and sent out to make disciples of Jesus.

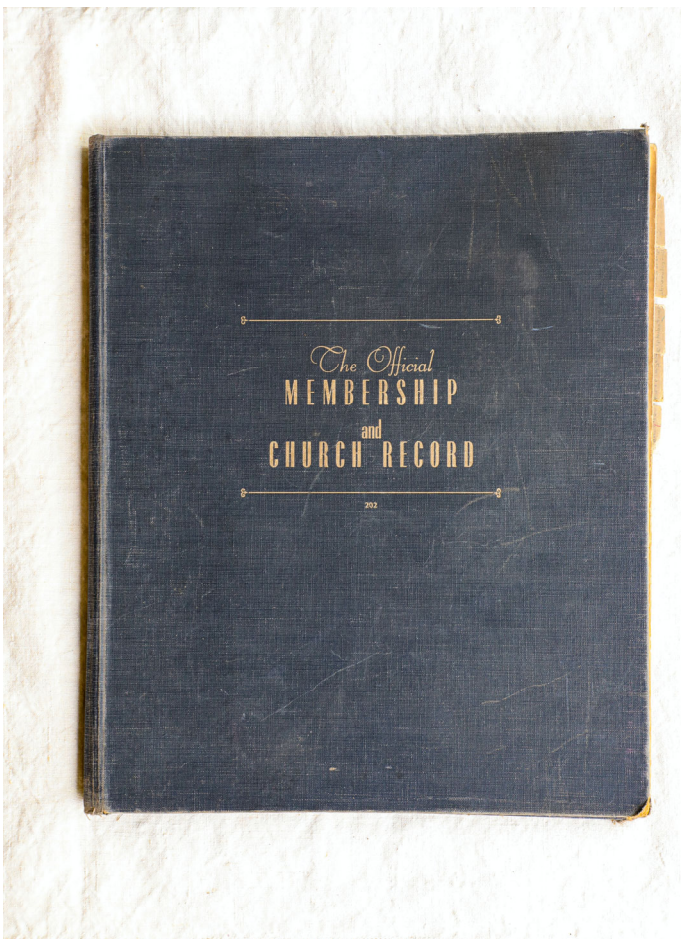
Wherever you are at in your journey in the grace of God, I pray that this Issue will encourage you to devote yourself to the essential ministry of your local church—perhaps even help you to join a local church. Together in our local churches, under qualified male eldership, we use our gifts, talents, abilities, and everything we are to make disciples of Jesus, for the glory of God. So I hope you'll find this Issue helpful to your spiritual growth and begin to see, as J.I. Packer once said, that the healthy Christian life is a life lived in the local church.

Dave Jenkins

Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

Six Reasons to Be a Member of a Local Church

By Dave Jenkins



The belief that professing Christians should gather together as members of a local Church is waning in many sectors of Christianity sectors today. Some

feel that faith shouldn't be "institutionalized" and should be a private matter between individuals, not something to be experienced in community.

Here are six reasons why Christians should be members of a local church. This isn't an exhaustive list, but these reasons give Christians a biblical framework to think through why they should be local Church members.

First, the Bible teaches that God distinguishes between His people and the world (Leviticus 13:46; Numbers 5:3; Deuteronomy 7:3). *We, as a*

Body of believers, are set apart from the world to be a light unto the nations.

Second, Christ says that entering the Kingdom of God means being bound to the Church “on earth” (Matthew 16:16-19; 18:17-19). The New Testament refers to some people being inside the church and some people being outside the church (1st Corinthians 5:12-13). The church in Corinth consisted of a definite number of believers, such that Paul could speak of a punishment inflicted by the majority (2nd Corinthians 2:6). Not only does the New Testament talk about the reality of church membership, but its dozens of “one another” passages are written to local churches. The “one another” passages in the New Testament fill out our understanding of what church members should look like practically.

Biblical church membership is important because the Church presents God’s witness to Himself in the world and displays His glory. In the church’s membership, non-Christians should see in the lives of God’s changed people that God is holy and gracious and that His gospel is powerful for saving and transforming sinners.

Third, the Epistles were all written to local churches. A brief sampling of Paul’s epistles make this abundantly clear:

- **1st Corinthians 1:1-2**, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...”
- **2nd Corinthians 1:1-2**, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.”
- **Philippians 1:1-2**, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.”
- **Galatians 1:1-2**, “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor

through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia...”

- **1st Thessalonians 1:1-2**, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.”

Fourth, Christ saves Christians to live in community with other believers. Christ calls believers to local church membership, not just for our spiritual growth, but also for their spiritual gifts in the context of the local church.

Fifth, some people think meeting together with other Christians is not important because the early Church only gathered in small groups in Acts 2:42-48. The problem with this view is it ignores history. As the Church continued to grow, they gathered together in large gatherings.

There were small group meetings, but there were also large gatherings. Regardless of if the local church meets in a building or a home, it doesn't matter. The Church is comprised of people who have been regenerated by the work of the Spirit. The people of God are to gather to worship together in Spirit and Truth, hear the preached Word, fellowship, participate in communion, baptism (and more), and then scatter to spread the Great Commission in their families, neighborhoods, cities, and nations.

“Christ calls other Christians to live in community with one another for accountability and spiritual growth (growing in Christlikeness).”

While many people have a problem with the Church, the Bible teaches that professing Christians are to be members of local churches. While local churches may have many issues, the Church itself is purchased by Christ and is, therefore, blameless. The members of the Church (the Body of Christ) are justified and yet sinners, meaning they

are made right with God through the blood of Jesus, but still growing in Christ-like character and going forth in His name to share the gospel to the world around them.

Those who object the loudest to this kind of teaching think that they can be Christians and not be in the Church. From even from a cursory examination of the Scriptures, the lone-ranger view of being a Christian is not biblical. Christ saves Christians to live in community with other believers. Christ calls believers to membership in the local church for their own spiritual growth, and to use their spiritual gifts in the context of that group of believers.

Christ calls other Christians to live in community with one another for accountability and spiritual growth (growing in Christlikeness).

Lastly, Christ doesn't save sinners, so they will live in isolation or be lone-rangers. Instead, He saves them so that they will be in community with one another—speaking the truth in love to one another, “one anothering” each other, and displaying His character and glory to a watching, unbelieving world.

“One Another”: How to Nurture Biblical Love in Body Life

By Brian Hedges

How do you define

“church”? What does being a member of the church mean to you? “Attending meetings, giving my offerings/tithes, casting my vote...” might be a typical answer. But actually, church membership embodies so much more than that.

Church is about relationships. How we relate to God (worship); how we relate to His Word (discipleship); how we relate to the needy (ministry); how we relate to the world (evangelism); and how we relate to one another (fellowship). Let’s focus on fellowship. The Scriptures are full of directives on how we are to relate to one another.

Paul teaches us that we are members of one another (Romans



12:5, Ephesians 4:25). This means that there is an organic unity of all believers in Christ. We are members of Him, members of His body, and thus members of one another. Understanding this is crucial to all of our relationships. It means that however we treat a member of the Body is actually how we treat Christ Himself.

The commands regarding “Body life” are very specific. There are both positive and negative commands. We are told both what to do and what not to do. Positively we are commanded to comfort one another (1st Thessalonians 4:18), edify one another (1st Thessalonians 5:11), forbear one another (Ephesians 4:2), forgive one another (Colossians 3:13), edi-

“The most often repeated command respecting Christian relationships is simply, *“love on another”...*”

fy one another (Romans 14:19), admonish one another (Romans 15:14), admonish through Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16), exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), consider and provoke one another to love and good works (Hebrews

10:24), greet one another (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2nd Corinthians 13:12, 1st Peter 5:14), assemble together to exhort one another (Hebrews 10:25), be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving towards one another (Ephesians 4:32, Romans 12:10), submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21, 1st Peter 5:5), receive one another as Christ received us (Romans 15:7), care for one another (1st Corinthians 12:25), prefer one another (Romans 12:10), be like-minded with one another (Romans 12:16, 15:5), minister one to another (1st Peter 4:10), show hospitality to one another (1st Peter 4:9), confess faults one to another (James 5:16), and pray for one another (James 5:16).

The most often repeated command respecting Christian relationships is simply, *“love one another”* (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; 1st Thes-

salonians 4:9; 1st John 3:11, 16, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2nd John 1:5). *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another”* (John 13:34, ESV). Paul teaches that we fulfill the law through loving one another (Romans 13:8). And Peter says that we are to *“love one another earnestly from a pure heart”* (1st Peter 1:22).

There are also many negative commands in Scripture which teach us how *not* to treat one another. We are specifically forbidden to lie to another (Colossians 3:9), bite (harshly talk to), devour (use abusively), and consume (take without giving in return) one another (Galatians 5:15), provoke [to wrath/anger] one another (Galatians 5:26), envy one another (Galatians 5:26), take one another to court (1st Corinthians 6:7), be *“puffed up in favor of one against another”* (1st Corinthians 4:6), or judge (wrongly) one another (Romans 14:13). Of course, every sin forbidden in Scripture applies to our relationships with one another.

Now, the question I want to ask is this: how can we nurture this kind of biblical love towards one another in practical ways? It's one thing to see these commands on paper. It's another thing to live them out. We need help. What can we do to help?

Saturate Yourself in Scripture

Paul commands: *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God”* (Colossians 3:16, ESV). Do you see the connection? As the word of Christ takes residence in your life, you will be equipped to teach and admonish others. How can you obey what you don't remember? And how can you remember what is not etched in your mind? Familiarity with the Word is essential to Biblical relationships. Perhaps the main reason why people have difficulty getting along with others (whether in their families or in their churches) is because they do not know and obey Scripture. Why not start familiarizing

yourself with Scripture by looking up and studying these "one another" passages?

Live in Covenant with Your Church

Many churches today don't have "church covenants". Ours does. And the most God-centered churches that I know of do. What is a church covenant? It is simply a document that summarizes our Biblical responsibilities towards one another and declares our commitment to fulfill those responsibilities.

Have Deep Friendships with Other Believers Who Will Hold You Accountable to Walk with Jesus

The importance of accountability cannot be over-emphasized. If you struggle in a particular area (gossip, bitterness, selfishness, lust, prayerlessness, etc.), then you should ask a brother or sister in Christ (men with men, women with women) to hold you accountable in that area. If you sin, commit yourself to confess it to them. How else can you obey the command of James 5:16?

Meet with Other Believers in Small Groups

This is different from regularly assembling with the saints for worship on Sunday mornings. That is crucial. But it isn't enough. This is joining with other believers in a more informal context for bible study, prayer, accountability, fellowship, and encouragement. The biblical basis for meeting in smaller groups is strong. Acts 2:46 indicates that believers in the early church met together regularly in their homes. Acts 12:12 describes a prayer meeting in the house of Mary. Paul taught not only publicly, but "from house to house" (Acts 20:20), indicating two kinds of gatherings: public and private. Passages like Romans 16:4-5, 1st Corinthians 16:19, and Philemon 2 mention assemblies in homes.

Another plank in the argument for meeting in small groups is the

fact that the “one another” commands are reciprocal. They are mutual. I am to serve you; you are to serve me. I am to teach you; you are to teach me. The road runs both ways. But in most formal church settings, that doesn’t happen. When a pastor preaches on Sunday mornings, the road is running one way. From the pastor to the people. I’m not downplaying the value of that—in fact, my life and livelihood is centered around that awesome task. But that’s not all there is to Body life. There is also to be the ministry of every member to one another. The best practical way to facilitate “every member ministry” is meeting in small groups.

When the writer of Hebrews said, *“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin”* (Hebrews 3:12-13, ESV), and *“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near”* (Hebrews 10:24-25, ESV), he had more in mind than meeting together for worship services. Notice that he commands us to exhort one another *daily*. How can you exhort one another daily if you only engage one another once (or twice) a week? But if you see other believers on Sundays, *and* meet in a small group, *and* then talk on the phone, *and* send off e-mails, *and* meet for breakfast or lunch, then this daily “one-anothering” may begin to take place.

Discover and Use Your Spiritual Gift(s)

Every person in the Body of Christ has been given spiritual gifts through which to edify other believers. Ephesians 4:7 says, *“But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.”* God intends for us to use these gifts of grace as means of ministering to others.

Peter describes us as “stewards” of the currency of God’s grace, say-

ing: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1st Peter 4:10, ESV). The next verse gives us a two-fold description of spir-

itual gifts: “Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (There are more complete and

“I don’t know my spiritual gift,” you might say.

complex lists in 1st Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; Romans 12:6-8; and Ephesians 4:11.)

J.I. Packer describes these two categories of spiritual gifts as “gifts of speech and gifts of Samaritanship (loving helpful response to others’ physical and material needs.)” The first assortment of gifts (which includes teaching, prophesying, and exhorting) are meant to edify through speaking truth to meet people’s spiritual needs. The second assortment (which includes giving, serving, and showing mercy) are intended to edify through meeting people’s physical needs. Both are to be done “by the strength that God supplies”, that God might be glorified. You see, when we minister to others through God’s strength supplied to us, the reality is that God is ministering to others through us. And therefore He gets the glory as the Supreme Giver.

“I don’t know my spiritual gift,” you might say. Well, it isn’t nearly as important that you identify your specific gift as it is to actively seek to build up the faith and meet the needs of other believers. In fact, I think the best way to discover your spiritual gift (or gifts) is to start looking for ways to build up others. If the Body of Christ responds positively to your efforts, then you have probably found your gift. So, focus on the purpose of all the gifts (building faith and meeting needs), and

you will likely discover your specific gift.

In conclusion: we are members of the Body of Christ. Are we living like it? Are we living out the “one anothers” towards other believers in meaningful ways? Or are we living like amputated fingers or arms—cut off from the rest of the Body? Remember who you are—a member of Christ’s Body; saturate your soul with His Word, live in covenant with the church, keep yourself accountable to other believers, assemble with other believers in small groups, and develop (and use) your spiritual gifts. In so doing you will be obeying that great and awesome command: “love one another.”

Reference:

J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Fleming H. Revell, 1984) 83.

Fellowship: God's Workspace for His Glory

By Laura Miller



I can see God's eastern canvas from my pillow each morning, a front row seat to the glorious awakening of the sky. No matter how it's painted, no matter how tired I am, my eyes are

glued to the horizon. There's no sleeping in because the one missed may be the best sunrise yet. How I feel about the morning sky is how many people feel about special events or unique experiences. It's popularly known as FOMO, the "Fear of Missing Out". Sometimes it's the party or the latest movie, the new car or the best friend. But how often, for Christians, is it fellowship?

Walk into any church in North America, evangelical or mainline, traditional or contemporary, and there will be a reference to fellowship some-

where in the building—on a board, in a bulletin, part of a media presentation.

"The mark we bear as Jesus' disciples is fellowship— a partnership in the gospel that has begun in us, that He will complete in the final day..."

Today, churches are encouraged to draw visitors by including the word in their marketing material. While some traditions plan events, others tick the box by adding a line in the liturgy or a handshake during the service. And with each occurrence, we are prone to hang expectations for what we think fellowship

should look like on hooks that are not meant to bear that weight—the weight of misplaced hopes, inevitable disappointment, and despair. Sadly, this is what fellowship looks like to many in the church, but what is God's vision for fellowship?

In the New American Standard Bible, the Greek word *koinonia* is translated into *fellowship* twelve times, as well as being rendered as *sharing*, *participation*, and *contribution*. In all usages, the writers employ *koinonia* to describe the manner of life lived by the early church, but God introduced fellowship to His people long before the New Testament.

Man is a Social Being

God, whose own nature is three persons in one, made man a social being. He saw that there was no companion for Adam and determined a

good world would include the creation of Eve (Genesis 2:18)—establishing the first social group, and it was also good. Soon on its heels, however, the first social dysfunction erupted and infected every human interaction after it. Though we are made for fellowship, like our first parents, we do it with the obstacles that come with being fallen and full of a rebellion that lashes outward as much as it does upward. Perhaps that's because we're not supposed to *do* fellowship. We are supposed to *be* [in] fellowship—abiding in Christ with one another, “being of the same mind” (Philippians 2:2) and “becoming like Him” (Philippians 3:10). The mark we bear as Jesus' disciples is fellowship—a partnership in the gospel has begun in us, that He will complete in the final day (Philippians 1:6).

We all have ideas about what fellowship should look like. We often anticipate a certain outcome—affirmation, an invitation, a best friend. And when the results don't measure up to our expectations, we fear we've missed out on the good life. We blame faulty fellowship, cold churches, and fake people, but fellowship isn't based on any of those things. It's timeless, having been established before the foundation of the world. It's bound together by a sacrifice made to secure peace and reconciliation, yielding gratitude in the hearts of worshipers. It is essence preceding practice. And it's grounded in truth about who Christ is.

Christian fellowship begins with God

As disciples of Christ, our spiritual rebirth transforms our being. We are known to be His through a love that is informed by this transformation (John 13:35). Christian fellowship differs from what the world has to offer because it begins with God. The Trinity provides the template for unity (Philippians 2:1–2), its sweet, perfect, reciprocal fellowship acting together, yet as one in the creation of the world (Genesis 1:26), the redemptive plan of salvation (Matthew 3:16–17), and the min-

istrations of grace and peace to the elect (1st Peter 1:2).

Sin brought discord, and the first couple fell out with one another and then with God. Through succeeding generations, sins of ingratitude, partiality, and grumbling compounded, yet God chose and called out a family, formed them into a nation, and made a covenant with them that included reconciliation and peace. In the midst of the statutes and laws established for the formation and governance of the nation of Israel, God encoded the opportunity for any of the people to present a peace offering (Leviticus 3; 7:11–17). This was also known as a fellowship offering because it acknowledged that any hope for restored fellowship between God and the one making the offering was due to the peace that God had initiated and granted on His own terms. The worshiper was declaring gratitude for God's generosity.

The offering reflected the condition of the heart. It was not mandatory, but voluntary. It was not a duty, but a privilege. It was personal because it was made by an individual and not on behalf of the people. It was spontaneous in that it wasn't according to the tabernacle cycle, but usually predicated upon an event, a circumstance, or a Spirit-directed inclination. It announced that the worshiper was moved by the kindness he experienced and humbled that he, a sinner, had received mercy and not rejection at the hands of a holy and just God. Fellowship restored by God was being celebrated.

The declaration of gratitude took place at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting with all the congregation looking on (Leviticus 3:1–5; 7:6–36). The worshiper's personal act called on the entire Body to rejoice in God along with him, giving testimony to the wondrous works of the Lord. It was as if he was saying, "Listen to how benevolent Yahweh is! Let's party and exalt our magnificent God!" Full of gratitude and goodwill, it's no wonder our Levitical worshiper extends fellowship to his neighbors, beckoning all to feast and celebrate the mercy of God.

Be, Then Do

Thankful, humble proclamation about God's praiseworthy and remarkable offering; the bountiful celebratory feast shared with fellow believers; spontaneous, voluntary, and personal testimony to the goodness and mercy of the Lord—doesn't this describe the early church?

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47).

Look beyond the things the early church *did* together to the language used to describe the *nature* of their fellowship: *devoted, awed, in common, generous, consistent and persevering, glad, praise-filled, favored*. These identify who God's people are. Christian fellowship is unique in essence and, therefore, in practice—beginning with God's benevolence and culminating in man's gratitude.

In His high priestly prayer (John 17:6–26), our Savior-Advocate uncovers the mystery of fellowship and its foundation in the Trinity. Christ is one with the Father and the Spirit, entering into our human social sphere to share Trinitarian fellowship with us. In Christ, we abide together with the indwelling Spirit, perfectly one with Him and the Father, and one with one another (17:21–23). The Trinity seals believers in fellowship, and in fellowship we are preserved for glory (John 17:11)—our simplest acts glorifying God because we are in Christ (John 17:10). What

a privilege it is to be united with God! Sinclair Ferguson writes: “The triune One is greater in glory, deeper in mystery, and more beautiful in harmony than all of the realities in creation.” We get to reflect that mystery in Christian fellowship.

Fellowship Requires Death

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, also warned that He came with a sword (Matthew 10:34). Reconciliation with God would require the spilling of blood, as in the days of Leviticus. The sword had been raised against the perfect Lamb, and in union with the suffering of our Head, all of the members of His Body are called to die to self. The cost of reconciliation that God paid was much greater than we can ever know because the Father is holy and the Son is without blemish. We are neither, but we are made able to apprehend it through fellowship in a type of sacrifice of our wills, affections, and circumstances, walking in a manner worthy of our calling:

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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 (Ephesians 4:1b–6, ESV).

We have numerous accounts of what Christian fellowship looks like in the New Testament, but here are three: Christ stooping low to wash His disciples’ feet, urging them to serve others as their Master served them (John 13:1–17); the communion table shared by all believers—Gentiles and Jews—coming together without partiality or grumbling, confessing sins to one another, and giving thanks for the real and true peace offering bringing about real and true peace with God (1st Corinthians 11:17–34); Peter, James, and John perceiving the grace in Paul and offering him the right hand of fellowship for the sake of the spread of the gospel (Galatians

2:9).

Just as God's offering cost Him, our offering of peace to one another must cost us. We've all been to church functions meant to celebrate the Lord's blessing in a community, and inevitably, tension arises. Past hurts are recalled, and instead of bearing with one another, we highlight the differences, regarding one another with suspicion as one might an enemy who would betray us. And as quickly as that, joy evaporates. Pride, distrust, and partiality drive wedges, and an undercurrent of grumbling begins. Second-century Roman historian Tacitus wrote, "Men

are more ready to repay an injury than a benefit, because gratitude is a burden and revenge a pleasure."

"The Sword of the Spirit, God's Word, spoken in exhortation to one another, comforts and strengthens..."

It seems counterintuitive, but daily intervention with other members of the Body is the antidote to disunity. I cannot alone perceive my own blindness because I don't even know myself

(Jeremiah 17:9). Self-deceived, I easily convince myself that I am able to save my soul and guard my injured heart, but God's grace for my life comes in the form of fellowship with my brothers and sisters. *"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another"* (Proverbs 27:17). The Sword of the Spirit, God's Word, spoken in exhortation to one another, comforts and strengthens in times of temptation and despair and builds up the Body of Christ.

Hebrews 10:24–25 reveals that community is critical to preserving what God has done and will continue to do in you and me: *"Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

Avoiding this actually puts us in peril. Simply practicing the "one

another's" repels the danger that we are to our own hearts as well as to others. We read earlier in Hebrews:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:12–14).

In Fellowship: a Vision of Glory

Fellowship and communion cannot happen where everyone arrives as rulers of their own little kingdoms. There is no glory in winning the argument over the best way to do a potluck. The church gathering provides the context for Christ's prayer for His disciples when He expresses His desire that *"they may be with me and may see my glory"* (John 17:24). Not a potluck, not a picnic, but together with Him to see His glory. Where does that glory manifest itself but in the gathering of believers putting to death pride and partiality, dying to self in the workspace of fellowship (Mark 8:35–38; John 12:24; Romans 6:1–23). The Lord chisels through suffering, disappointment, and fear and applies the healing balm of affliction to our lives and our gatherings. Hard surfaces yield the most glorious designs when the Holy Spirit is our sculptor.

To get the attention of a selfish world, there's nothing like the fellowship of messy people surrendering to Christ, putting His truth before self for the sake of the Kingdom. God calls us to gather regularly because we forget every time that we can't go it alone and we put our sovereign little selves back on the throne. We forget our need for Christ's Spirit working through the Body, both for us and for us as tools in others. God ordains the variables of fellowship to do His best work in sin-scarred individuals as a witness of His glory to the world.

After a year of shutdowns and social distancing, fellowship is looking

pretty anemic. In the post-pandemic period of confusion, lethargy, caution, and discovery, many are asking the question: Can Christian fellowship survive in this new era? Fellowship's impact on this era and eternity is considerable. Remember in the early church, where devotion and a common call reflected the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace—there were 3,000 souls saved! I think there are other questions to soberly ponder:

- Am I thankful God has made me for fellowship and fellowship for me?
- Am I thankful He has restored fellowship with me by means of His perfect peace offering?
- Is impartial, grace-filled, Trinity-powered fellowship the jubilant hope I have for my sisters and brothers?
- What would reconciliation and fellowship cost me?
- Can souls that survived a pandemic afford the loss of Christian fellowship?

I don't know about you, but I don't want to sleep in and miss the glory the Lord has in store when He unites us with the rest of His Church.

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- i. "Koinonia" in the New American Standard New Testament Greek Lexicon (1999), N.p., cited www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/koinonia.html
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Small Groups and the Christian

By Dave Jenkins



Small groups are an essential ministry, for the local church and the Christian. Over fifty times in the New Testament, Christians are instructed to “one another”. For example, in Acts 2:42-48, the Early Church gathered together around the Word, prayer, food, and doing life with one another. This is what small groups should be about. In this short article, I want to talk with you about the

importance of small groups in the life of the Christian.

Small groups are not first and foremost a time for Christians to gather only for fellowship or share a meal. While fellowship is important and eating food is always good, the central point of small groups is to gather around the Word and pray with God's people. Gathering around the Word means that you read Scripture together, and someone leads the discussion of the text by people in the group. This format encourages participation among the members of the group so everyone can learn. This is important because small groups are the perfect environment for people to ask questions, receive prayer, and care.

While learning/discussion methods may vary from group to group, what matters is that the Scriptures remain central. Whether your group chooses a sermon-style presentation with questions at the end, a discussion via a question/answer format, or some other configuration of study, as long as the Bible is the focus of your group session, you're headed in the right direction.

One way to start the small group is to spend time in fellowship and prayer. First, ask people what prayer requests they have, and then allow conversation and ministry to happen among one another for about thirty minutes. After everyone has shared their prayer requests, ask people to pray for one another. After this, wrap up the prayer time and go into the Word together. This way, there is fellowship, prayer, and time in the Word. I suggest this order because it's often more important for people to have a time of prayer with each other than it is to "go deep" in a discussion on Scripture. If there is one area often neglected in the Church today, it is that of prayer for one another.

I want to come back to asking questions because, not only do we not talk enough about small groups, but there is not enough conversation in the Church about the value of asking questions and answering them in a small group. Since small groups are meant for encouraging spiritual growth, we should encourage everyone to ask any and all questions they have. No question should be off-limits. As we explore the text,

our answers should always be explained through a Biblical lens. At times further study of the subject may be required before an adequate answer can be given. When that is the case, the person facilitating the discussion should take notes and make the effort to follow up on the issue at hand so that a response can be given at the next small group meeting.

The point of having questions and an answer time is that small groups provide a safe place for people to ask questions without judgment and without getting any dirty looks for not knowing what people should know. The goal of small groups is to provide a safe place for people in our local churches to receive care, prayer, ask questions, and fellowship with one another. Small group leaders should know the essentials of the faith and be able to explain them. They should be humble, faithful, servant leaders, willing to study and learn, and already know sound doctrine.

Over the years, I've been increasingly thankful both for the small groups I've been privileged to lead in the local church and those small groups I've participated in as a non-leader. If you are in a local church—and you should be—you should also be in a small group to do life with fellow Christians; to receive prayer, encouragement, support, and learn and grow in the faith.

An Invitation to Sit: Receiving God’s Word by Sitting Through Sermons

By Scott Hurst



As I taught through the book of Amos a couple of years ago, one passage—which I had paid little attention to before—became an anchor for my convictions about God’s Word.

In Chapter 8, God gives Amos a vision of the judgement coming to Israel.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, ‘when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord’” (Amos

8:11). God taking His Word away is more deadly than your water supply sucked dry. Warren Wiersbe says having no Word from God “means no light in the darkness, no nourishment for the soul, no direction for making

decisions, no protection from the lies of the enemy.”

Without God’s Word, we are aimlessly searching, but never finding our destination. Psalm 119:105 says, *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* Without light, we will not find our way home. Knowing God and understanding ourselves is impossible apart from His Word (Psalms 119:130 & Romans 10:14-17). Timothy was called to “preach the word” (2nd Timothy 4:2) because his church needed to hear and heed the Word of God. What we need most is not bread, but God’s Word (Matthew 4:4).

“When your pastor walks to the pulpit, it is then that Jesus extends Martha’s invitation to you.”

How wonderful, then, is going to church every week and feasting on God’s Word through Bible-saturated sermons! Sermons are not the only time you hear God’s Word, but they are the only time the entire church family gathers for that purpose. It is like Thanksgiving dinner with all our aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. It is when everyone comes to the table for a feast. Sermons are not monologues, filling time between songs. They forge the church family around God’s will. Hearing the Bible explained and applied enriches our communion with God, empowering us to walk by the Spirit as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Growing as a sermon listener blesses your whole church.

Sit to Hear

The picture of sitting during a sermon stresses the significance of focus. At least once a week, while making breakfast for my kids, preparing my coffee, and putting last night’s dishes away, my wife asks me to do a specific task. I say yes, but in less than ten minutes I forget that she even asked. I am so distracted by everything else happening around me that I forget what she said once she stops speaking. As I run around the kitchen, I am unable to focus on her request, but if I sat down and

looked at her, she would have my attention.

Martha was the same. She ran around the house, distracted with getting everything ready, and cannot be bothered to listen while Jesus is teaching (Luke 10:40). Listening to sermons with one ear, while checking emails, sending texts, scheduling meetings, and planning dinner makes us like a distracted Martha. We are within earshot, but never really listening, because our focus bounces from one thing to the next. Jesus responds to Martha's distractedness by inviting her to sit and listen (Luke 10:41-42).

When your pastor walks to the pulpit, it is then that Jesus extends Martha's invitation to you. Choosing to sit, and leave the distractions for another time, embraces Jesus's invitation. Sitting increases the blessing we receive from our pastors' sermons. It takes hard work to sit and focus. Not only do children have a hard time sitting through sermons, but adults also. Let me offer three habits for helping you sit through sermons and *listen* well.

Prepare

Growing up, my family made sure the next day's lunch was always in the fridge and ready to go the night before. Preparing lunch the night before shortened the list of things to worry about before school, making mornings more manageable. It also gave me a few more minutes of sleep, which I always appreciate. Sitting and listening well during a sermon, likewise, begins with preparation before Sunday morning. By making preparation, we are sowing seeds throughout the week, which we reap during the worship service.

I find reading, praying, and resting personally helpful. Reading the passage being preached before Sunday gets me familiar with the text. When my first interaction with the passage happens before Sunday morning, I am more equipped to follow the sermon. Praying for my pastor throughout the week prepares my heart to receive his preaching. Being as well-rested as possible is key for staying awake and alert. Some

late nights are unavoidable, but binge-watching *The Office* on Saturday night never helps me on Sunday morning. Being well-rested gives us the energy we need to listen well.

Follow

We can eliminate distractions, but something inevitably breaks our focus during a message: daydreams, crinkling paper, cranky children, or going to the bathroom. Having a routine creates an on-ramp back into the sermon for times when we get distracted. Learning to follow the sermon is like following directions. Every sermon has a destination, and by following the flow of the sermon, you will get to the destination without getting lost.

Taking notes is the usual advice you get for following a sermon. For some people, note-taking is a great tool. I, however, am not a good note-taker. When I tried taking notes during sermons, it was like chasing a bus I could not catch. I wanted to be on board, I could see it in the distance, but I never caught up.

Note-taking is *one* tool for following the flow of sermons, but if it does not help you, there are other tools in the toolbox. Following the flow of the message is the goal, not note-taking. Having my Bible open and tracking my finger across the text during a sermon helps me follow along. Try some different things and see what works for you.

A brief word to preachers: Work hard to help people follow the flow of your sermon. Stating and repeating the outline of your sermon goes a long way to accomplishing this. It is very rare for me to go hiking. If I do hike, I have a hard time distinguishing the trails from the trees, so I cherish the map. It tells me where I am going, how I get there, and guides me back on the path if I get lost. Your outline provides people with a map.

The mom with small children throwing paper in the back row and the person coming back from the bathroom can get back on the trail if you show them where you are on the map. Stating your outline at the

start and restating it throughout the message is like keeping one finger on the map, tracing the trail for people. The clearer you make the path to your destination; the better people can follow you.

Encourage

I played basketball in high school and into my twenties, but not all that much anymore. My brain, however, always forgets that when I pick up a ball now. In my head, my pull-up jump shot looks like Kobe Bryant. On an actual basketball court, it looks like a dog chasing its tail. As the saying goes—use it or lose it. Just like I lose my basketball talent by not playing regularly, we lose what we learned from Sunday’s sermon by not using it.

Even though we know to be doers and not just hearers of the word (James 1:22), many of us leave a sermon unsure how to apply it. Using

what you gain from a sermon for encouraging others is a tangible way of applying the message. Hebrews 3:13 tells Christians, *“Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”* Living among brothers and sisters in our church, who put effort into encouraging us, is an incredible gift. Using what you learn from Sunday’s sermon to encourage someone in a conversation, email, text, or phone call is a tangible way we multiply that gift every week. By encouraging you can be a doer of the word every week.

Having a plan to use what we hear from a sermon holds our focus during the message. I paid attention during basketball practice, but not in math class, because I thought (rightly or wrongly) that basketball was useful and math was not. Going into a sermon listening for a word to encourage someone amplifies the usefulness of listening well. You will fo-

cus when what you hear is useful. Using every sermon with the goal of encouraging your spiritual family, allows you to train yourself to sit and listen well.

Consider the Joy of Hearing God's Word

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation conclude with a promise: the one who conquers will receive a reward from Jesus. The phrase connected to each promise shows how Christians conquer, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13 & 22). Jesus strengthens His church to conquer and persevere through the ministry of his word.

The risen Christ walks among the churches (Revelation 2:1), encouraging them by His word to persevere to the end and enjoy all the blessings of being with Him in glory. Sermons are not just a person talking. Sermons are one of the ways in which Jesus encourages His bride, as the Holy Spirit carries the Word of God to the Church. Keep this in mind and be encouraged by Jesus as you sit and listen to Bible-saturated sermons week after week.

Reference:

- i. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Concerned* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2nd Edition 2010) pg. 83.

United Disagreement

By Tim Shorey

Let's face it. This has been a bad couple of years for the American church.

Between politics, COVID, racial differences, justice questions, views on our national history, and whether or not to



wear masks, opinions have been flying around at warp-speed, with collisions everywhere. I would argue that, far from our finest hour, this has been an hour of profound sin and shame within the Church. If James were present, he would tell us to feel wretched and mournful over how we have treated each other (James 4:8-12).

Agree? On *Everything*?

In his first letter to Corinth, Paul offers us a better way than the one we have taken. At first glance, Paul's appeal in 1st Corinthians 1:10

stretches faith to the limit. And upon further review, it appears to ask the impossible. How is it possible for everyone to agree on everything; to be *united in the same mind*? This can't happen unless everyone has absolutely and equally perfect knowledge and wisdom. And it won't happen this side of heaven.

Besides, Paul writes elsewhere about various matters over which Christians will disagree, and gives them permission to do so (Romans 14:1-15:7; 1st Corinthians 8:1-10). We are even told to hold our differences *firmly*— “*each one should be fully convinced in his own mind*” (Romans 14:5). So, we not only are permitted to have different opinions; we are exhorted to strengthen them in our own hearts before

“Both divisive disagreement and united disagreement exist.”

God. Contrary to calling us unrealistically to agreement on everything, God permits us to have strong personal convictions upon which we base our own personal decisions in life.

The command in Romans 14:1 is that we are not to *quarrel* over disputable “opinions”—matters not explicitly and emphatically taught in Sacred Scripture. Paul’s aim is *not* that we have only one opinion (Romans 14:5), but that we not *quarrel* over the opinions we have (2nd Timothy 2:22-24; Titus 3:2). It is permissible to disagree; it is not permissible to quarrel like verbally pugnacious adversaries. When matters of personal faith and conscience vary, God commands us to keep our faith private; between us and God alone (Romans 14:22).

Both divisive disagreement and united disagreement exist. It is a safe bet which one the Lord wants us to practice. It is *unity in disagreement* in the week-in, week-out life of the Church to which we are called as the holy and loving people of God, and for which we must earnestly contend (Ephesians 4:1-3).

United Disagreement: When Leaders and Followers Disagree

There are, of course, relationships in which divinely ordered roles give leader-authorities the final word in disagreements. Governing officials (including bad presidents and police officers), heads of households, parents, employers, teachers, and pastors are all given leadership roles in varying spheres, which sometimes requires that their opinions/convictions will be the final say in a controversy—though they all will give a strict accounting for all they decide and do.

Rightly handled (would that we all would *rightly handle* more often!), most disagreements between leaders and followers *in the home and Church* can be discussed, prayed over, patiently worked through, and eventually brought to a mutually satisfying resolution; but not all. It is when agreement cannot be reached and decisions have to be made, that leaders and followers need Spirit-enabled unity in disagreement.

I have long been helped by James Hurley's wise counsel in this regard. His words were first written to help disagreeing husbands and wives, but I have taken the liberty here to edit and condense as follows:

Mr. Hurley begins by saying that "There are...situations...in which [leaders] and [followers], even after discussion, prayer and consultation with others, remain irreconcilably committed to different courses of action...The manner in which these situations are handled is crucial. The [leader] may not be high-handed and stubborn, knowing that [the follower] will finally have to give way. That is not the model of Christ's [leader] ship. Neither may the [follower] be grudging and resentful. That is not the manner of our response to Christ. [W]hen the two...[cannot] come to one mind, an exchange along the following lines is in order." According to Mr. Hurley, the leader should say something like:

"[N]ot because I am [wiser] or more righteous, nor because I am

right (although I do believe I am or I would not stand firm), but because it is finally my responsibility before God, we will take the course which I believe right. If I am being sinfully stubborn, may God forgive me and give me the grace to yield to you.”

Mr. Hurley recommends further that the “follower” respond with words like these: “Not because I believe you are wise[r] in this matter...or more righteous, nor because I accept that you are right (because I don’t or I would not oppose you), but because I am a servant of God who has called me to honor your [leader]ship, I willingly yield to your decision. If I am wrong, may God show me. If you are wrong, may he give you grace to acknowledge it and to change.”

“Such decisions,” Hurley concludes, “must be made. They can be steps of commitment to God which cement a relationship and assure both partners of the other’s loving commitment. They can alternatively be times which show sinful abuse. The sort of commitment outlined above can be used to preserve the dignity and honesty of both partners by setting matters in their proper context” (James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, pg.150-152).

I do not want followers to think that they should *always* yield in church or home; for there are indisputable matters of essential doctrine, life, and godliness that must be championed at all times. Still, in the normal flow of leadership-followership disagreement, this is the way forward; though it is a path requiring much wisdom and even more grace. Many have been the times when I have failed on both sides of this disagreement tension; times when I’ve not followed well or led well. None of this is easy. But a little bit more Hurley-esque wisdom in all our leader-follower relationships would go a long way toward establishing united disagreement.

The Problem of the Last Word

In Romans 14, Paul has something more in mind than just leader-

follower disagreements. He wants all spiritual brothers and sisters to learn how to handle their differences. In such cases he calls us to the humility that does not need to be proven right, or win an argument, or have the last word.

Over two centuries ago, John Newton faced the same problem that Paul confronted many centuries before; this problem of the *last word*: “I believe scarcely any thing has [contributed] so much to perpetuate disputes and dissensions in the professing church as the ambition of having the last word” (John Newton, cited by Grant Gordon in *Wise Counsel*,

Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009, pg. 251; bracket update added).

“We gain traction against this selfish arrogance when we understand that God alone *will have* the last word.”

The fact that there are still times—4.7 decades into my Christian life, 4.3 decades into my marriage, and 3.9 decades into my ministry—when I still need to put a stranglehold on my tongue to keep it from saying “just one more thing”, reveals that, at least for

me, the seduction of the last word has hardly weakened with time. And from what I've seen in others, I'm guessing that I'm not alone in the struggle.

God Gets the Last Word

We gain traction against this selfish arrogance when we understand that God alone *will have* the last word. This is Paul's emphasis in Romans 14. Each of us will give an account of *himself* to God (Romans 14:10-12). I will not give an account of you; or you of me. If you disagree with me—and happen to be wrong in the disagreement—it's not really any of my business. That's between you and God on the Day to come.

And if I am wrong, well—and I mean no flippancy—God will have a serious little “That Day” last-word chat with me about that, too. You need not fret over it at all.

We are to be willing to let our disagreeing fellow believers stand or fall on their own before the only Judge that counts (Romans 14:4; James 4:11-12); being confident that they *will* stand in the same grace in which we stand (Romans 14:4). Having this confidence means that we do not have to fix their opinions for them to be okay. They already stand before God in Christ; and correcting their allegedly wrong opinions won’t make a difference. They’re okay without us!

That everyone will answer to God and be subject to His final word should effectively close our mouths when the last-word urge surges within—even when quitting the argument may cost us dearly (1st Corinthians 6:1-8). We don’t need to be right to prove others wrong, to set them straight, or to get what’s ours. Brothers and sisters, when it comes to our disagreements, God will sort it out. And that is all the assurance we need.

United disagreement is no easy pursuit. But knowing that God has the final word helps us to know when to drop a debate, when to say no more, and when to move on in grace. When different opinions surface, we must not take the bait. It is far more important that we *keep the peace* than that we *say our piece*. It is vastly more important that we edify others and glorify God, than that we satisfy our urge to argue down precious ones for whom Christ died. And when it comes to opinions, it is *always* more important that we prove our love than that we prove our point (Romans 14:15-19; 15:1-7; 1st Corinthians 10:31-33).

How to Find a Good Church

By Scot Chadwick



You may be looking for a good church for a variety of reasons. Perhaps you are a new believer in Jesus Christ—praise God! Maybe you are moving or have moved to a new area. Perhaps your current church differs from

your understanding of biblical principles or patterns. If any of these scenarios describe your situation, you are in need of a good church. Local churches fulfill specific roles in God's plan of saving and sanctifying people. Jesus promised that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18), and we want to be part of His building work by participating in good local churches.

How to Look for a Good Church

Searching for a local church to join can be difficult, frustrating,

and overwhelming, but God helps us to walk according to His will (Romans 12:2). Pray for wisdom and discernment to find a good match. Ask Him for good, Christian friends that you can encourage and be encouraged by. Ask God for a church where you can serve alongside others

“Of primary importance is the clear preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

so that you all “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2nd Peter 3:18). He wants you to succeed in this worthy task, so pray with humble dependence upon His care for you.

Take care and give appropriate time in your search, since your participation in a local church is a significant decision that may affect you and your family for years to come. Here are some preliminary steps to take before you get too far along in your search.

Discover the Churches in Your Area

Perhaps if you have already been invited to various churches in your area, you could start your search with these. If not, you could ask family or friends what church they attend. You could also go online to search for local churches. You might also consult specific online directories of local churches, such The Master’s Seminary (<https://www.tms.edu/find-a-church/>). If you are currently in a church that is part of a denomination or other association of churches, you may want to see if there is a participating church in your area.

Most churches will have some sort of online presence, perhaps on a website or social media platform, or there might be some descriptive information in the online church directories mentioned above. In any event, you should also contact the church directly or plan a visit to talk to a church leader to learn more about the church.

Some key questions to consider as you gather information may include the following:

- Is the church's statement of faith clear and biblical, according to your perspective? What significant doctrines (if any) does it not address?
- Is the church part of a denomination or other association of churches?
- Who are the leaders in the church? How long have they been there? What training and other experience have they received?
- What is the history of the church? Is the congregation established, growing, or waning?
- What are some of the church's core commitments that may make it distinct from other churches?
- What is the level of transparency regarding church spending? What priorities are reflected in the way the money is allocated? What indebtedness does the church have?

What to Look for in a Good Church

Alongside your convictions and preferences, you will want to consider some critical characteristics that mark a good church. Each church will have its own distinct composition of these attributes, and some aspects will be quite obvious while others may take a bit more time to discern.

1. Sound Biblical Teaching

A good church teaches, believes, applies, and obeys the Bible (2nd Timothy 3:15-17; James 1:22). The role of the Bible in the life of the church may be the most significant factor to consider because it is our primary authority in matters of faith and practice (Psalm 1:2; Acts 2:42; 2nd Peter 1:3). Of primary importance is the clear preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The presiding influence of the Scriptures come primarily through the pulpit preaching, but also through Sunday school classes, home Bible studies, and natural conversations among church members (Romans 15:14; Ephesians 4:15). The Bible should be the primary voice of any les-

son, not an introductory allusion or an afterthought (2nd Timothy 4:2). The preaching and teaching should promote understanding of the Bible, which promotes and builds personal holiness and a biblical worldview. If possible, listen to several sermons from the church; these may be online or you may be able to request copies of any audio recordings that are available.

Questions to Consider

- Do they clearly present the gospel? What do they claim is necessary for a person to be saved?
- Does the church teach that the Bible is the Word of God, without error in its original manuscripts?
- Does the church teach that the Bible is the final authority in our lives and is wholly adequate to speak to the matters of our faith and practice?
- What place does the reading of Scripture have in the church meeting (1st Timothy 4:13)?
- Does the church's music communicate sound doctrine?
- Does the church present a consistent view of the Bible's history, including the creation account in Genesis?
- What curricula are used in the Sunday school classes and home Bible studies? What is their approach in teaching the Bible?
- Are parents encouraged and equipped to teach the Bible in their own homes?

2. A High View of God

The gatherings of the church should show reverence for God and should include the whole church in songs of praise and adoration (Colossians 3:17). Scripture teaches us that the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Proverbs 9:10), so we fear, love, and cling to God for our very life (Psalm 36:5-9; Matthew 22:37-38).

The church should have a high view of His perfect attributes, including His sovereignty, holiness, goodness, and love. God is both over all (Psalm 47:2; 83:18) and separate from His creation (Genesis 1:1; 1st Kings 8:27), yet He is a personal God who draws close to His creation (Psalm 57:1; 100:3; Revelation 21:3-4). Christians should practice a prayerful dependence upon God, bringing requests and thanksgivings for their own sake and for the sake of others (Acts 2:42; Philippians 4:4-7). Christians want to please the Lord (2nd Corinthians 5:9; 1st Thessalonians 4:1) and bring Him glory in all of life (Psalm 86:12; 1st Corinthians 6:20; 10:31).

Questions to Consider

- How is love for Jesus Christ evident in the congregation (Ephesians 6:24; Revelation 2:4).
- How do the public prayers in the church meeting reflect God's passion for His glory?
- How does the church trust and glorify God through trials? (Romans 5:1-5; 12:12; James 1:2-4)
- How does the church carry out the Lord's commands to baptize (Matthew 28:19) and to share the Lord's Table? (1st Corinthians 11:23-24)?
- How does the music leadership encourage the congregation to participate in worship?

3. Love for One Another

The local church grows and matures as its members actively serve one another (Ephesians 4:11-16; 1st Peter 4:10-11). It constitutes a prime venue for Christians to show love to one another, as Jesus said to His disciples, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34-35; Matthew 22:39). This love is neither merely abstract nor purely emotional, but proves itself in that we each think and

act to advance the best interests of others (Philippines 2:3-4). This love proves itself in such things as humility, peace, affection, graciousness, self-sacrifice, patience, forbearance, devotion, encouragement, admonition, discipline, and comfort.

Questions to Consider

- How were you greeted and regarded on your first visit with this church?
- How does the congregation show love for one another?
- Do you see a unity based in humility, self-denial, and self-sacrifice, and not selfishness or factiousness (Philippians 2:1-4)?
- What do the people talk about outside of the formal meeting of the church? What meaningful, heart-level relationships are being developed within the congregation?
- What place do children have in the meeting of the church?
- How might you contribute yourself and your resources to this church?
- How does someone become a member of this church? What must you agree to believe and do?

4. Godly, Caring Leadership

Jesus Christ is the head of His church (Ephesians 4:15; 5:23; 1st Peter 5:4), and He has delegated authority to qualified men to feed and lead His local congregations (Philippians 1:1; 1st Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17-20; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:7, 17). The Bible teaches that each church should be led by men of integrity who teach and model spiritual maturity (2nd Timothy 3:10-17).

These godly leaders must love the church and be committed to the sanctification of the people (Acts 20:28; Galatians 4:19), including the practice of confronting sin in the church (Matthew 18:15-20). They provide clear teaching of sound doctrine and come alongside those in the church in difficult situations or doctrinal error (Titus 1:9). These shepherds seek out the lost and straying sheep (Matthew 18:11-14; Ezekiel

34), especially those in the congregation who are discouraged and seem to have lost hope. They are to serve humbly and gently, yet boldly as under-shepherds of Christ.

Questions to Consider

- Who are the leaders of this church? How does one become a leader? Within this local church, what qualifications must the leaders meet?
- How long have the current leaders been with this congregation?
- How does the church leadership provide pastoral care for the congregation?
- Would you feel comfortable submitting to the spiritual nurture of these men? (1st Timothy 3:5; Hebrews 13:17)
- What is the role of the congregation in decision-making?
- How does the church show a high regard for its leadership? (1st Thessalonians 5:13; 1st Timothy 5:17-18; Hebrews 13:7, 17).

5. Gospel Ministry

Our Savior has entrusted to the church the message of salvation (Romans 1:16), and given us the task of making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:47). The church must proclaim the gospel of grace—that all people should turn from their sins and recognize that Jesus is Savior and Lord. Local churches can support local and foreign missionaries and mission projects, perhaps also participating in short-term mission trips to encourage church members to serve the Lord in these ways.

Church members can also meet practical needs of our neighbors, being channels of God's abundant mercy to human need and suffering, always serving with a view toward communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church should pursue a desperate and dependent holiness, not so we can think of ourselves as better than others, but so that we freely confirm God's saving and transforming work in our lives.

Questions to Consider

- What strategy does the church follow in sharing the gospel outside the church building?
- How does the church pray for unbelievers?
- How does the church pray for missionaries and mission agencies?
- What evangelistic activities does the church encourage and perform?
- What missionaries and Christian agencies does the church support? What gospel work do these people do?

Conclusion

Once you find a good church, be involved and build relationships with others in the congregation. Remember that *no church is perfect*, but you should be able to find a good church that you can joyfully be a part of. Take time to be thorough, but also avoid a continuous situation of being separate from a specific community of faith. Love, serve, and meet needs as you're able. Be present. Seek to know and be known by the church leaders. Pray for yourself and the whole church to "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity*" (2nd Peter 3:18).

Reference:

- i. Leaving a church may be appropriate when there are real doctrinal differences. Be sure to talk specifically about these apparent differences with the appropriate church leadership to bring clarity to the issue before you make a decision about leaving that church.

The Importance of Preaching for Everyday Christians

By Micah Caswell

It is common to wonder about the role of sermons in the lives of everyday Christians.

Why do pastors spend so much time preparing a weekly sermon? Wouldn't

it be better if he spent more time in meetings with teams of leaders, counseling the hurting, building relationships with visitors, or discipling young believers?

Of course, those are all key aspects of pastoral ministry. However, every Christian should recognize the role of preaching in their lives. Further, they should devote themselves to listening to biblical preaching.



Even though we live in an age with multimillion-dollar action movies and TED talks, the weekly sermon in a local church is key to the spiritual growth of everyday Christians.

Ordinary believers need to understand the Sunday sermon is grounded in a deep theology of the Word of God. Further, listening to sermons is essential for our spiritual growth. The church also needs a revival in our understanding of preaching as an avenue of grace. Spiritual maturity is linked to our ability to soak up a faithful sermon. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the role of the sermon in our corporate worship as a needed reminder of the gospel.

2nd Timothy 3:16 teaches, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*” This phrase means God’s Word comes from inside of Him. This truth is the ground for the biblical doctrine of inerrancy. The New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833) is the origin of the Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963, and 2000). All four documents explain the Bible is truth: “without any mixture of error.” The reason His Word cannot be mixed with any untruth is that only truth is found inside God. The Bible, therefore, is truth.

“Therefore, the Bible corrects or makes straight what was crooked.”

2nd Timothy 3:16 builds on this idea to explain that because Scripture is from inside God and thus truthful it is “*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*” As truth “without any mixture of error”, the Bible is useful. Specifically, the Bible is beneficial for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. God provides His Word for us to learn doctrine. We need to know it theoretically in order to apply it practically. Speculation leads to application. His Word is how God chooses to reprove or convict. We perceive our sin as sin through Scripture convicting us.

Therefore, the Bible corrects or makes straight what was crooked.

It shows us the way we should go. As a result, it trains, educates, and disciplines us to live according to God's way. The pathway to righteousness is through the Bible. The end result is that the Bible equips us "*for every good work*" (2nd Timothy 3:17).

If the Bible comes from inside God and is thus truthful and useful to equip us for good works, then what should we do with it? 2nd Timothy 4:2 says we are to "*preach the word*". We are to proclaim or herald the good news of the Bible. It is truth and it teaches us how to live faithfully. We should urgently tell the world what it teaches. People need to know. But what does preaching really mean?

Definitions of preaching abound. Sadly, due to so much unfaithful preaching, definitions have to be narrowed to Christian preaching, as well as expository preaching. A technical definition for expository preaching is needed, as well as a simpler more straight-forward one.

First, expository preaching consists of a Christian preacher uncovering an author's intended meaning of a section of the Bible, by means of the historical, grammatical, literal (consistent with the genre of the passage) exegesis as well as enlightenment by the Holy Spirit; then structuring a sermon not only built around the central idea of the text, but also the structure and thought of the text; then placing the passage within the meta-narrative of redemptive history; then interpreting a universal principle, which he first applies to himself; and concluding by applying the Scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit to his audience. Like most technical definitions, that was a mouthful! However, notice the definition includes five key components: exegesis, central idea and structure, metanarrative, universal principle, and application.

Second, expository preaching is simply defined as a sermon that *explains* and *applies* the passage preached. But, why is it so important for a pastor to explain and apply the Bible? Churches and pastors should commit to preach the Bible because of the example given to us throughout the Scriptures.

Beginning in Genesis 1, we learn that God ultimately creates by speaking creation into existence. His Word (or communication) is what brings life. Another interesting example is the account of the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37. God brings His prophet to a valley filled with bones. The bones are so dead they are described as dry. Again, God's chosen method of bringing life is the communication of His Word. The prophet is told to preach of the dry bones. As a result of his proclamation the bones come to life.

In the book of Ezra, we read of God's people rebuilding the temple. We see scenes of God's people gathering in order to hear the prophet explain and apply God's Word. As a result, we see a familiar Old Testament phrase that the people are doing things "*as it is written*" (Ezra 3:2). Faithfulness to the preaching and explanation of God's Word led to the application of rebuilding the temple.

We also see helpful examples in the New Testament where God's Word is explained and applied. Between the testaments the synagogue system was established. Throughout the land of Israel buildings were built with the primary purpose of reading the Scriptures then explaining and applying them. Jesus provided us an example in Luke 24 where he appeared on the Road to Emmaus. He walked and talked with two who followed Him but strangely do not recognize Him. Jesus proceeded to explain the meaning of all the Bible to them. Then, upon hearing His explanations, God enabled them to see Jesus. A great example of faithful preaching was Peter's sermon in Acts 2. He explained and applied texts like Joel 2 and Psalm 16 in order to call the crowd to repent and believe. Thousands were born again at the preaching of God's Word. Finally, we are given an interesting account in Acts 8 that helps us further understand the importance of preaching. The Spirit led Philip to an Ethiopian Eunuch reading the book of Isaiah. The problem was the man needed to do more than just read it because he did not understand it. In Acts 8:30, Philip asks, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" Under-

standing was what he lacked, therefore he needed more than just reading. The Ethiopian Eunuch needed preaching. Philip proceeded to explain and apply the Bible to him resulting in the man's salvation.

Again, preaching is explaining and applying the Bible. Communication of God's Word leads to life. In fact, the biblical model of someone experiencing new life and being born again is through the avenue of the preaching of God's Word. We need to read the Bible, but sitting at home alone reading it is not sufficient for a healthy spiritual life. Every Chris-

_____ tian needs the preaching of God's Word. Therefore, we need a renewed understanding of preaching as a means of grace.

"Therefore, it is helpful to think of spiritual disciplines as means of grace."

_____ Spiritual disciplines are biblical habits that promote spiritual growth. 1st Timothy 4:7 calls us to train ourselves in order to become godlier. However, we have to be careful and not make the mistake of the Pharisees in believing the *discipline* is the godliness. Christians, unlike the Pharisees, understand spiritual practices are a means to an end.

Further, another mistake of the Pharisees was living out their spirituality in their own strength. Moralism—being good or righteous through human strength—is contrary to the gospel. For example, in Philippians 2:12 God calls us to obey and to work out our salvation with "*fear and trembling*." However, He goes on to say in Philippians 2:13 that "*it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*." As a result, not only is godliness the goal of our spiritual habits, but we cannot ultimately do them out of our own strength. Therefore, it is helpful to think of spiritual disciplines as means of grace. These biblical habits are how God pours out His grace in order to conform us to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29).

Biblically, we see a series of ways God's grace conforms people into

the image of Jesus. Bible reading is key to spiritual growth. Prayer is a vital means of grace. Ministry and service are also hallmarks of a healthy spiritual life that leads to godliness. However, listening to preaching is also essential. Ephesians 4:11 says that God has given the church individuals gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. Each of those god-gifted roles requires preaching. Paul goes on to explain the reason God has given us those ministers. He says they are given “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry*” (Ephesians 4:12). Their preaching is a means of grace to daily help Christians mature to the point of doing ministry. Like prayer, Bible reading, or good works, preaching is a means of grace given to each and every Christian.

If preaching is a means of grace, how can everyday Christians be equipped through listening to the preaching of God’s Word? First, be prayerful to prepare your heart to hear God’s Word. Most Christians do not pop out of bed in the morning excited to hear a sermon. Therefore, we need the Spirit’s help. We need to pray to God to give us a heart to hear what we need to hear from the upcoming sermon.

Second, learn how you learn. Some people are classified as audible learners, while others are visual learners. Some are active learners, while others are reflective learners. While some learn through sequential steps, others are called global learners. Learning how you are wired can help you develop proactive strategies to better hear God’s Word.

Third, take notes. The sermon is primarily an audible experience. However, even if you are a visual learner take notes on what you are hearing. Pastors should develop sermon notes and ways for the congregation to fill in blanks. And preachers should make the main points clear. However, preachers should not make the note taking too obvious. Sequential learners need to see the flow of thought, but global learners need to figure some things out for themselves. Even if your pastor does not provide sermon notes, everyone learns best with a pen in their hand, writing down key concepts as well as notable truths.

Fourth, listening to a sermon and taking notes will require someone to develop their concentration abilities. The success of things like TikTok and TED Talks highlight our generation's short attention spans. Pray for God to help you concentrate. Make it a game to see how long you can focus. Remember, concentration can be developed.

Fifth, in your mind or on your sermon notes, ask the “so what” questions. Educators understand that one of the best ways to motivate students to learn is to quickly show the relevance and usefulness of their lesson. God is communicating through every verse in the Bible; therefore, our role is to determine the relevance of the passage. When we are listening to a sermon, we need to ask questions like: What do I need to believe? What do I need to turn from? How does this passage convict me? How does this verse encourage me? What does this say about my heart? What does this Scripture teach me about Jesus and His gospel grace? Keep your mind active by discovering how your pastor's sermons can transform your thinking, emotions, and behaviors.

During the pandemic we have all been reminded of the charge from Hebrews 10:25 to not neglect the habit of meeting together. For a season we had to neglect this habit, due to forced mandates. However, one of the main reasons we meet together is to hear the preaching of God's Word. The sermon is meant to be a communal experience. Christians are designed to come together daily and collectively hear the Word preached. Together we are to learn and be admonished and encouraged. Together we are to believe and repent. Together we are to remember the good news of the gospel. Brothers and sister, do not neglect the hearing of God's Word preached. We all need it. It is a gift, a means of God's grace. I pray your pastor sees you this Sunday with your Bible open and your pen in hand!

Discipleship for the Glory of God

By William Farley



I have been a Christian for fifty years, and during that time I have disciplined scores of men. It's been a labor of love. Some have gone on to be leaders in the church. Others have become better fathers and husbands. In a few cases, the results have not been positive. Some have remained totally unchanged, while others have completely fallen away from Christ. One even ended up in prison for molesting his daughters. I was not too surprised, unfortunately. Even Spurgeon had dis-

appointing disciples. When asked about them, he responded. The explanation is simple. They were my disciples—not Christ’s.

Despite the ups and downs, discipleship is central to the local church’s mission. The Great Commission is to make “disciples”. It is not to get “decisions”. *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,”* commanded Jesus, *“baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:18-20).

To help you excel at this discipline, I will answer four questions. What is discipleship? Why should the church practice it? Who should the church disciple? And how should we go about it?

What is Discipleship?

“Making disciples” means cooperating with the Holy Spirit to help other Christians become like Christ for the glory of God. Notice we are *cooperating with* the Holy Spirit. We are *not replacing* Him. This distinction is crucial.

Because the Holy Spirit is the ultimate discipler, guilt-manipulation and other forms of external control have no place in our pastoral work. Guilt-manipulation binds them to the discipler, not Christ. By contrast, the Holy Spirit changes people from the heart outward, and therein lies the great pastoral problem—you can’t change another’s heart. Therefore, the leader’s job is to identify what the Spirit is doing in a Christian and encourage it. This means that every leader is totally dependent on the Holy Spirit’s prior initiative! You can manipulate Jack with guilt to read his Bible, or you can talk to him about the glories of Christ until spiritual hunger motivates him. The latter is Christian discipleship.

Why Should the Church Practice It?

Second, why should we prioritize discipleship? The first reason is that Christ commands it. As we have already noted, Jesus did not command us to get “decisions”. The Great Commission is more than that. It is about discipling nations. Making disciples is long-term—even years—

but we haven't obeyed the Great Commission until converts become disciples.

The second reason we should make disciples is that the glory of God is at stake. God's end in creation and redemption is the display of His glory. We glorify God when we delight in Him and imitate the moral example He displayed at the cross.

There is a last reason making disciples matters. If you are a pastoral leader and your church grows, the stress will be intolerable unless

“The Bible assigns the task of discipling wives and children to husbands.”

you develop leaders to help bear the load. This means that after preaching, the pastor's number one priority should be making disciples.

Pareto's 80/20 principle is helpful here.

Eighty percent of the average Christian leader's efforts get twenty percent of his or her results. Whereas twenty percent of his/her efforts get eighty percent of his/her results. Therefore, effective Christian leaders identify the twenty percent and delegate everything else.

The twenty percent that get the long-term results are preaching and *discipling*. If a Christian leader is not investing wholeheartedly in preaching and discipling, then it is unlikely that you will have substantial long-term fruit.

Who Should the Church Disciple?

Who to target is the third crucial question. Children, husbands, wives, and singles comprise the average church. But the benefits of discipling these groups are not equal. Therefore, wise pastoral leaders intentionally prioritize those that maximize the long-term glory for God.

The members of your church will apply well-meaning social pressure to disciple the least fruitful groups. For example, parents will pressure church leaders to disciple the children. I'm thinking of children's and youth ministries. But discipling children is the least effective way to maximize glory for God.

The second pressure will be for women's ministries, and although the women matter greatly, this will also be less fruitful. This is who the average evangelical church targets. "The church and the Titanic have something in common," writes David Murrow. "It's women and children first. The great majority of ministry in Protestant churches is focused on children, next on women."

Discipling men, not children or women, is the most fruitful way to fulfill the Great Commission. It's not that men are more important than women. They are not. It's because discipling men provides the long-term results we really want. It is the rock-solid foundation upon which fruitful local churches build. Why would I say this?

The Bible assigns the task of discipling wives and children to husbands. Therefore, the local church that goes around the men, directly discipling women and children, when the men are not doing it at home, will be mostly ineffective. This is why fruitful pastoral leaders aim all their arrows at their men. What do they teach them? They start by teaching them to establish personal devotions then to disciple their wives and children. This foundation is the necessary prerequisite for discipling other men.

Wives

God does not give the task of discipling wives to the women's ministry. He gives it to *husbands*. Husbands discipling wives is God's priority, and it is foundational to all that follows.

*"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might **sanctify** her, having cleansed her by the **washing of water with the word**, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, **without spot or wrinkle** or any such thing, that she might be **holy and without blemish**" (Ephesians 5:25–27).*

I have emphasized the discipling language— "sanctify," "washing of water with the word," presenting her "without spot or wrinkle...holy and without blemish."

The problem with obeying this text is that your wife is often the most challenging person to disciple. Maybe she knows the Bible better than you? Perhaps she actively resists your efforts to lead her? Maybe she isn't even a Christian? In some cases, wives look down on their husbands, discouraging their efforts. After all, who knows your sins and weaknesses better than she?

Nevertheless, when a man discipled other men but ignores his wife, he is acting hypocritically. Worse, he is sowing seeds of long-term fruitlessness. The men he discipled will imitate him. They will ignore their wives, and the entire congregation will suffer. In addition, because this is the priority God most cares about, God will resist you.

The same priorities apply to married woman discipling other women. Before a woman discipled other women, she should start by encouraging her husband to disciple her. Why?

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:22-24).

God gives authority to those under authority. Is your discipling ministry squarely under your husband's authority? Are you doing it with his permission? Is he encouraging or resisting you? Unless your ministry is directly under your husband's authority, like Balaam and his donkey, the angel of the Lord will stand in the road resisting your progress. Worse, the women you lead will imitate you.

Children

In the same way, God holds fathers, *not* local churches, responsible to disciple their children. If you are not actively discipling your children, the children's ministry in your local church will probably be mostly fruitless.

"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

A teacher at a Christian school shared his experience. He told me that there is a direct correlation between the father's spiritual involvement with his children and the school's ability to reach that child spiritually. Again, notice Paul's words in Ephesians 6: "discipline and instruction." It's the language of discipleship.

The conclusion is radical but foundational. A man not willing to start with his wife and children has no business discipling other men. By "discipling" at home I mean regular family devotions, talking with your children about the Bible and spiritual things, sacrificially loving your wife, and—above all—setting an example of spiritual hunger for your family.

Men

Churches that prioritize discipling men get bundled rewards. The women and children usually follow. "On the main, if men are growing the rest of the church follows," writes Jim Eliff. "I can't feel good about a church that isn't mentoring men in a serious way."

Therefore, wise elders motivate and persevere in men's discipleship. Unlike women's discipleship, building a culture of men's discipleship requires significant spiritual sweat. It does spontaneously happen, but it produces three big-time rewards.

First, it provides a pool of future leaders. Second, it attracts other men to your church. Churches with vibrant male leadership are attractive to outside men. Third, it makes your church attractive to wives, single women, and children. Reach the men and you get everyone else thrown in as a bonus. Reach the women and that is all you will reach. According to David Olson, many churches have discovered that reaching men "is crucial to their success...In most cases 'the impediment to family faith was, in a word, men...If they go over the tipping point, women follow, children in tow.'"

I have personally experienced the truth of these statements. I planted a church in 2002, and immediately established a men's discipleship group. I met with eight to twelve men each Saturday morning from 8:00

to 10:00 AM. We discussed and applied articles by various Christian authors. We discussed and applied chapters from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. We discussed and applied appropriate sections of scripture. We had one goal—to help the men establish personal devotional habits and then to disciple their wives and children.

The men that finished the program began to lead other groups. It took five to seven years of dogged perseverance, but once established, our now-dominant church culture of male discipleship funnels new men directly into the men's discipleship program. It's just what men do in our church. Afterward, we introduced women's discipleship, and to the lady's credit, it took off with little effort. Youth ministry followed. Healthy, fruitful churches prioritize men.

How Should We Go About It?

Scripture, prayer, and living example are the three tools of discipleship. As we have already noticed, the Holy Spirit alone changes people. Obviously, He uses human leaders, but the work is essentially God's. Only God can create spiritual hunger, and that hunger is the motor that drives authentic discipleship. It will always be more robust in some than others, and it is always a response to God's Word.

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12–13).

In essence, effective disciples are motivated and changed by a word-saturated culture. It starts with preaching and its application. But ultimately, the word of God culminates in the cross. Therefore, cross-centeredness is crucial to fruitful discipleship. A rich understanding of what happened at the cross, and its application to his life, arms disciples to discern God's will in most situations.

In addition to the word, prayer is crucial. Prayer that the Holy Spirit would deeply root God's word in the disciple's heart is vital. Prayerless disciplers are an oxymoron, testifying to our self-reliance.

“What gives a ministry its motivations, perseverance, humility, joy, tenderness, passion, and grace,” writes Paul Tripp, “is the devotional life of the one doing ministry.”

The third tool is a living example. If there is a conflict between what you teach and what you do, your disciples will generally imitate what you do, not what you teach. Therefore, your devotional life, your humility, your efforts to disciple your own wife and children, your prayer life, etc. are all absolutely crucial to the discipling process.

Conclusion

Discipleship occurs when we help other Christians grow in godliness and holiness. It matters because God’s glory is at stake. It matters because Jesus commanded us to make disciples, not just acquire decisions.

Preaching and discipling men are the two activities that get the long-term results we really want. Effective discipleship starts by teaching men to disciple their wives and children.

Because we are completely dependent on the Holy Spirit, the word of God, prayer, and living example are the three tools that fundamentally change those we lead. We fulfill the great commission when we disciple men, then families, and lastly nations.

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all men...teaching them to do all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-19). That is our mission. When we apply ourselves to this work, Christ promises to be *“with us to the end of the age.”*

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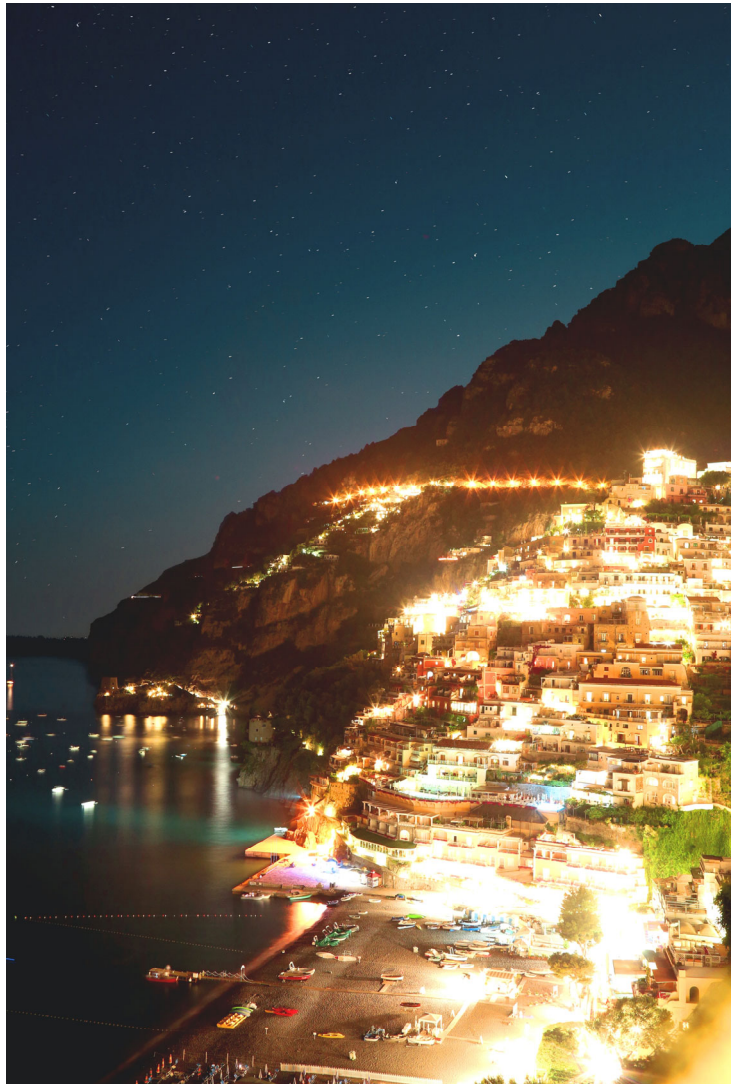
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The Importance of Church Membership in Evangelism

By Ben Wilson

Jesus gave the church the Great Commission to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). This is a solemn and glorious responsibility. Jesus did not give this commission to one individual. He could have given it to Peter. “Peter, now that you are restored here is what I want you to do. You go and make disciples of all nations.” He gave it to the disciples as a group, and as we see from Acts the disciples obeyed and planted churches, which continued the work of Jesus’ commission.

Jesus gave the command to a collective group of people. The church is the primary vehicle God uses to grow His Kingdom. We must obey as individuals,



but we are more equipped to obey when we belong to a church.

We Need Each Other

The Christian life is not meant to be a solo adventure. Membership means belonging. Becoming a member of a local church is an intentional decision on your part and the other Christians in that church to obey Scripture together.

Colossians 3:16 is one of my favorite verses. *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in*

your hearts to God.” Paul is calling the Colossian church to let Christ’s word abundantly dwell in them, and the result is that they would teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. One way they would do this is through singing. One of the key phrases in this verse is “one another”. They were to teach and admonish their brothers and sisters in Christ, within the context of the church. You need to be teaching and admonishing through your singing with the congregation and they do the same for you.

“Church membership is one way we express our need for other Christians. We need each other.”

It is impossible to obey this command if we are never around the “one another” Paul mentions. God’s will is that this happens through the church—a local assembled group of Christians. Church membership is one way we express our need for other Christians. We need each other.

Benefits of Church Membership for Evangelism

This means we need each other for the work of evangelism. It is possible to tell others about Jesus without being a member of a church, but we rob ourselves of many benefits if we are not. Here are six benefits for evangelism when you are a church member.

The Great Commission

First, remember Jesus gave the Great Commission to the Church. We can only rightly obey Christ's command when we are correctly linked to His body. We may tell someone about Jesus, but if that activity is *always* disconnected from a local church ministry, it is insufficient. To rightly obey we need the church, we need to belong to a local church.

Accountability Through Discipleship

At my church we use our discipleship groups to provide accountability for one another. The accountability provided could be as multi-faceted as the people you have involved since we have our unique struggles.

"Being part of a local church is an opportunity to receive training in evangelism."

But one area we ask every group to provide accountability for is evangelism. This is not a time to beat up one another, but to keep evangelism in front of us. This is as simple as asking what non-Christians we are developing a relationship with so that we can share the gospel. This also provides a place where others can share when they did evangelize and how it went. Additionally, and most importantly, it provides opportunities to pray for those who are lost and for those who are spreading the gospel.

Training

Being a part of a local church is an opportunity to receive training in evangelism. It is true that you could buy a book and train yourself, but that is not so much what I have in mind. Churches can—and, in many cases, should—offer formal training in evangelism. The training I have in mind is informal and it can come in many forms.

- You could be trained in evangelism by listening to how your

pastor addresses non-Christians during his sermon. He may say something a certain way that you had never thought about. When that happens, you just received informal training.

- The conversations that happen between brothers and sisters in Christ are invaluable as well. You may talk to a mature saint one Sunday morning and hear their testimony of personal growth through evangelism. This, again, is something you can learn from and implement as you see fit.
- Being heavily involved in other people's lives helps as well. If you consistently go to someone's house, you will have the opportunity to see how parents treat their children, which gives them an opportunity to tell them the gospel. You can observe their interactions with their neighbors and how knowing and loving someone can lead to an evangelistic conversation.

More could be added, but as we invest in the members of a local church we will grow in evangelism as we see them obeying Scripture. None of us has perfectly figured out evangelism; I know I haven't. We need each other for continued training.

Support

Not only do we receive training, but support. How is support different than training? Church membership is another way of knowing someone has your back. You know that many people are there for you. When you have a friend that you want to share the gospel with, you have brothers and sisters who will pray for and encourage you. Without the Church, it is easy to get overwhelmed in evangelism. Who would you turn to if you were constantly rejected? Who has your back when you're alone? With the Church we are never alone.

Guidance

There will be times when you are burdened to share the gospel with a friend or family member, but you don't know how to approach it or

may not be sure what to say. God gave us pastors and mature saints in the church to help. If there is someone at your church that you think is gifted in evangelism, ask them what they would do. How would they approach the situation?

This is also helpful to know what *not* to say. I remember a time when my church was going through evangelism training and someone asking me when they should bring up the doctrine of election during evangelism. I politely told them they should stick to the main points of the gospel: God is holy, we are sinners, and therefore we need Jesus and the salvation only He can provide. For this person, if they had not been

_____ a member of a local church, they may have become frustrated in their evangelism because they were bringing up a doctrine that could distract from the goal of evangelism. We all know how our flesh, the world, and the devil will try to distract us. This is one reason why sharing about election in this context may not be wise. Of course, if _____ asked a question regarding this doctrine, we should address it Biblically.

“There will be people that God has equipped you to evangelize to that He hasn’t similarly equipped others in your church for.”

But always remember the hope and prayer of the evangelistic conversation is to see them come to Christ.

A Team Approach

The final benefit of church membership for evangelism is a team approach. When we read in Scripture that we are to make disciples of all nations it could be intimidating if we were alone. But we aren’t. Jesus is with us and He has given us His Church.

There will be people that God has equipped you to evangelize to that He hasn’t similarly equipped others in your church for. And the opposite is true as well. We should be willing and ready to share the gospel

with all people, but there will be times when you may have a harder time with one person and someone else in your church won't. Be faithful. You may plant the seed and they may see the harvest. But with a team (or more accurately, a family) approach we can each be faithful where God calls us, knowing that we are not alone. In summary, the six benefits of church membership for evangelism are:

1. Obeying the Great Commission as Jesus gave it.
2. Accountability through discipleship.
3. Training
4. Support
5. Guidance
6. A Team Approach

Evangelism Without Church Membership Leads to Weak Converts

Evangelism without church membership leads to weak converts. Does that statement surprise you? Notice that statement says *converts*, not disciples. Too often evangelism that is disconnected from the local church leads to *converts* and *not disciples*. Perhaps someone was told the gospel and they prayed a prayer and came to church a few times, but they have never been back nor thought about Jesus in years. They may have professed faith, but their current lack of following Jesus should trouble us. Was this person ever truly saved?

In the Great Commission Jesus said we are to baptize and teach. Baptism is another gift Jesus gave to the church. One implication of this is that those that we share the gospel with, if they truly believe in Jesus, will integrate into the life of the church. It will be harder for this to happen if you, the evangelizer, are not a part of a local church.

None of this is meant to be legalistic. Jesus loves the Church (Ephesians 5:22-32), and we should too. We can only love the Church if we are striving to be as committed to it as Jesus is (Acts 9:5). Our present commitment to the Church is an indicator of our present commit-

ment to Jesus. That has implications for our whole spiritual life, including evangelism. **Church membership is for your good and has many benefits for evangelism.**

Engaging in Biblical Counseling with Another Christian

By Joey Tomlinson



In answer to the question, “How do I engage in biblical counseling with another Christian?” I am

tempted to say, “Open your Bible and remain silent” and leave it at that, but that certainly doesn’t fulfill any sort of word count requirements for an article such as this. However, the issue of biblically counseling a Christian friend is more complex than my short answer (but admittedly, not paralyzingly complex), because it does require a bit more intentionality and thoughtfulness. Therefore, as I reflected on my own ministry of biblical counseling, I decided to speak to 3 issues that we as Christians must consider if we want to counsel faithfully according to Scripture.

Know What Biblical Counseling Is and Isn't

In my studies, I've found that much of the debate surrounding biblical counseling involves well-meaning brothers and sisters speaking *past* each other. This sort of behavior is tragic because there is so much literature that has been published over the last few decades on the subject that we should all have better definitions. As it relates to Christians counseling one-another, I like this definition from the late David Powlison:

“...Biblical counseling is part of the interpersonal ministry of the Word. God means for us to bear each other's burdens. It's a good goal to become more competent at self-counsel, the private ministry, but we always need other people. We need their prayers, encouragement, and insight. There may be something you have said to yourself a hundred times, but then you hear it from the lips of someone else, and the Holy Spirit chooses to work. Hearing it from another person's voice makes it come to life. Wise counseling brings that personalized relevance of interpersonal ministry of the eternal Word of Truth that turns our lives upside down and inside out.”

First, Powlison says that biblical counseling is part of the interpersonal ministry of the Word. That means that the Word of God *should* be fleshed out in our relationships with one another. The idea that Christians would keep their faith private is foreign to the Scripture and is a contradiction for what it means to be a believer. Of course, we are to be ambassadors for Christ to a lost and hostile culture, but we are to be ambassadors committed to God and His gospel to each other as well.

Secondly, Powlison warms up our idea of counseling. I think we often associate counseling with stuffy offices and therapists with notepads, but it doesn't have to always be this way. Biblical counseling is warm and can happen over a cup of coffee. It is a tangible way of 'bearing each other's burdens'.

Now, implied in Powlison's definition here is the idea of the sufficiency of Scripture. In one sense it can be said that the sufficiency of Scripture is the authority of Scripture *applied*. Christians historically have believed that the Scriptures really are sufficient for life and godliness (2nd Peter 1:3). And the ministry of biblical counseling is a means by which we can use the Scriptures to teach doctrine, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness so that believers can be thoroughly furnished (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). This is a little bit of what biblical counseling is as it relates to applying it in our relationships with one another. But we should also be mindful of what biblical counseling is not.

Biblical counseling is not a 'take two verses and call me in the morning' sort of ministry. Biblical counseling is not an assertion that the Scriptures speak to every situation in life explicitly. Biblical counseling is not a refusal to acknowledge or utilize God's common grace in the advancements in medical practices and medications. The ministry of biblical counseling should be holistic and believers who counsel biblically (which should be all Christians) should have humility in not speaking beyond what they know.

Have Clear Biblical Categories and Seek to Apply Your Own Counsel First

Matthew 7:1-3 (KJV) states, "*Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?*"

First, Christ is warning Christians to have proper, biblical categories. What do we measure our judgements by? It should be according to Scripture. Therefore, we should have robust, biblical categories of sin, suffering, justification, sanctification, glorification, etc. We should know biblical words and we should know their definitions so that we may apply them rightly, and thus helpfully. Furthermore, Christ is teaching us

that we are to apply the standards we counsel to ourselves. Hypocrites hold others to a standard in which they themselves do not keep. Yeah, sure things may seem great on the outside, but are you regarding iniquity in your heart (Psalm 66:18)?

Humble yourself before the Lord through confession, repentance, and resting in the finished work of Christ. Then, with the joy of having your sins forgiven, counsel others and do so with gentleness and respect (1st Peter 3:15).

Grow in Your Ability to Counsel

Counseling in a way that magnifies Christ and effectively loves your brother/sister is hard work. Yet, work is good. God instituted it before the fall. Therefore, the hard work of growing in our ability to counsel biblically should be a priority in the Christian life, and we shouldn't be deterred because it takes time and labor (your whole life actually!).

It is wrong to think that you can just open your mouth and give true, seasoned, God-centered counsel if you are not cultivating your own knowledge and love for God and His Word through the means He's provided to you; namely, public worship each Lord's Day, and the private means of Bible study and prayer.

This article is by no means exhaustive on the subject of counseling others biblically, but it is my prayer that this will be a good starting point for you as you seek to honor the Lord in how you help care for your brothers and sisters.

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- i. <https://rpmministries.org/2013/03/5-definitions-of-biblical-counseling/>

Walking Alongside a Struggling Christian

By Justin Huffman



People are hurting. Christians are no exception. The last year, for many, has felt more like running a gauntlet than running a race. With a global pandemic, racial unrest, political upheaval, the word “unprecedented” has been worn thin in media commentary. And these issues are not limited to a particular nation or region; the Body of Christ around the globe has been feeling the strain acutely.

The pain that individual Christians are feeling, however, while perhaps related to these larger challenges, are often battles fought on a deeply personal—even isolated—level. Not just a worldwide pandemic, but the loss of a dear loved one. Not just racial unrest, but feeling person-

ally betrayed or let down by a friend or even fellow church member. Not merely political upheaval, but internal turmoil in the midst of so much uncertainty and discouragement. People are hurting. Christians are no exception. But how can I help?

Don't Assume Fellow Christians Aren't Hurting

I was struck recently as I read Paul's words in 2nd Corinthians 7:6, which says, "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus." Apparently, even Paul himself was not a stranger to discouragement. In fact, in the proceeding verse Paul's summarizes his situation with this stark description: "Our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within" (2nd Corinthians 7:5).

It occurred to me, as I read this passage, that I too often do not take Paul's discouragements (and therefore his encouragements) seriously enough. It's easy to romanticize Paul's struggles, or lionize Paul's faith to such an extent that we can't really even imagine him actually struggling with stomach-churning fear or hope-stealing doubt. But that idea does not come from Paul. Paul says he was at the point of physical and emotional exhaustion.

"If the apostle Paul had not been transparent about the fact that he was fighting against fear and pounded by affliction, then his readers would not have been able to appreciate how meaningful it was for God to send him comfort through Titus."

Apparently, one of the greatest ways I can be a source of help and comfort to a fellow Christian is to not assume they're doing fine. Just because his career looks successful, or her family seems happy, or their walk with the Lord is strong... doesn't mean they're not struggling. People are hurting. Christians—even strong Christians, like the apostle Paul—are no exception.

When was the last time I asked a person at church how they are

doing—really doing—and listened carefully to their response? Knowing that everyone is struggling, do I know what the specific struggles of my pastor are? Or of my small group leader? Or even of my own spouse and kids?

Be a Source of Real Comfort

Two things jump out at me as Paul describes how God sent help and encouragement to him in 2nd Corinthians 7:6. First, in sharing his own story, Paul clearly means for it to benefit others as well. And second, the personal presence of Titus brought Paul much-needed relief. We should not take either of these realities lightly.

Paul, as we already noticed, describes himself as wrestling with inward fear, even as he is also being bombarded by afflictions. The result was physical and emotional fatigue: “our bodies had no rest.” One of the ways we can fail to help others is by always pretending to be “above it all” ourselves. When people ask how I am doing, do I tend to be honest with them or do I automatically feel obligated to put on my “game face” and act as though I am not struggling? If so, I miss out an opportunity to share with others the ways God is sustaining me, because they do not even see me wrestling to begin with.

If the apostle Paul had not been transparent about the fact that he was fighting against fear and pounded by affliction, then his readers would not have been able to appreciate how meaningful it was for God to send him comfort through Titus. Instead, as Paul shares his own struggles, he is able to draw out this general and strengthening lesson for his readers, “God comforts the downcast.” So, Paul, through admitting his own discouragement, is able to speak truth into the lives of other Christians, that will help them in their times of being downcast as well.

How does God comfort the downcast Paul? Through the coming of Titus. What a friend and fellow worker Titus must have been, for just his presence to be a much-needed boost to Paul’s drooping spirits! There is obviously a lot of unspoken, unexplained history here. Paul and Titus

had grown intimately and deeply connected, over time, and therefore knew each other well. Titus wasn't just a guy Paul had seen at a distance occasionally at church. Titus was a brother-in-arms, a comrade who had fought alongside Paul in the trenches. And so, Titus had the ability to speak deeply into Paul's life and encourage Paul in significant ways.

I cannot be a genuine comfort to others if I don't really know them and they don't really know me. If I just show up at church and shake a few hands, if I avoid any meaningful conversation or accountability, if I insist on walking alone as a Christian rather than in community, not only will I not *know* the kind of comfort that Paul experienced at the coming of Titus, but I will also never *be* the kind of comfort that Titus was to Paul.

How can I walk alongside a fellow Christian when they're hurting or struggling? By walking alongside a person before a trial hits, and long after that particular trial may be in the rearview mirror. If I only parachute into someone's life and try to offer comfort by quoting some Bible verses or patting them on the back, the amount of help I can give will be in direct proportion to the relationship I have with them.

If we've known each other for years, passed through numerous sorrows and celebrations together then perhaps, like Titus, my presence alone can bring an unspeakable comfort to my friend. Yes, some words and acts of service will probably be eventually needed as well, but just the ministry of presence can bring immeasurable relief to the burdened or grieving soul.

Titus was a comfort to Paul because Titus had been a friend to Paul already, and displayed his continuing interest in Paul by going out of his way to be there when Paul needed him. Likewise, my being a help to others will require me showing genuine interest in them now, and being willing to make myself uncomfortable to help them in their time of need. No real or deep comfort can be

given without real and deep cost to the person who comforts.

Be Part of the Corporate Solution

Perhaps easiest to miss in Paul's situation is the invaluable role of the Christian community in encouraging him. Paul was ultimately moved most deeply, not only by Titus' presence, but also by the news that Titus brought with him of the wellbeing of the church at Corinth: *"...and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more"* (2nd Corinthians 7:7).

In his first letter, Paul had found it necessary to write to the church at Corinth to rebuke them for known sin and outright disobedience in their midst. It grieved him to have to scold them after this fashion, but they were in such poor spiritual condition that this was the only way for Paul to truly love them. But now, Titus returns from Corinth bearing the good news that the Corinthian Christians had received Paul's letter with the right spirit, had been brought to genuine repentance, and were now sending through Titus their own love and support back to Paul.

It is hard to overestimate the role that spiritual health in the church plays in the spiritual health of individual Christians. Nothing can be more disheartening than factions in the Body of Christ, scandal in the life of the church, or a general shallowness among the church members. By contrast, there is nothing more heartening and healthful than seeing fellow Christians love and forbear with each other, than observing fervent holiness in the lives of professing believers, or experiencing transparency and community in the Church Body.

Paul was not encouraged by the good news Titus brought him just because Paul was an apostle and so was super spiritually minded. No, the fact is every Christian is greatly inspired, or greatly dispirited, by the experience he or she has as a member of the larger Christian community. The Church is one of the primary means of grace by which Christ works in and through individual believers.

How then can I be a blessing to another struggling Christian? By committing, by God's grace, to being part of the corporate solution. As I pursue faithfulness and holiness myself, and as I commit and contribute to the healthy activity of the Body of Christ, I have opportunity to exponentially spread encouragement, hope, and healing throughout the Church as a whole.

People are hurting. Christians are no exception.

But Paul's experience with Titus reminds me that I can either be contributing further to the discouragement of fellow believers, or I can minister real comfort as part of the wholesome influence of the Body of Christ.

Spiritual Friendship in the Church

By Christina Fox



These past months have flipped many things in our life upside down.

Much has changed in the way we go about our daily lives— everything from work to school, from

shopping to doctor's visits, and from gathering with friends to gathering for worship. In all these changes, many of us have realized things we took for granted. Even more, we've realized what is important, what matters most, what we *truly* need.

One of the things we need most is church community— friendship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. As our interactions with one another have been limited, as we've changed how and where and when we gather, we are reminded anew just how much we need the body of Christ. That's because God made us to be in community.

Created for Community

Community is God's idea. He is a community in Himself: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Triune community has existed for all eternity past—loving, serving, exalting, and glorifying one another. When God created mankind, He chose to share that community with us so that we could experience the love and fellowship God has always known.

Genesis 1:26 tells us that God created mankind in His image. One of the ways we reflect God is by being in community with others. That's why God said that one thing was missing in His creation (Genesis 2:18). He created Eve to live in community with Adam, and together they would reflect the Triune community. And they did so, until they fell into sin and broke community with God and each other.

Jesus came to redeem and restore us back into right relationship with God and one another. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus created a new community: the Church. This new community is made up of redeemed saints, who, by faith, are adopted into the family of God. The Church is a family, and we are all children

“God is the One who creates Christian community, but we need to cultivate it.”

of God, making the relationships we have with one another even closer than our biological relationships. *“I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty”* (2nd Corinthians 6:18).

The Greek word *koinonia* is used in the New Testament to refer to the new relationship formed among believers united in Christ. It is most often written as “fellowship” in our Bibles. When the early Church met together, Luke tells us, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (Acts 2:42).

Often when we think of fellowship in the church, we think of Wednesday night spaghetti dinner in the church fellowship hall. Or we might think of the time between Sunday school and worship where we stand around with our coffee and catch up on each other's week. The fellowship described in the New Testament goes deeper than chatting over a cup of coffee. It's more than talking with others about our travel schedule for work this coming week or the latest remarkable thing our child did, or about the outcome of the big game. It's more than joining a small group or serving on a committee.

The fellowship that the Bible describes in Acts is that of sharing a common life together. As Jerry Bridges noted in his book. *True Community*:

"The first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship—a relationship that consisted of sharing together the very life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ, they were formed into a spiritual organic community."

Cultivating Spiritual Friendships in the Church

Sharing a common life together is not about doing activities, but about sharing spiritual life. It is about working together to bring about God's kingdom purposes. It is about serving together, helping each other through trials, reminding each other of the gospel, lifting each other up when we fall, praying for one another, and urging one another on in the faith. And ultimately, it is reflecting Christ in our love for one another, reflecting Him to the fallen world around us.

God is the One who creates Christian community, but we need to cultivate it. We need to foster and nurture it in our churches. Certainly, we can drink coffee together, participate in a fun event, or enjoy one an-

other's company, but those activities are merely the means to community; they aren't community in themselves. Below are a few ways to cultivate community—spiritual friendship—in the church.

Cultivate Friendship through Service

Christian community involves meeting each other's needs. In Acts 2, the believers shared what they had with each other. Peter tells us to use our gifts to serve one another (1st Peter 4:10). We can cultivate community by ministering to one another's needs. One of the easiest ways is to provide meals for those who are sick, recovering from surgery, just had a baby, or moved into a new home. We can mow the yard for a widow or repair a leaking faucet.

“...we rejoice together over the Bread of Life who nourishes our very soul.”

We can provide transportation for those who need it. In serving one another, we show the love of Christ to our brothers and sisters in the Church.

Cultivate Friendship through Spiritual Encouragement

Christian community involves spiritual encouragement. Hebrews calls us to encourage one another in the faith (3:13, 10:24). Rather than telling someone we will pray for them, we can stop right where we are and pray with our brother or sister in the Lord. We can remind a hurting friend of God's great love for him in Christ. We can be open and honest with others about our struggles, doubts, and temptations to sin, helping others see that we are all sinners saved by grace; not one of us has it all together. We can share with and encourage one another the encouragement we've received from the Lord (2nd Corinthians 1:3-7).

Cultivate Friendship through Hospitality

1st Peter 4:9 says, “*Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*” One of the best ways to cultivate community is in our homes. The

home is where we are most ourselves. It is a warm, intimate setting where we can share spiritual life with one another. This aspect of friendship has been most challenged during the pandemic. We've had to get creative in hospitality by eating outside and having small gatherings. But no matter how limited, as we feast together on bread that nourishes our physical body, we rejoice together over the Bread of Life who nourishes our very soul.

Cultivate Friendship through Discipleship

Spiritual friendship is also cultivated in the context of discipleship. The best description of this in the Bible is in Titus 2 where both older men and older women are called to mentor and instruct younger men and women (respectively) in how to live out the gospel. Such relationships are more than mere biblical instruction; it is investing in another's spiritual life. It is an older believer helping a younger believer apply the gospel to all areas of life.

Though God created community through the blood of Christ, we need to cultivate it. It takes work and effort. We have to invite people into our hearts and lives. Let us all strive to live out the community Christ died to create. Let us seek to develop spiritual friendship with others in the body of Christ.

Reference:

- i. Bridges, Jerry. *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), p.10-11.



Recommended Reading on Church Membership

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering the subject of church membership and "one anothering" each other. We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that, hopefully, readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of it so they can stand fast on the Word of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list below. These books are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

- *The Trellis and the Vine* by Collin Marshall and Tony Payne
- *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever
- *The Deliberate Church* by Mark Dever & Paul Alexander
- *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* by Jonathan Leeman

I hope you'll find these resources helpful as I have.

In Christ Alone,
Dave Jenkins
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Micah Caswell

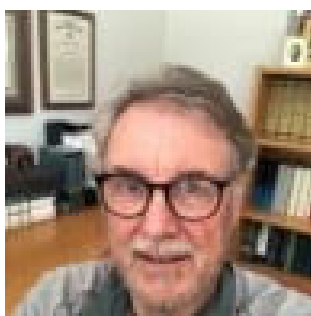
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