

RECOVERING CHURCH HEALTH



MY PART IN MY CHURCH'S HEALTH & GROWTH

A Six-Week Devotional Guide

Devotional Guide
Recovering Church Health
2nd Edition March, 2022

These devotionals are available in audio. Hear them at:

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Introduction

So this guy goes to the doctor for a check-up. And the doctor tells him he's overweight and needs to lose 20 pounds. He needs to start exercising more. And he needs to cut back on the fatty foods. How does this guy feel about it? He doesn't like hearing it, of course! But, it's true and he knows it. Now, he has to make a choice; he can live a healthier lifestyle... or not.

Sometimes, a congregation is told their church isn't as healthy as it needs to be. No one likes hearing that either. In fact, many members react with quite a bit of sanctimony and protest. They are in denial. Sometimes, they aren't able to see the truth. Sentimental feelings may get mixed in with spiritual feelings and the members have trouble distinguishing one from the other.

There are degrees of health and of sickness. Some churches are simply out of shape. Other churches have been invaded by an infection. Their church's immune system may have been compromised. So, in some cases the church has become seriously sick and toxic.

However, just as a person going through a season of sickness can regain her health, so a church can regain its health. The congregation may have to listen to some unpleasant truths and undergo embarrassing tests. They will have to accept treatment from the Divine Physician. But if they will follow the treatment plan, the church's health can be restored. The church can again be in great shape!

This devotional booklet is part of a six-week treatment plan and is divided into the following sections:

- ◇ Week 1: Introduction, Recovering Our Role as a House of Prayer
- ◇ Week 2: Recovering Biblical Discipleship in the Church
- ◇ Week 3: Recovering Biblical Fellowship
- ◇ Week 4: Recovering Biblical Leadership, Recovering Biblical Worship
- ◇ Week 5: Recovering the Biblical Mission of the Church
- ◇ Week 6: A Call to Renewal and Mission

As you read, be brave. Try not to be defensive. Instead, accept the challenge to see just how healthy we can help this church to become!

The Glory of the Church

There is a glory to the church. Yet one might just miss it, seeing her only from the superficial surface. With her simple tastes... so much done by amateurs and volunteers. Her pews filled with common people. With her sins and complicated lives. Yep, you just might miss the glory.

As we see in today's passage, however, when the Holy Spirit inspired sacred Scripture, he chose marriage as his figure of speech — Christ the groom with his chosen bride, the church. Just look at the love Jesus Christ has for his church: He gave himself for her. He cleansed her to make her holy. He provides for her and cherishes her. The old hymn summarizes it well:

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation
By water and the Word:
From heav'n He came and sought her
To be His holy Bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.¹*

In the end, he shall "Present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27).

The book of Revelation carries on this same word picture:

Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself. She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write: Blessed are those invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb!" — Revelation 19:7-9, CSB

Some may object that these passages speak of the universal church, not a particular local church. However, each local congregation is a visible, ministering, sub-set of the universal church. The visible, local churches are the ones who win the souls, develop disciples, who minister and see broken hearts made whole!

¹ *The Church's One Foundation* by Samuel J. Stone, 1839-1900



Right now on this earth, Jesus expresses his life through his body the church. “The Church is his body, and in that body lives fully the one who fills the whole wide universe” (Ephesians 1:22, Phillips).

And when God shows off his wisdom to beings in the unseen realm, he does so through his church. “This is so God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known *through the church* to the rulers and authorities in the heavens” (Ephesians 3:10, CSB).

And... when God chooses to bring himself glory, he does so through the church of Jesus Christ! “To Him be *glory in the church* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever” (Ephesians 3:21).

The biggest things God does in this world. The most enduring things. If it will survive the fire on the last day, then God does it through his body, the church.

So be careful, outsider! It is never a good idea to insult the wife of a big, strong man. And it is always unwise to slight the bride of Jesus Christ!

And believer, don’t allow the world’s criticism to embarrass you into undervaluing the church. Why? Because:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. — Hebrews 12:22-24

It hasn’t been revealed to the universe... yet... but you are part of the biggest enterprise in the history of the universe. There is great glory in the church!

Today’s Questions:

Have you been taking the church for granted? Or, do you feel like you are part of a great movement? Do you feel like you are part of a winner or a loser? Is there some other membership or connection you value more highly? A team, a social organization, etc.?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Jesus, Bridegroom of the church, please enable me to honor and serve Your bride, just as You have cherished and served her. Thank You for the standing we have as part of Your bride, the church.

Healthy Churches Know How They're Doing

"I know" — the words of Jesus Christ repeated to his seven churches in the Asia Minor Baptist Association. These can be reassuring words to hear. They can also be joltingly frightening.

- ◇ *"I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance..."* (Revelation 2:2)
- ◇ *"I know your tribulation and your poverty, (but you are rich)"* (2:9)
- ◇ *"I know where you dwell—where Satan's throne is! Yet you hold fast to My name..."* (2:13)
- ◇ *"I know your works—your love, faithfulness, service, and endurance. Your last works are greater than the first."* (2:19, CSB)
- ◇ *"I know your works; you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."* (3:1)
- ◇ *"...I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."* (3:8)
- ◇ *"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot."* (3:15, CSB)

About both the good and the bad, the Lord knows how we are doing as a church and how we are each doing spiritually as individual believers. The question is, do we?

Sometimes, we have friends who tell us their doctor diagnosed a disease in them they hadn't even suspected. Can that happen to a church?

What is a healthy church? When we say a church can be healthy, are we also saying a church can be sick?

Do health and growth always go together? Can a church be healthy and not grow? Can a church grow and not be healthy? Is growth the only way—or the main way—to measure the health of a church?

Why is the health of the church my personal problem? Isn't that the job of the ministerial staff?



If we *are* the church, and the people in our fellowship are spiritually unhealthy, how could the church be healthy?

The church of which you are a part, which ministers to you, and your family, and to your children — you make it what it is. We reap what we sow.

When you go to the doctor, your physician will look at your vital signs to evaluate your health — blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. The six vital signs of a church's health are: Christ-centered worship, Biblical Instruction, Prayer, World Evangelization, Nurturing Fellowship, and Caring Acts. It all starts in the heart with Christ-centered worship.

“He’s doing great; he’s got a bad heart and a terrible liver condition, but other than those two small exceptions, he’s in terrific shape”? Would you describe a friend’s health in this way? Well, perhaps sarcastically, but not in a serious way. Because if my heart is in bad shape, *I* am in bad health. A believer cannot think of himself as distinct from his local church any more than he can divorce himself *from himself*. We don’t just go to church—we *are* the church. And the local body is what we are, all put together. And whether we, as individuals, are spiritually healthy adds or subtracts from the collective health of the church.

In these devotionals we will look at the vital signs of church health, but understand: this is a *personal* devotional guide. It’s not primarily about what the institution of the church is doing. Nor is it about how some other class or group in the church is doing. Primarily, it’s about how you, as an individual, are doing.

Today’s Questions:

Of the seven “I knows” listed at the beginning of today’s devotional, which one seems to best describe where we are as a church right now? Which one best describes where you are right now, spiritually, as an individual?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Lord Jesus, head of your body, the church, the one who walks among the seven lampstands: Our congregation wants to be a strong and healthy church. But it is easy to get tired or discouraged or distracted. Please make us the church you would have us to be. And don’t allow me to hold this church back. Lord of the church, keep working here.

Healthy Churches Are Faithful Stewards of Their Legacy

A legacy is any benefit handed down by someone in the past. This may be a parent who leaves an inheritance or someone who paved the way for others to have a better life in some other way. For example, it would be accurate to say the founding fathers of our nation left us a legacy of liberty and representative government. Another example is our church. It is a legacy left to us by those who founded it, by those who built it up through the years, and by those who led the next generation to the Lord and trained them to carry on the work. Working together, they gave many thousands of dollars to construct the buildings we worship in each week. Though many members passed away in the years since, they were part of it. They did that for the Lord... and for us! They left us a legacy.

It is good to value a legacy we have received; it is even better to leave a legacy.

In our Scripture reading for today, we see how David was leaving a legacy for his son Solomon. David had wanted to build the temple. He felt it inappropriate that he should live in a palace while the Lord's worship was still being conducted in a tent. However, the Lord disallowed him from building the temple. Instead of dropping the whole idea, David began collecting building materials and offerings for the day when work on the temple could begin (1 Chronicles 22). David entrusted construction plans, materials, and the task of building the temple to Solomon.

There may be things in life you aspired to do, but were not able to do. There may be projects you haven't been able to finish, but for which you have laid the groundwork. And now someone who will follow you will be in a better position to carry on the work.

In estate planning, for example, we may leave financial support for the church building fund, a scholarship to support the training of ministers, or missions. Most of us have our best opportunities for giving in our estates. If we gave a portion of our income while we were living, we can give a portion of our estate to the Lord when we leave this world.

Make no mistake, we are talking about a leaving a legacy, not building a monument to ourselves. Heaven will record every sacrifice and the Lord will reward us there.



A legacy means leaving it better than we found it. We can leave our church stronger in tone and in fidelity to its mission. A legacy is about passing the baton. It is like planting a tree whose shade others, yet to come, will enjoy.

The Bridge Builder

By Will Allen Dromgoole

An old man going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening cold and gray,
To a chasm vast and deep and wide.
Through which was flowing a sullen tide

The old man crossed in the twilight dim,
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.

“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting your strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way;
You’ve crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build this bridge at evening tide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head;
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followed after me to-day
A youth whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm that has been as naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!”

Today’s Questions:

Will your legacy be a box of old trophies your children will throw away when you die? With your time, your influence, your money, your inheritance, etc., what could you do to leave things better for others? What could you do for Jesus’ sake that will outlive you?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Eternal God, Lord over the generations of men. I want to serve You in such a way, with such faithfulness, with such effect, that a generation yet to be born may praise You. I want to have a part in people coming to Christ even after I am gone. Please show me how to leave footprints others may follow.

The Flexibility of Faith

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, and he went out without understanding where he was going. By faith he lived as a foreigner in the promised land as though it were a foreign country, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were fellow heirs of the same promise. — Hebrews 11:8-9, NET

Flexibility is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances without losing one's focus or joy. The flexible person is not stubbornly rigid or obstinate, but able to go with the flow, making the best of the situation.

Abraham was such a person. He was told by God to leave home, a place at that time, of considerable wealth. He was to leave without knowing where he was going; being told only that God would lead him to the right place. For the rest of his life, Abraham and his family lived in tents, not houses. He and his family would live in a foreign land and in a different culture than the one from which they had come. It was a permanent impermanence. No one would choose it, but faith made it possible.

During the terrible days of the German bombing of London during the second world war, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as quickly as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father's voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, "I can't see you!"

The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings, called to the silhouette of his son — "But I can see you. Jump!"

The boy jumped, because he trusted his father.

Abraham's life was like that. He left not knowing where he was going, but knowing the One whom he was following. And that was all he needed. With his vital connection to the Lord, as the continuing constant in his life, he could adapt to anything else.

It is only natural many church members want church to be a place of stability in a



world of continuous change. Younger members would do well to put themselves in the shoes of older members. Technology has advanced unbelievably in their lifetimes. They have seen so many cultural rules change! Many have seen quite enough change for one lifetime, thank you! This weariness of change is understandable.

Many members have resisted change in their churches under the mistaken impression they were protecting it. However, their resistance actually damaged the church. They mistook sentimental emotions for spiritual priorities.

If we are going to have a church where we have the opportunity to worship sitting next to our grandchildren, we must demonstrate flexibility. And conversely, if we are going to have a church where grandchildren can worship sitting next to their grandparents, then flexibility is for the young, also. It takes all ages to have a family reunion—and that is what a church is, the family of God.

We must seek to express the Christian message in fresh ways, in ways the people in our community can understand. As a church member you may need to show flexibility to better minister to a new generation of members.

Flexibility is needed in our personal spiritual growth. By definition, spiritual growth is a process of change! People who aren't different than they were five years ago aren't growing. It is unbelief and disobedience that keeps us in a rut (which is a grave with both ends kicked out). Faith makes us flexible.

Yesterday's victories won't win today's battles. We can't retire from adapting. Flexibility is a continuing need in walking with and serving God.

Today's Questions:

On the spectrum from “resisting all change” to “change for the sake of change,” where are you? Do you find yourself relying on the familiarity of the church routine to serve as a refuge from the rapid and overwhelming change in the world around you? Regarding your spiritual growth: Do you have some changes you really want to make?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Father God, we have done church in familiar ways because we found comfort in the familiarity. But I am learning that You don't always hang out in the familiar places. You like to do new things. Please open my heart to new ways to reach new people. Please help me, Lord, to adapt and go with You.

Healthy Churches Are Praying Churches

No church rises above its prayer life

Thom Rainer writes:

In my years of research, I've noted... healthy churches emphasized prayer as a vital part of their corporate life. Like the early church at Jerusalem, they devoted themselves to prayer.

But I also notice that the decline in churches across America has been commensurate with the decline in corporate prayers. For many churches, a time of prayer is limited to one or two people voicing a public prayer in the worship services.

Other churches have declared that they will have a prayer meeting one evening a week, with many churches choosing Wednesday evening as that time of corporate prayer. Sadly, most of those churches only have a list of those with physical needs that is hurriedly prayed over so the small number of people at the meeting can get to 'more important' activities.

That is not what a praying church looks like.¹

There is the Attitude of Prayer: The very act of praying says we recognize our inadequacy and our dependence upon the Lord. Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NASB).

There is the Invitation of God to Pray. "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3, NKJV). Jesus said, "Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be complete" (John 16:24). We stand invited.

There is Listening in Prayer: We don't always know what to do; we often need divine guidance. So we listen for the small, still voice of God. We need the Lord's direction in our personal lives and we need it for the ministry of our church.

There is Agreement in Prayer: Jesus made special promises when believers gather for the specific purpose of praying. "Again, I assure you: If two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there

¹ Thom Rainer, "Where has prayer gone in the church?" Cyber Week email, December 6, 2019



among them” (Matthew 18:19-20, CSB).

The Church is Full of the Supernatural: Its members have been born again of the Spirit — supernaturally transformed. They experience the supernatural presence of God. They read from a book that is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). There are angels who, on occasion, minister to them (Hebrews 1:13-14). The church needs supernatural power because there is arrayed against the church a supernatural enemy — “For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens” (Ephesians 6:12, CSB). Everything about the church is supernatural... or it’s supposed to be. That is why prayer is determinative. And yet the church wants to pray about ingrown toenails.

Effective Prayer Leads to Effective Results: “The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect” (James 5:16, CSB). There is a story of a woman who came to a missionary at Bangalore, India, asking him to stop a certain local Christian from praying for her. When asked how she knew that the Christian was praying for her, she replied, “I used to perform my worship to the idols quite comfortably, but for some time past I have not been able to do so. Besides, he told me at the time that he was praying for my family, and now my son and two daughters have become Christians. If he goes on praying, he may make me, too, become a Christian. He is always bringing things to pass with his prayers. Somebody must make him stop.”

A prayerless church is a weak church. A prayerful church has power from God.

Today’s Questions:

Today’s Bible passage talks about the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. It also talks about the weapons we use in battle. Prayer is a powerful weapon to be used against the enemy. As you read this passage, how much of your life resembles this word picture? In private prayer? In praying together with others? Are you engaged in battle?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Heavenly Father, You have invited my prayers. Thank you that, as King, You have invited me into Your courts. Awaken my heart to pray, to spend time in fellowship with You, to seek Your Kingdom’s advance in our community and in our church. Please answer from on high with answers that will bring You great glory.

How to Pray for Your Church

We can learn a lot from Jesus about prayer. He lived his life on earth in constant dependence upon the Father and in continuous fellowship with the Father. In John 17, we have a rather long recorded prayer of Jesus, and this prayer is for his church. How did Jesus pray for the church? How can we pray for the church?

Pray for the Mission of the Church: As Jesus prayed, he was able to say, “I have finished the work which You have given Me to do” (John 17:4, NJKV). A few verses later, Jesus prays for his followers, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (vs. 18) and he prays “also for those who will believe in me through their word” (vs. 20) — and, if people believe through their word, that means they were spreading it!

As Emil Brunner is often quoted, “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” One of the easiest things in the church is to slowly, gradually, subtly, replace the mission of the church with something else. That something else might be sentimental memories, the historic preservation of a building, the comfort of our members, or one of many other things. However, when the mission ceases to burn, the church ceases to exist. It’s now a country club. Pray that you enter not into this temptation.

Pray for the Spiritual Protection of the Church: Jesus prayed in this way, both in a preventive sense and in a positive sense; that is, the Father would keep something from happening and that the Father would cause something to happen.

- ◇ “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15).
- ◇ “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (17:17)

Ask God to protect the members of the church from personal temptations and public scandals. Ask for protection from falling under the spell of the very world we are supposed to influence. Ask him to keep the devil out of his church.

We can’t win on defense alone, however. Affirmatively, we must ask God to enable the members of the congregation to grow spiritually. The Amplified Version renders verse 17 this way: “Sanctify them [purify, consecrate, separate them for Yourself, make them holy] by the Truth; Your Word is Truth.” We should pray for



encounters with the Word of God that are transformative in nature.

Pray for the Unity of the Church: This is one of the main things for which Jesus prayed! He asked, “That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (verses 21-23, especially 23).

You will note the gold-standard of church unity is the Holy Trinity – the three Persons dwelling in perfect and eternal unity!

You will notice there is an evangelistic result at stake: “That the world may believe.” A community is aware of it when one of their churches is in conflict – not just the Christian community, but the community as a whole. Church conflict robs a church of its credibility (“I thought you Christians were supposed to be loving; you hate each other!”).

Because of our fallen condition, we are subject to becoming offended, to resentments, and the like. So, we must ask the Father to guard the unity.

Pray for the Fellowship to Experience the Love of the Father: Jesus prayed “That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (vs. 26). The truth is, we are all people who need the love of God. The world beats us up and the devil beats us down. We need to experience “The love of God [which] has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5). This would include experiencing the love of the Father for ourselves, but also the love that God gives us with which to love others. Only when this happens does the church become a haven of grace.

Today's Questions:

How many days per week do you pray for the church to which you belong? Do you pray for the other members in your small group/Sunday School class? Do you pray for your friends only, or do you include the less popular and the less faithful? Do you spend more time critiquing church leaders or more time praying for them?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Holy Father, in the fellowship of the church, You have gifted us with great treasure! Through Your Spirit, enable me to value this gift always. Prompt me, please, to pray for her mission. Please guard our fellowship from distractions that would cause us to veer off course from our mission or would divide us from each other. Please make this church a haven of Your love and grace.

Prayer Support and Missions

Through prayer we join missionaries in their labors. Paul invited believers to “Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me” (Romans 15:30, NIV). Prayer is a powerful force in world missions.

“Prayer needs no passport, visa or work permit. There is no such thing as a ‘closed country’ as far as prayer is concerned... Much of the history of missions could be written in terms of God moving in response to persistent prayer.”¹

Ways that prayer empowers the work of missionaries include following:

Prayer Gets Missionaries to the Field: “Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:38). The Greek word for “send” is the same word used when Jesus would cast demons out of people. Sometimes, the Lord has to thrust us out of our comfortable places. Not only does prayer get missionaries to the field, it also gets local people in the areas where they serve into the ministry, and prayer sends them out as church planters, as well!

Prayer Connects Missionaries to the Person of Peace: “The Person of Peace is the one God has prepared to receive the Gospel into a community for the first time.”² Cornelius (Acts 10) and Lydia (Acts 16) are examples of such persons. Usually this person finds the missionaries. Missionaries have learned this principle from verses in Matthew 10 and Luke 9 and 10—especially, Luke 10:6-7: “And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you.” Some of these people will become believers; others will not. However, even those who never become Christians will show goodwill toward the missionaries. This person is always “an influential person who recognizes the great value of what believers bring and becomes their ‘protector, promoter, and pathway finder’ in his ‘area of jurisdiction.’”³

Prayer Opens Doors: Paul asked the believers at Colossae to pray “that God may open to us a door for the word” (Colossians 4:3). Prayer gets missionaries in touch with people they couldn’t have met, otherwise.

¹ Stephan Gaukroger (n.d.) Cited in Van Rheenen, Gailyn (2014-07-22). *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (p. 54). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² Watson, David and Paul Watson, “Church Planting: Finding a Person of Peace,” Excerpted with permission from *Contagious Disciple Making* by David Watson and Paul Watson © Thomas Nelson, 2014. www.faithgateway.com/church-planting/#.VN0dmdii6hl December 12, 2014

³ Bridges, Eric, “Friend of the gospel: the man of peace,” Baptist Press. <http://imb.org/updates/storyview.aspx?StoryID=537#.VN0cS9ii6hl> Accessed: February 12, 2015

Prayer Gives them the Words: Missionaries need the right words so the people of the other culture can understand the gospel and relate to the message. Paul asked for prayer that “words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19, NIV).

Prayer Empowers the Spread of the Gospel in Specific Areas: “Brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored” (2 Thessalonians 3:1). One missionary is reported to have said that to reach Muslims “it will take targeted and specific prayer for village chiefs, sheiks and religious mullahs on a village-by-village, province-by-province basis.”⁴

John Robb writes of a giant tree in Ethiopia. It had stood for generations, having withstood draught and famine. The people came to believe a spirit had given the tree divine powers. They looked to the tree for help. Adults would kiss the tree as they passed by. Children would say, “This tree saved us.” Christian workers there recognized the tree as an idol and a barrier to faith in Christ. Impressed to claim Matthew 21:21, which speaks of faith and a withered fig tree and mountains being removed, the workers prayed about the tree. It became common knowledge in the community that they were praying about the tree. Within six months the tree’s leaves began to wither and it dried up. Finally, it fell into the river. The amazed people said to the workers, “Your God has done this! ...Your God has dried up the tree!” Robb reports, “Within a few weeks, about a hundred villagers received Jesus Christ because they had seen His power displayed in the spectacular answer to the Christians’ prayers.”⁵

Today’s Questions:

Have you given thought lately, that starting from Jerusalem, we live in the uttermost parts of the earth? That missions is what brought the gospel to us? That we are the gentiles which the gospel had to jump a high fence to reach?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Father, it is in Your eternal purpose that the gospel be taken to the ends of the earth. Please make our church’s sending capacity match her seating capacity. Deliver me... deliver our congregation... from feeling relief we weren’t called to the mission field. Instead, make us seek ways to be part of the endeavor by sending and calling out the called, and underwriting, and praying for those who are at the tip of the tip of the spear.

⁴ Bridges, Eric, “ANALYSIS: Many converted Muslims stand—or fall—alone.” Baptist Press, March 13, 1997 <http://www.bpnews.net/4243> Accessed: February 12, 2015

⁵ John D. Robb, “Strategic Prayer” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd ed., Edited by Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne, William Carey Library © 1981,1992,1999. Page 145

⁶ James Fraser, quoted at <http://omf.org/us/resources/people-and-places/famous-missionaries/james-o-fraser/> Accessed: February 12, 2015

Healthy Churches Are Made Up of Disciples

The word *Christian* appears three times in the entire New Testament, twice in Acts. The word *disciple* appears 29 times in Acts, 75 times in the Gospel of John, and 72 times in Matthew – including the Great Commission. So *disciple* is an important word, worthy of our attention.

So, just what is a disciple? In New Testament times, a disciple was an apprentice, a learner who attached himself to a particular teacher or movement. John the Baptist had disciples. The Pharisees claimed to be the disciples of Moses and had disciples of their own. Both Jews and Gentiles were students of various rabbinic, philosophic or rhetorical schools, as they:

- ◇ Traveled with their master
- ◇ Listened to the teachings of the master
- ◇ Observed the lifestyle of the master
- ◇ Assisted the master in his work
- ◇ Carried forward the message of the master after he has left the scene

In Mark 3:14, when Jesus selected the twelve, we are told that “He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him...” For the original disciples, “Item 1” on their job description was to spend time with Jesus. Sometimes, we get busy with the busyness of life and lose the thrill of walking with Jesus. But by refocusing on our relationship with Christ, we draw fresh power and experience the sense of adventure once again.

While he never gave us a formal definition of a disciple, Jesus had some definite ideas about what his disciples should be like. In describing the personal loyalty he expected, he told us who was a disciple and who was not:

- “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.” (Luke 6:40)
- “And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’” (Luke 9:23)
- “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own



life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26-27)

- “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

Disciples were not a phenomenon of Jesus’ day only; but an ongoing part of the Christian movement. In Acts, the first history of the church, we read of Paul and Barnabas both making and strengthening disciples:

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples encouraging them to continue in the faith...”

— Acts 14:21-22

Yes, with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the New Testament church, a deeper, more specific meaning came to be associated with the term. Paul Powell defines a disciple in this way:

*In the Christian sense then, a disciple is a person who has accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and is seeking to learn from, obey, and follow after him as the Master of his life.*¹

To the degree a congregation meets this description, to that degree that church is healthy. The problem, writes Bill Hull, is that “American churches are filled with pew-filling, sermon tasting, spiritual schizophrenics, whose beliefs and behavior are not congruent.”² Here is the distinctive mark of the disciple’s journey: *alignment*. Getting our beliefs and our behavior into alignment. It’s a lifetime quest.

Today’s Questions:

What emotions do the words of Jesus in today’s passage about discipleship cause you to have? Do you feel reassured? Warned? Discouraged? Some other emotion? Did you sense a challenge in regard to your personal relationship with Jesus Christ?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Lord Jesus, I want to follow You, cost what it will. Please give me the courage to do so in the face of mockery or financial loss. Make me to see the implications of that commitment in my every day life. Enable me to never shrink from Your demands, even when the cost is high.

¹ Paul Powell, *Dynamic Discipleship*, © 1984, Broadman Press. Page 13.

² Bill Hull, *The Disciple – Making Pastor: The Key to Building Healthy Christians in Today’s Church*, Fleming H. Revell, © 1988, page 20

Healthy Churches Develop Disciples

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gave us what we call the Great Commission. In these words, he tells us several things:

- He tells us **why** we are to engage in world evangelization: “All authority in heaven and in earth has been given to me . Go therefore...” — He is in charge and we are under orders.
- He tells us **where** we are to engage in evangelism: “Go therefore... all nations” — That is, everywhere, globally.
- He tells us **who** we are to evangelize: “All nations” — Every people group and every language group on earth.
- He tells us the **first step of obedience** after a person is evangelized: “Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” — immediate follow-up.
- Jesus describes **an on-going process** after a person is baptized: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”.
- He gives us **a promise** as we carry out the mission: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- For all the information in this passage, there is **one core command**: “Make disciples” — not merely get people to make decisions, walk the aisle, or pray a prayer — but to *make disciples*.

The core command is to make disciples. The process that follows is “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” This process includes several factors:

Submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ: First and foremost, developing disciples means helping people recognize the Lordship of Jesus Christ over their lives and becoming obedient to him, even when the Lord’s demands go against their preferences. Too many church members have the attitude, “No one is going to tell me what to do.” But if Jesus Christ is not your master then you haven’t been born again — you are still lost. Oscar Thompson summarized Jesus’ description of a disciple, naming four characteristics:



1. *A disciple has a personal relationship with the teacher.*
2. *A disciple is under the total authority of the teacher.*
3. *A disciple possesses and demonstrates the character of the teacher.*
4. *A disciple must be prepared to suffer for the teacher.*¹

Character Development: Jesus used the phrase, “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”— which, of course, is another way of saying character development. As we read the qualifications for pastors and deacons in 1 Timothy 3, we see these are more character-based than skill-based.

Doctrinal Instruction: Paul warned Timothy, “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions and constant friction...” (1 Timothy 6:3-5, NASB). Right thinking leads to right living.

Skill Training: Developing disciples involves skill development. How to find the books in the Bible, how to study the Bible, how to pray, how to pray *in public*, how to share one’s testimony, how to explain the gospel. These are vital skills. For example, parents who don’t take their children to Bible Drill are doing them a great disservice which will hinder them for the rest of their lives.

It is obvious that this can’t all be done on Sunday mornings. Nor can it all be achieved in the “big church” worship service. It can’t be accomplished without the nurturing fellowship of a small group of believers who know and care about each other. Nor can it be accomplished without them holding each other accountable.

Today’s Questions:

How alert are you to opportunities to share the faith? How alert are you to people in your sphere of influence and their spiritual condition? How long has it been since you led someone to faith in Christ and then helped them get on their feet spiritually, if ever? How many people could say that in the last two years you disciplined them?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Father, I have a relationship with You because some people shared the gospel with me. I admit this business of sharing my faith makes me nervous and I miss opportunities to do so. Please give me boldness. Give me someone to mentor in the faith.

¹ Ritzman, Carolyn; Thompson, W. Oscar. *Concentric Circles of Concern: Seven Stages for Making Disciples* (Kindle Locations 3177-3179). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Healthy Churches Pass the Faith On To Their Children

As is so often stated, the Christian faith is one generation away from extinction. The starting place of securing the legacy of the Christian faith is in our own homes with our own children. This involves teaching them God's commandments about right and wrong, God's stories that illustrate his principles for living, sound doctrine that tells us the truth about God, and the gospel which delivers us from our sin. Don't wait until they start asking questions about salvation (or baptism or joining the church) before you start talking to them about the gospel. Use a Bible Story book when they are little. Use a Catechism to teach doctrine when they are in elementary school.¹ Ask them what they learned in Sunday School (not if they had fun). Talk about matters of faith as a normal part of life. Car rides to and from practices are a great opportunity for this.

Children can understand the plan of salvation: In fact, we tend to think our children are geniuses... until it is time to discuss salvation with them. They can remember their responsibilities at short stop and learn the names of the state capitals. The Gospel is simple. They can understand it also.

The Bible teaches adults they must have a child-like faith in order to be saved. It does not teach that children should have an adult-like faith. Jesus said "I assure you: Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:17).

Some Do's:

Do pray for your child's understanding. The Holy Spirit can make the light come on!

Do make sure your child knows the difference between baptism and salvation. Or between joining the church and salvation.

Do go see the preacher together. A member of the church staff can make a great member of the team. You know your child better than anyone and they have a great deal of experience in explaining the Gospel.

Do impress upon them the seriousness of sin. Sometimes, it is hard to see our own children as lost sinners, but one has to admit they're lost in order to get saved. Even children are responsible to obey God and are accountable when they disobey.

¹ *Know the Truth*, A free catechism based on the Baptist Faith & Message 2000, is available at www.smalltownbaptist.net/pdf/catechism.pdf



Do emphasize the cross (Romans 5:8; Colossians 1:21-22). Jesus took our punishment for us so we would not have to be punished. It is the only way anyone could ever be saved.

Some Don'ts:

Don't ask questions with yes or no answers when discussing the gospel with children. Instead, have them answer questions in their own words. You are trying to discover what they understand and where they need some clarification. A good question is: "What does it mean to become a Christian?"

Don't ask leading questions where children can guess the answers. "You love Jesus, don't you, Timmy?" Also, avoid figures of speech; children think in concrete terms.

Don't rush a child. Each one comes to Christ as he or she is ready.

Don't use scare tactics or use fear as a motive. On the other hand, don't try to "protect" your child from feeling the conviction of the Holy Spirit. No one can be saved without it (John 16:8-9).

Don't use peer pressure or try to get a child to follow his friends, nor should parents give rewards for a response.

Don't lead your child in a prayer to receive Jesus until he or she shows an understanding of the commitment involved.

Don't tell children that they are saved, even after they respond. Assurance is the work of the Holy Spirit.

If Your Child Isn't Quite Ready:

Don't belittle her interest and make her feel foolish for bringing up the subject. Don't harshly say, "You're not ready for that." Instead, answer her present questions, clarify her understanding, and compliment her interest.

Here is the Gospel: "He saved us—not because we were good enough to be saved but because of his kindness and pity" (Titus 3:5, Living Bible). God does the saving. We don't help. It's based on his mercy and not on our works. It's

Today's Questions:

What you grow up with is what you think is normal. It is a matter of both words and observed priorities. When was the last time you had a conversation about spiritual matters with your child? What would your child say your priorities are just by watching?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Father, from whom every family on earth derives its name, please enable me to instruct my children like You do Yours. ...Even when it is awkward for me. Give me the words when I don't know what to say.

Healthy Churches and the Role of Sunday School/Small Groups

You want to get together for meaningful Bible study and fellowship. You want to meet with a small group of people with whom you have things in common. So, the thing to do is start a home Bible study, right? Because clearly, nothing like that is happening in church... that is, unless you have an organized Sunday School. There, you already have rooms that are the right size. No one has to clean house before the meeting. You not only have child care available, you have a Bible study group for your children (and not just baby sitters)! You have the time. When people are attending the worship services already, adding one more hour is easy to work in. After all, it is still part of the same basic bite of time. Why not Sunday School?!

In most churches, you haven't really become part of the church until you have become a part of a Sunday School class. Sunday School places you together with other people in the same stage of life, facing the same opportunities and struggles — people with whom you have the most in common. In Sunday School, people know your name and miss you when you are gone. Worship services provide celebration and the opportunity to feel part of something bigger than one's self. Sunday School classes connect us to people relationally, providing fellowship and caring. We are merely members of the same audience until we are part of a class.

What is Sunday School, Exactly? Sunday School is not our deepest Bible study. It's not a multi-generational gathering. It's not next-level discipleship. It is not purely evangelistic nor purely leadership training. So, what is a Sunday School class supposed to be, exactly?

Sunday School Classes are Family Meetings: Only, not like a family reunion where you see grandparents and grandchildren together. It's more like the cousins are together, the uncles and aunts are together, etc.. Sunday School classes are not multi-generational; they are gatherings of the layers of the family. Sometimes, the cousins just want to be together.

Sunday School Classes are Instruments of Evangelism: New people are able to relate immediately with the group since they have life-stage parts of life in common. They instantly have things to talk about before class. There is great power in



the witness of the group, as a group, as they see how Christians relate together.

When we expose people to the Word of God and to the people of God, over time, the Spirit of God does a work of God to bring them into the family of God.

If you could get all of your cousins to agree to attend a Bible study, would you be willing for it to be less deep than you would prefer? Would you be willing to have it at a time or place less convenient for you? Of course you would. Because some of your cousins need the Lord, you would be willing to make sacrifices to see what God would do in their lives!

An Edge: The fact that Sunday School Classes are an “official” ministry of the church gives you an edge: It’s easier to invite new people to attend Sunday School in a reputable church than to an off-campus group. Some people fear attending a home Bible study, thinking it might get a little weird.

Sunday School Classes are Open Groups: You can join them at any time, not just when the course starts. Our classes are open to people who are not in our circle of friends, even though we are organized in a way we could easily become friends. Regardless of where you are spiritually at this point, Sunday School is for you.

Sunday School Classes are Entry-Level Discipleship: Through the influence of the class, some will begin the Christian life as a new disciple. Some begin growing in discipleship. Some experience their first opportunities for Christian service in the class. Because Sunday School classes are a ministry of the church, they interpret the work of the church. They serve as an entry-way into all its opportunities for growth and for service. Classes are the introducers in the church, the general practitioners who refer their members to the various specialists. In fact, that is what Sunday School is... the general practitioner ministry of the church.

Today’s Questions:

Could a church look like Acts 2:42 by attending worship services only? Have you brought in to Sunday School? Do you feel your class is an important group of people in your life? Do you have a serving role in your Sunday School class?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Dear Reader: Today, please pray for your class and its ministry. Pray for fellow class members by name. Pray for your teacher and other class leaders. If your class isn’t fully staffed, ask God to provide the Care Group Leaders or an Outreach Leader, et al. Ask God to show you how you can help your class be stronger.

Healthy Churches Equip Every Member for Ministry

Every pastor has a story about preaching a sermon on serving the Lord, only to have some old grump walk out the door with the remark, “Preacher, that’s what we’re paying you to do.” What kind of biblical thinking is that?!

In Ephesians 4:12, Paul tells us that the church staff exists “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” The staff equips and the saints do the ministry. Of course, as fellow saints, the staff ministers also — kind of like player-coaches. A few athletes have simultaneously played on a team they coached. Bill Russell did it with the Celtics. In the mid-1950s Tom Landry played defensive back while serving as defensive coordinator for the New York Giants.¹

The word for equip in Ephesians 4:12 is used for setting a broken bone, to get it ready to be serviceable again. Equipping is a word picture for preparing and training people for the work.

The Bible teaches that God gifts each believer for ministry and commands each believer to engage in ministry. “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10). God has a role as he empowers believers for ministry. Each believer has a role as he or she obediently follows God’s pattern and engages in ministry. And the church has a part in equipping its members and deploying them in its ministries.

Have you ever wondered why a Baptist church has so many services and groups? There is Sunday School where people from similar backgrounds study the Bible together. There is the morning worship service where the whole church gathers to worship and celebrate the risen Christ. There is Wednesday night prayer meeting because Jesus reminded us that his house shall be called a house of prayer (Matthew 21:13). Other groups — short-term and long-term — are created to develop disciples in a small circle of trusted people, to teach children their books of the Bible, to train church members to do the work of the church. Training includes ministry skills, doctrine, church organization (“polity”), and church history. A church needs to find a way and a time to train their members in these skills or they may end up with many members, but with weak lay leadership.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Player-coach>



Disciple-makers have often said, “Tell them why, show them how, get them started, keep them going.” These are important parts of the equipping process.

Tell them why: Knowing why provides motivation. It keeps us from getting discouraged and giving up. When you know the why, you know the what. That is, you are not just painting by the numbers. If a variable kicks in, you know enough of what is going on to make adjustments to achieve the goal.

Show them how: Most folks can’t simply read a book and know how to develop a skill set. They need to see it done... multiple times.

Get them started: The writer of Hebrews got onto some believers for not developing their spiritual gifts. “By this time you ought to be teachers” (Hebrews 5:12). No one is ever fully ready for prime time, but everyone has to start sometime.

Keep them going: The Lord’s church does hard things. The people we work with are all volunteers and we all have sinful natures. So, keep them encouraged!

The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. We are compared to arms and legs and eyes and ears. However, nowhere does it identify a “serving part.” That is because we are *all* serving parts. We just serve in different ways.

Our job is to equip and reproduce. As Paul wrote in today’s reading, “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

There are disciples, then makers of disciples, then makers of disciple-makers!

Today’s Questions:

Sometimes Christians find themselves in “perpetual youth group mode,” looking for the grown-ups to come take care of them. These immature believers expect the ministerial staff to do the work they should be doing—and then critique how well they do it. Is that true to some degree in your own life? Or, would you say you are being equipped to serve? Do you have someone under your wing, who is learning how to serve the Lord better with your help?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Lord Jesus, I don’t want to be the end of the line, merely the final beneficiary. I want to be the start of a new line, winning people to You and then helping them learn how to serve You through Your church.

Healthy Churches Hold to Sound Doctrine

If you had just moved to a new town and were looking for a church home, what would be the top thing or two you would look for in your new church? Many would answer, “Good music” or a “A good children’s ministry.” Doctrine may not make the list at all. In our trans-denominational age, people are not as interested in doctrine as they used to be — or as they *should* be. Many would consider such beliefs a mere technicality or a matter of terminology. What difference does it make as long we’re trying to be better people? But think about it: You would never, and I mean *never ever*, sign a contract with such vague language.

Ask yourself: Who will the God be about whom this great praise team will sing? And what will that wonderful children’s program be teaching your children?

W. T. Connor wrote:

*Many people today have little patience with any kind of definite doctrinal teaching in religion. This aversion to religious doctrine is not confined to those who are altogether indifferent or hostile to religion. Even many religious people are unfriendly to any kind of definite doctrinal teaching. They wish to confine religion to the realm of feeling or friendly good will, or make it a matter of practical social activity.*¹

Just preach the gospel, some will say. OK, let’s take John 3:16. That verse is as gospel as the gospel gets!

For God: Would that be the triune God of Christianity or the mono-person god of Islam?

So Loved: You mean God has personal characteristics like love? So, we are talking about a personal God and not an impersonal force as found in the eastern religions?

The World: So God is concerned with the world, and not just a certain people group within the total world population?

That He Gave His Only Begotten Son: You mean there is a distinction between the Father who gives his Son and the Son who is given? In what sense is the Son *begotten*? Is Jesus Christ the highest of created beings or the eternal Son of God and

¹ W. T. Connor, *Christian Doctrine*, © 1937 Broadman Press, pages 11-12



uncreated creator? Would Allah, as described in Islam, take action like this?

That Whosever Believeth in Him: God has expectations concerning our response to him? What does it mean to believe? Is salvation by grace through faith? Or, is salvation by faith *and* works?

Should Not Perish: We are not all going to the same place? We are not all absorbed into the cosmic consciousness or reincarnated in another life? There is actually a place of eternal separation from God? The teaching of universalism that we are all saved — it's only that some of us don't yet know it — isn't true?

But Have Everlasting Life: There is a higher quality of life which can be experienced right now and continue forever? There is a place called Heaven?

One can easily see that even the simplest of truths are doctrinal in nature. Doctrine is the collected body of truths about God, ourselves, and the world around us, drawn from Scripture.

It cannot be said that we love God with all of our minds, as the Great Commandment instructs us to do (Matthew 22:35-38), if we are bored with the slightest bit of consideration of his person. Further, without doctrine, the Christian life is out of balance. We are, so to speak, rolling on a warped rim.

*Without the element of feeling, religion has little motive power; without doctrinal belief, the element of intelligence is lacking; without practical activity, it is vapid and empty.*²

To believe the Bible, we have to believe doctrine. These are truths to live by. Many have died for these truths. These are truths to die with. Our church must be faithful to these truths. And we should instruct our members in them.

So... should you move to another town, when you search for a new church home, biblical doctrine should be on the very top of your list.

Today's Questions:

Our lives are based on truths or lies. How much of your own outlook in life is driven, for example, by the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ (as seen in John 3:16, mentioned above) or the perseverance of the saints, or the doctrine of the church?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

God of all truth, truth matters to You. Please make it matter to me. Show me how life and relationships and church and work are matters of doctrinal truth, and enable me to walk in those truths and live in their light.

² W. T. Connor, *Christian Doctrine*, © 1937 Broadman Press, page 12

Healthy Churches Are Built On Biblical Truth

A strong church is built on a foundation of truth. As each member aligns himself with the Word, all members are brought into harmony together. A. W. Tozer writes:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow.¹

There is one standard of objective truth. It is found in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. It is here we are told the truth about God, ourselves, and the world around us. The Bible is not man's best understanding of God, but rather God's self-revelation of himself. Scripture is inspired — that is, the very words are God-breathed. We hold that, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). This isn't subjective opinion because, "No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The Scriptures have been preserved. Through the centuries, the books of the Bible have been accurately copied, protected, and transmitted to us.

The Holy Spirit illumines our minds to understand the Scriptures. Many believers remember how odd and foreign the Bible seemed to them... until they became a Christians.

Scripture is not a collection of trivia from antiquity or mere abstract thought. As God gave us the Scriptures, he had their application in mind. We are told how we should live, how our families should function, and how the church should operate.

The late E. V. Hill told of the church business meetings when he arrived at his new pastorate. They had to hire three police officers to keep order. So, the new pastor implemented a policy: If a member wanted to speak to a motion on the floor, the member had to use Scripture to support his or her position. That would silence a

¹ A. W. Tozer, cited in *Preaching the Word - Acts: The Church Afire*



lot of church members in a lot of churches!

The First Baptist Church in Tallassee has thirteen church principles. One is “The Principle of Biblical Authority”:

While cultures and traditions may change, God's Word is eternal and absolutely reliable in all it affirms. Therefore, the Bible shall have the final say in all the church believes, teaches, and practices. We purpose to teach believers from the Bible in practical terms how to live the Christian life. We will train them in Biblical doctrine and for Christian service.

In a healthy church, the pastor preaches the Word. He doesn't merely read his text and then tell stories, spout opinions, or wax poetic. His sermons take their shape from the biblical text. He is the mouthpiece of the passage. Likewise, in Sunday School (and other small groups), the discussion is centered around living out the principles contained in the passage.

There is a dynamic in Scripture. The Bible feeds our souls; it strengthens us. Hearing it imparts faith. It transforms our worldview. It reprograms how we think and what we feel. We are, thus, a truth-based people — and these truths are life-changing.

Scripture is at once understandable and deep. “I believe it was Jerome who said that the Scriptures are shallow enough for a babe to come and drink without fear of drowning and deep enough for theologians to swim in without ever touching the bottom.”² This is not a book one will get bored with!

Today's Questions:

Have you ever been in a Sunday School class where people swapped opinions as if they were pooling their ignorance? One person's opinion was considered as good as the Bible's? “I disagree with Paul, here” Did that class seem to feel they were under the authority of God's Word or the Word was under the authority of their opinions? Did that seem to you to have any power in it?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Living Spirit of God, You have to put to paper the sacred words of truth. You have given us the commandments of God for how we should think and our attitudes and our lives. Please work in me to see myself as under Your Word, not equal. As learning from Your Word, not self-confident in my opinions. As depending on Your Word, not self-reliant.

² Walter A. Henrichsen, *Disciples are Made—Not Born*, © 1974 Victor Books, pages 12-13

Healthy Churches Have a Nurturing Fellowship

I remember, years ago, being told about a high school football coach who often became frustrated when he attended church because he wanted to talk about the Bible and everyone else wanted to talk about the football game. His idea of fellowship was in contrast to that of many of the other members.

One of the six main functions of a church is “Nurturing Fellowship.” Fellowship begins with *two fellows in the same boat*; that is, it is a relationship based on things held in common. In Christ we have much in common. But, what do we mean by the first word in the term, *Nurturing Fellowship*?

First, we mean that a strong, healthy church has an uplifting tone. One gets an “up-look” for having been together, and leaves feeling inspired.

The church provides a culture of normal. A lot of people didn’t grow up in an unbroken home, but they see happy families modeled at church. They can see what a Christian man looks like. They can see what people are like who are whole. One is around people who don’t cuss, don’t gossip, and aren’t negative — people who are trying to live for the Lord. In church, we see examples all around us.

Nurturing fellowship means one hears other believers’ stories of their Christian journey. You hear stories about conversion, about spiritual growth, and about serving the Lord — and you relate. One brother shares how the Lord enabled him to overcome a sinful habit. Someone else tells how she was finally able to tell her sister about Jesus. This gives us a mental picture of what some new aspect of growth and service, which we have not yet personally experienced, might look like.

Nurturing fellowship means there are people to encourage you. In the world, there is always someone to drag you down and make you feel like a loser. Certainly, the devil enjoys beating us up over our sins. In a healthy church, they build you up.

We need to know that others are counting on us to do our part. Sometimes, we need someone to ask us why we were absent. Sometimes, we need to



face the hard questions. People aren't going to give anyone permission to ask such questions if they are not in a relationship with a high level of trust. But, accountability helps us stay on track and to become what we should be.

Many, many times, I have heard church members going through a health crisis or the loss of a loved one remark that they didn't understand how people without a church family could make it through such life events. Nurturing fellowship includes support. We need someone there for us when life hurts. We need someone who won't kick us when we're down. We need someone who will love us and pray for us. People who will brush us off and get us back into the game.

Consider this situation: A new Christian is in your class. He doesn't have any Christian family or friends. The class members are just getting to know him. Where is he going to find this kind of nurture? And could there be anyone who needs it more?

The answer is that this kind of support must be provided *on purpose*. Christians have to have a plan or they will end up taking care of only their friends. This includes a plan to check on the missing (absentees), to comfort the grieving, and encourage those who are going through a hard time. There has to be a plan for communicating urgent prayer needs. Classes have to organize to minister in these ways so no one falls between the cracks.

Today's Questions:

How fragile is your walk with God? Have you ever felt like you had all this spiritual momentum and then, suddenly, you crashed and burned? In Colossians, Paul names people who had been in his life or in the life of the church. They were difference makers in the lives of others. How well do you feel you do spiritually when you are away from the difference makers in your life?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Lord, I realize You did not create me to be alone in my walk with you, that it simply will not work that way. You placed me in Your church and with Your people. I confess that I am not strong enough alone. Please remind me that others need the same kind of nurture and encouragement I do. Show me, please, my opportunities in fellowship.

Healthy Churches Let People In

Sometimes, a person will join a new church and will be given a heads-up by someone who has been there just a little longer: “You have to make your own way here.” Consider the hurdles a new member may have to clear to “make his own way”:

There is the hurdle of existing relationships. Some peoples’ “dance cards” are already full. They don’t have time on the calendar or room in their hearts for any more close friends.

There is the hurdle of personal history and the related inside-stories. In Sunday School, someone leans forward and speaks past the new member to enjoy a story from their past with an old friend. How do you think the new guy in the middle feels?

Socio-economic differences can be hurdles. Some have cars, clothes, and conveniences others do not. And while they don’t flaunt them, as they talk about their stuff with their friends, the outsider takes notice.

There is the “rules of the road” hurdle. How you carry yourself. What you wear. How loudly you talk. How you choose your words. How much banter you engage in and your type of humor. A lot of this will come from our work environment, the homes in which we grew up, and our educational backgrounds.

There is the “what you can talk about before class” hurdle. A lot of this is a reflection of the different kinds of things we do at work.

Sometimes, we can remove the hurdles and bridge the differences. Sometimes, it’s a bridge too far. That is why we start new classes — so more people can have a home base where they feel comfortable.

However, as the Lord’s people, it is our job to create an environment where no one has to make his own way! Instead, we need to create ways from the outside in. There must be intentionality in helping people move through the various stages of being an “outsider” to becoming an “insider.”

First, we need to develop relationships with people who don’t know the Lord *in our spheres of influence*. We need to be in places where there are unbelievers, un-



churched people, and de-churched people (people who once attended church but became disillusioned). Our goal is get to know and like them. Then, we want to invite people to become part of our Bible studies and DLife Groups. This represents the first movement— from our sphere of influence *into an exploratory visit*.

The next movement is from the parking lot *into the front door*. Greeters help people find the right entrance and provide assistance to any who need it.

The transition from the front door *into the classroom* is one that makes most guests feel nervous. How do I find the right classroom? What's behind the door? Will there be people in the classroom like me?

It's important for someone in the class to ask our guests to sit with them *in the worship service*, walking with them from the classroom to the worship center.

Over time, with exposure to his Word and to his people, God brings people to faith in Christ. This is the big in-movement — *into God's forever family*.

From the time someone comes into the Lord's family, there are other in-movements include getting them *in training* to develop as a disciple and how to serve the Lord. Then, deploying them *in the world* in witness and service.

Another "in" is one no believer ever moves out of; that is, *staying in fellowship*. Because our Christian walk is fragile, we all need each other's help for that!

There is a story about a World War I soldier who was killed in action. His buddies asked the priests if they could bury him in the Catholic cemetery nearby. No, the young officer was a protestant. So his friends asked if they could bury him just outside the cemetery. Yes, they could permit that. His buddies happened to come back by the cemetery later and saw, that after reconsideration, the priests had moved the cemetery fence to include this soldier. Our role is to *include people in*.

Today's Questions:

Who is counting on you to be at church this Sunday because... you are the one who "includes them in"? Who are you looking out for so they don't have to make their own way? Who is on the outside in some way, you are helping to move inside?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Spirit of God, please give me the ability to pick up on it when someone is feeling like they are on the outside looking in. Guide me in showing them respect and not make them feel like they are my project. Give me the words and the sensitivity to include them into my world and Your family.

Healthy Churches Resolve Conflict

People sometimes move their membership from a church which their family has attended and served for generations. They have many memories there — baptisms and family weddings and Christmas pageants. However, the congregation has fallen into open conflict. There is continuous drama and it's like a football rivalry; you're expected to pick a side. Finally, after getting sick and tired of arriving in the church parking lot with their stomach in knots, they leave all their memories behind. They want to be part of a church, not a fight. And so they move their membership to the church that has a reputation for stability and peace. The question is: How do you become that church, the peaceful one?

Jesus taught us that being in a right relationship with our fellow believers is a high priority. If a relationship is threatened, we should treat it as a crisis, and resolve the problem immediately.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. — Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus never said a church should expect to have no conflict. In fact, he taught us that, sometimes, confrontation would be part of the Christian life. The Bible uses terms like *reprove* and *rebuke* in good ways (2 Timothy 4:2). However, Jesus and his apostles gave us guidance in resolving conflict:

Goal: Sometimes, when offended, we want to give people a piece of our minds. We want to *destroy* them. But Jesus taught us our goals should always be to *repair relationships* and to *restore* people in their walk with God. The goal is to “win” our brother (Matthew 18:15), not win a fight. “Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20).

Credibility Comes First: “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye” (Luke 6:42).

Motives Matter: “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (James 3:13-15). Here, we see the source of the negative attitudes that may be found in many a conflicted church.



Tone: When confrontation is necessary, the spirit with which we do so is very important. “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness...” (Galatians 6:1). “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15, esp. 15).

Jesus Taught Us to Resolve Disputes Privately. “If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matthew 18:15, CSB). Privacy isn’t always possible. Sometimes, others must be involved, especially in legal matters. But in everyday personal disputes, this is always the place to start.

We Deal with Christians and Unbelievers in Different Ways. Our non-Christian friends have not yet accepted God as the authority over their lives. Nor are they under the discipline of the church. Those who have received Christ have done both. “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (1 Corinthians 5:1-13, esp. 12).

In the Church, Divisive Personalities are Not to be Tolerated. “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11).

We Should Never Give Credence to Gossip, especially in regard to church leaders. “Don’t accept an accusation against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses” (1 Timothy 5:19).

There is a Special Responsibility When a Christian Brother or Sister Repents. The conflict must instantly end. “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

This is how we protect the unity in our church and, in so doing, protect the impact of our message in the community.

Today’s Questions:

What is your first instinct in times of conflict, to post it on Facebook so people will take your side? To tell your friends and gather sympathizers? Or to seek to resolve the conflict? How did you handle the last such situation you experienced?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Jesus, You are the source of reconciliation between God and man. Please enable me, as far as it is possible on my part, to be at peace with everyone in my life. Please grant me courage when it is time to go have a conversation, wisdom as it is needed, and composure as I speak. Use me to help others in Your church resolve their differences, as well.

Healthy Churches Are Full of Encouragers

In 701 BC, Sennacherib led the Assyrians into the land of Judah. He would capture Lachish, a highly-fortified city in its day, and take over 200,000 people captive. However, Hezekiah has Jerusalem in a much stronger position than they had been. And, they are more “blessable” now. Still, this is a terrifying moment for the people. The Assyrians are fierce and merciless. So, Hezekiah makes military preparations and then he speaks to the people of Jerusalem. Verse 6 says [Hezekiah] gathered them together to him in the square at the gate of the city and spoke encouragingly to them.” Literally, it reads, “He spoke to their hearts.” And it worked! “The people took confidence from the words of Hezekiah king of Judah” (verse 8).

Why People in the World Around Us Need Encouragement:

- ◇ **Sin:** Sin beats folks up and wears them down; they need encouragement.
- ◇ **A Cynical View of Life:** People are repeatedly disappointed and disillusioned with what this world has given them; positive people point them to better dreams.
- ◇ **Self-Centered Culture:** With so many self-centered people around them, folks feel locked out and isolated. However, encouragers reach out to include them and bring them in.
- ◇ **Fear:** People fear rejection; encouragers help people see past their fears.

1. We Encourage When We Confirm the Strengths of Others

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:11-12). Powerful encouraging phrases include: “You are good at...” and “I believe you must have the spiritual gift of...”

2. We Encourage When We Affirm the Direction of Others

The Holy Spirit was at work in Antioch. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem get word. So they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check things out. So, “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them [that is, encouraged them] all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (Acts 11:23).

3. We Encourage When We Help Others Put Hard Times into Perspective

Paul and Barnabas returned to some churches they had started. They were,



“Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). This would help correct the false impression that suffering always means I did something wrong. It reminds them that Heaven will make our sufferings look small. Failures aren’t final...It’s too soon to quit.

4. We Encourage When We Appreciate the Efforts of Others

“Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints” (Philemon 7). Philemon had supported Paul in his work. Paul’s expression of appreciation would encourage him!

5. We Encourage When We Inspire Higher Motives in Others

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, NIV). One person used to witness using this opening sentence: “God loves you and wants to use you to change the world.”

Some Practical Thoughts on Speaking to Peoples’ Hearts:

Encouragement is more about the tone you set than saying certain words. Concentrate on relieving the other person’s fear; that’s where encouragement begins. Use a tone of voice that says you’re safe. Avoid saying something that would put them on the defensive... to put up such a defensive wall you can’t speak to their hearts. Ignore the fronts people put up – speak to their hearts. Speak sincerely – don’t feel you have to appear to have it all together... that is merely putting up a front of your own.

We serve the One whom Romans 15:5 calls: “The God of endurance and encouragement.” Our Master is good at this! We should be also.

Today’s Questions:

Think of an occasion when someone gave you timely encouragement. What did that person do and say to help you? What difference did it make in your life? Now think of the last time you encouraged someone. How long has it been?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

God of all endurance and encouragement, I want to be an encourager. Please give me the eyes to see and take notice... prompt me to speak up... give me the interest to be a good listener... and the boosting word to build up — when those around me need encouragement.

Healthy Churches Don't Gossip

Gossip is discussing a situation with someone who is neither part of the problem nor the solution. The Bible clearly warns against it.

In Romans 1, there is a list of scandalous sins that mark a culture in spiritual decline. Verse 29 ends, "They are gossips."

Paul lists the qualifications for widows to receive benevolence assistance. He warns against someone being placed on the list at a young and healthy age, warning that otherwise, "They learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not" (1 Timothy 5:13). Gossips say things they shouldn't say.

The Corinthians had experienced spiritual decline and division. Paul writes to coach them up and warn them. He expresses his concern that when he visits them again, "That perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder" (2 Corinthians 12:20). The reader will notice gossip in this list and will see "the crowd" with which gossip runs.

Most people have had the experience of being on the subject matter end of gossip and found it to be most unpleasant. Yet, when someone else is the subject matter, it can be a juicy temptation. "A gossip's words are like choice food that goes down to one's innermost being" (Proverbs 26:22, CSB).

One word in the Old Testament for gossip is often translated *whisperer*. Many church members have had the experience of walking down a hall in the church to see a small circle of friends talking in hushed tones, and upon being seen, the group gets quiet.

The Damage Done by Gossip

Gossip Spreads Misinformation. That may not be the intention in the beginning, but as the information is repeated by one person to another, it is distorted and the facts are misrepresented.

Gossip Destroys People Instead of Restoring People. Gossip talks about people, not with people. Gossip has the agenda of making others think less highly of the one being discussed.



“You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people” (Leviticus 19:16).

Gossip has Embedded Within it the Resentment and Bitterness of the Ones Who Started it. There is the information of gossip and there is the spirit in gossip.

Gossip Lowers the Trust Level in a Church. Are you going to ask for prayer, or share a problem, or seek help when you know there is a good chance everyone in the church will know about it in less than 24 hours? One of the things on which the discipleship process depends is the disciple being able to trust others with a confidence.

“The one who reveals secrets is a constant gossip; avoid someone with a big mouth” (Proverbs 20:19, CSB).

Gossip turns a church into a collection of factions, undermining the unity of the church. For example, this happens when people want to get their way in a church decision and they work behind the scenes seeking to build a power-block to vote their way. Factions are categorized in Galatians 5:20 as a work of the flesh. 1 Corinthians teaches that divisions exist in a church because some members are seeking personal recognition (11:18-19). Jude 19 warns that people who cause divisions “are worldly, not having the Spirit.” Gossip is their tool.

Disguising Gossip: We know we shouldn’t gossip. So we may disguise it as something good. We say something like, “There’s something I want to share with you as a prayer concern” or “There’s just something on my mind I need to get off my heart.” But let’s just call it what it is: gossip. And let’s repent of it, as needed.

The Bible promises God’s people: “Without wood, fire goes out; without a gossip, conflict dies down” (Proverbs 26:20, CSB)

Today’s Questions:

Have you ever been the object of gossip? How did it feel when word got back to you? Did you trust those who were talking more or trust them less? Can you recall in your life experience a church that was made stronger by gossip? Can you think of one which was weakened and damaged by gossip?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Holy God, I am a person of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight. Empower me to speak, not unwholesome words, but to say only those things which will build others up, according to their needs.

(See Isaiah 6; Psalm 19:14; Ephesians 4:29-32)

Healthy Churches Do Caring Acts

On most every Monday one church's "ramp team" is out working. They build wheel chair ramps for those who cannot get in and out of their homes, and cannot afford to have a ramp built. The cost of the lumber is paid by another source, but these crew members have given away thousands of hours of labor. The team will pray with each family they help.

Each week, the local benevolence ministry gives away food boxes, clothes, and utility assistance. Volunteers from various community churches staff this ministry. Thousands of hours are given to sort clothes, take client applications and, at Christmas, distribute presents for children.

On Fridays, volunteers place big zip-lock bags of food into the backpacks of children who would otherwise go without over the weekend. This is a ministry of the churches of a Baptist Association. Volunteers order the food, pick it up, pack the freezer bags, and discreetly give it to the children.

Similarly, we could describe the ministry at a local Pregnancy Center, helping people in ways unknown to the community at large.

Sometimes, some churches do caring acts for the same reason as some businesses: for public relations. It is better not to have a service day and spend it taking selfies and posting them all to Instagram. When the ramp team goes out, they call it "Monday." Nor are deeds of generosity and kindness merely for the purpose of creating a "platform for the gospel." It is about meeting actual needs.

The Bible repeatedly commands us to help people:

- ◇ "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." — 1 John 3:17-18, CSB
- ◇ "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." — Hebrews 13:16
- ◇ "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." — Ephesians 4:28



- ◇ “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” — 1 Timothy 6:18

Most of the people helped by the type of ministries we have listed are not members of the churches that help them. So, sometimes, we can think of benevolence as something we do for people outside the church family. However, caring acts should especially be extended to fellow church members. The Bible commands us to “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality” (Romans 12:13).

We all need to know we are cared about, especially as we go through the tough times and challenging seasons of life. There are many ways we can communicate love to each other.

Simple caring acts within the fellowship might include:

- ◇ When a fellow class member has surgery or when a new baby is born; help the new mother out with supper for several nights.
- ◇ When someone loses a family member, take meals to the family and attend the memorial service.
- ◇ When there is a crisis, communicate the news and pray for one another.
- ◇ When someone is going through a hard time, quietly let them know you are praying for them.

The most attractive quality in a church is the love of God’s people. No matter how else we are perceived and described, loving should top the list!

Today’s Questions:

In today’s passage, we see how the church at Philippi had sent people and care packages to assist Paul. How good of a job does your Sunday School class do of keeping up with one another? How well do you support each other in times of trouble? When did you, personally, do your most recent caring act?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Good Father, You care for us. You provide for us and sustain us in time of trouble. Make me like You. Present in times of trouble. Generous in times of need. Comforting in times of distress. Supportive of those who are running on empty.

Members of a Healthy Church Are Committed to the Church

There is a term for them: *Church Hoppers* — that is, people who regularly change from one church to another. They leave disappointed or dissatisfied or having caused trouble (again) because they weren't allowed to take over... or something. Over time, such people develop a reputation.

Church hoppers hurt the churches they attend and then abandon. First, it shakes the congregation's confidence. "Such practices are very hurtful to churches, because those left behind start questioning what's wrong with *their* church if 'everybody' wants to leave."¹

Further, church hoppers hurt the churches they jilt by giving others the same idea. "Remember, *church hopping behavior is contagious. Sheep follow sheep.*"²

In our reading for today, verse 21 says, "So the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" What a hurtful thing to hear. Yet, when we ignore the older or the younger members in the church, that is what we are saying. When we have no interest in including people of other socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds, that is what we are saying. And when we leave a church for the wrong reasons, that is what we are saying to that congregation — "I have no need of you."

Members such as this do not contribute to the health of the church or to the Kingdom of God, as going from church to church, they leave questioning members and frustrated ministers in their wake. Church membership is a commitment to the Lord and to each other. We are members of the same body — of one another. Amputations are painful and are grieved.

Verse 28 says that each member is gifted and "placed in the church." Since God placed us in the body to fulfill a function, then we cannot let that bodily function go unfulfilled without hurting the body and offending its head, Christ.

The fact that the body is a picture of diversity in unity stands out in this chapter.

Verse 12 "For as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ." (CSB)

Verse 20 "There are many parts, yet one body."

¹ Thomas F. Cannon, *Two Faces in the Mirror*, Preacher's Kid Press, 2007, page 118 ² Ibid



To separate ourselves from the rest of the body is to mutilate the body of Christ and disfigure her.

To those who have been discouraged by people leaving their church: Many churches are like the front porch light in the summer. There are always a lot of bugs flying around. Not to compare people to insects, but when the light is on in a church, people will be attracted to it and will come to check it out. Not all will stay. The reputation of the church or the first impression they experienced in their early visits to the church made them feel this church was worth investigating. Yet no one church is for everyone. Some will visit for a while, perhaps join a Sunday School class, but then come to the conclusion the church is not exactly what they had first thought or, perhaps, they are not the best fit in this congregation. When you see this happening in your church, you can allow it to bother you or you can understand that people swarming in — and out — means the light is on. It says something good about your church that people feel it is worth checking out.

Once we commit to a local community of faith, we should take that commitment seriously. We need to put on the jersey and play for our team. When others are irregular in their attendance, then it is time for the committed members to be solidly faithful in theirs. When others are spending God's tithe on themselves, it is time for the committed members to make sure they are giving proportionately and at God's leading. When others are too busy to serve, it is time for you to volunteer. Put on the jersey and play for your team!

Today's Questions:

Today's passage has a lot to say about spiritual gifts; it also has a lot to say about our common connection to Christ. It speaks much about our interdependence in the body of Christ. As you read about this interdependence, what is it saying to you about your commitment to the rest of the body? Are you being selfish and "hurting the team"? Are you being faithful in attendance? Are you faithful in your participation? Would your class or your church's ministry be helped if you stepped up to the plate a little more?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

O God, I realize there are people counting on me. I have a part. I have a role to fill. I have a job to do. People need me. You have expectations of me. Help me remember. Remind me when I am distracted that it makes a difference when I am present and accounted for.

Recovering the Biblical Role of Deacon

The New Testament church faced a crisis. The church distributed food to the widows on a daily basis. However, controversy threatened the church when the overloaded Apostles were accused of playing favorites and neglecting the Greek-speaking widows. So the Apostles called a church conference and stated, in the first place, they should be concentrating on “Prayer and the ministry of the Word” — that is, they shouldn’t be distracted from what God had called them to do in order to administer the benevolence ministry. Second, the church should call out some qualified people to fulfill this task instead of them. The church agreed, and even selected all Greek-speaking deacons as a show of good faith. The controversy ceased and the church continued to grow.

Though the word, “deacon,” is not used in Acts 6, most Baptists consider this passage the historical record of the establishment of the office. The word for waiting on tables is the same root word as deacon and the duty described in the passage seems consistent with what we read in the rest of Scripture concerning the office.

These first seven deacons were probably full time with the church. Consider the size of the church at Jerusalem, with thousands of members. Consider also how, in that day, there was no refrigeration nor trucks in which to transport the food. Yet, it was a daily distribution.

While there is more information on the role of the pastor, especially in the pastoral epistles, two things stand out about the office of deacon: First, the name of the office means “servant.” Second, the office was established to administer the benevolence ministry.

Many have gotten the impression from talking with friends who are members of churches in other denominations that deacons are like their ruling elders; it’s the same thing with a mere a difference in terminology. But this is a mistaken impression. In the New Testament, a pastor is a shepherd, is an elder, is an overseer (or bishop). These words are used interchangeably for the same office (1 Peter 5:1-4 and Acts 20:17-38). Thus, elders are pastors and deacons are not elders.

I have heard some deacons state the Bible says they are to take care of the business of the church. However, the Bible says “*This business*” — that of the benevo-



lence ministry — not *the* business.

Here is a summary of the biblical role of deacons:

New Testament Deacons serve the Lord by conducting the caring ministry of the church — doing the benevolence work, visiting the sick, being alert to the spiritual needs of the congregation — for the purpose of freeing the pastoral staff to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word — thus, promoting unity within the church and facilitating the spread of the gospel.

What Kind of Man Should the Church Select for Deacons?

The Bible doesn't expect men to be perfect or some kind of "super-Christian" to be qualified to serve as deacons. However, it must be more than he's a successful businessman and he attends. Scripture does describe the type of man who should be selected for this office. The Apostles listed three core qualifications for the office of deacon: that the men have a good reputation in the community, that they be full of the Holy Spirit, and that they be full of wisdom.

First, a man has to have a reputation in the community for character. He has to live a consistent Christian life. Otherwise, the reputation of the church will be damaged, as will her ministry to the community. It all starts with credibility.

Secondly, a deacon should have the experience of the Holy Spirit working in his life, enabling him to grow in grace and empowering him to serve the Lord. Since the church is a supernatural phenomenon, powered by the Holy Spirit, her leaders should have a meaningful connection to the Holy Spirit. One might take note of two of the original seven deacons: Steven (Acts 6:8-7:60) and Philip (Acts 8:26-40).

Third, a deacon should be full of wisdom. That is, he should know how to apply the principles of Scripture to the problems of life and of the church. He should know how to apply the appropriate biblical text to the issue.

Today's Questions:

From where did you get your concept of Deacon ministry? The church in which you grew up? A careful study of the Scriptures on the subject? A book you read? What are the key factors for you in the Deacon selection process?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Lord Jesus, You are the Head of the church. You have the right to tell us how You want it to be run. Please guide us, as a church, and me, as an individual, to approach this office biblically.

Honoring the Biblical Role of Pastor

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

A new neighbor was building a house next door to ours. The man's father was overseeing the contractors and doing some of the work himself. As we were talking in the driveway and I told him what I did for a living. He remarked that someone once told him that there are two people in every small town people are trying to run off: the head football coach (Coach lived on the other side of us) and the preacher at the Baptist church. I don't think he was even a believer.

Why do we see much of this? Well first, pastors all engage in ministry as general practitioners. Yet each has a gift-mix, specific areas of the work in which they excel, a collection of niches and life experiences in meeting specific needs of the congregations they have served. All together these things make them who they are. Below is a list of things pastors do:

- ◇ Preach and Teach the Word (and study to prepare)
- ◇ Pastoral Care: visit Hospitals, homebound
- ◇ Personal Evangelism (also evangelistic preaching)
- ◇ Discipleship
- ◇ Decision Counseling
- ◇ Personal and Family Counseling
- ◇ Casting vision
- ◇ Ministry event and the related project management
- ◇ Lead & Manage Staff
- ◇ Promotion within church
- ◇ Advertising in media for the community
- ◇ Provide Institutional Memory: Serve as resident expert on the bylaws and how we carry out the various processes in the church (e.g. deacon selection process); to assist deacons, teams, and committees with background information on the denomination, etc.

God doesn't gift pastors in all of these ways. Even if a man were talented enough to be excel at each and every one of these skills, there wouldn't be enough time in



the week to do all of these things with excellence.

Consider now the collected expectations of the congregation. Add them all up and the composite is a fictional Super Pastor! No one could live up to all that!

The Bible, however, provides realistic expectations for what pastors should emphasize. We find some guidance in his titles:

Elder: Elder describes the earned credibility of the leader. Elder was the term used for the leaders of local synagogues, which were decision-making bodies. The term was carried over to the church. In Acts 20, Paul sent for the elders (multiple elders) of the church at Ephesus. When one considers that, at this point, local churches did not own their own buildings, it would make sense to think they probably functioned as a network of house churches.

Shepherd: Pastoral Care is usually thought to include hospital and homebound visitation. People sometimes think of visits to “pat hands.” The biblical focus is more on shepherding souls. That is, assisting people in their spiritual growth.

Equipper: The role of your pastor is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). That is, he trains the church members to do ministry through the church and in their spheres of influence.

Teacher: Sometimes, people describe a pastor as being, “A great teacher, but not so gifted as a preacher.” They intend the word preacher to communicate something along the lines of *stem-winding orator*. The New Testament doesn’t list preaching as a spiritual gift, but it does speak of the gift of “pastor and teacher” (Ephesians 4:11). As many church members use the word, preacher is more of a reflection of our culture. Pastors are responsible to teach the Bible.

Overseer: This title casts him as the leader with responsibilities to protect those under his care. Thus, the writer of Hebrews says that a little respect is in order.

Today’s Questions:

Who is the favorite pastor you have ever had? What was he good at? Why was he your favorite; what made you appreciate him? Does your current pastor have a different gift set? Are you accepting him as a person and receiving his ministry?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Father, You have given us these leaders as gifts to Your Church. Help me to have biblical expectations and realistic expectations. Enable me to appreciate what my pastor does well and to focus on that. Remind me to pray for him. Prompt me to be a blessing to him.

Healthy Churches Are Faithful Stewards of the Lord's Money

“No one is going to tell me what to do with my money!” More than one Christian has testified to this in regard to the matter of their tithes and offerings. And certainly, in a Baptist church, all giving is a voluntary matter. There's no collection agent to come take it from you. Why is this such a sensitive subject?

Richard Halverson, then chaplain of the U.S. Senate, said:

Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other single thing because, when it comes to a man's real nature, money is of first importance. Money is an exact index to a man's true character. All through Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of a man's character and how he handles his money.¹

There is the matter of ownership. If you are actually a Christian, who owns what?

God Owns You: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

God Owns it All: “The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the LORD” (Psalm 24:1, CSB).

God Owns the Tithe: “And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord” (Leviticus 27:30, NKJV).

So... if We Spend God's Tithe on Something Else, we're Stealing from God:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings” (Malachi 3:8, NKJV).

The Bible teaches that everything in our lives belongs to the Lord and that we are to manage His resources in His way. You may be thinking strictly in terms of financial assets, but these resources include our time and abilities. Foremost, we are stewards of the gospel. In regard to money, the tithe is the starting place. Offerings are gifts over and above the tithe.

God Will Get His Tithe: How many Christians have testified to this from their own

¹ Richard Halverson cited in John Piper, *Enough for Us: Abundance for Every Good Work*. www.desiringgod.org/messages/enough-for-us



personal experiences! God tells his people he has cursed his readers' finances: "You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you." (verse 9). But then he makes them a conditional promise: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse... put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need" (verse 10).

We often think we can't afford to tithe, but that is because God has been repossessing his money! But if we take the step of faith and begin to obey him in the matter of our giving, then, as the farmer put it, "The chickens seem to lay more eggs." God invites you to take the tithing challenge; "Put me to the test."

If you haven't submitted to the Lordship of Christ over your money, you haven't submitted to the Lordship of Christ over you!

Take My Life and Let It Be

Take my life and let it be

Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my hands and let them move

At the impulse of Thy love.

Take my silver and my gold,

Not a mite would I withhold.

Take my moments and my days,

Let them flow in endless praise.

Take my will and make it Thine,

It shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart, it is Thine own,

It shall be Thy royal throne.²

Today's Questions:

Are you one of those people who get agitated when the church discusses money? Or, are you a joyful giver? When you write your tithe check, do you say you've "got to give" — or that you "get to give"? Have you been embezzling God's tithe for recreational purposes or to boost your standard of living? Do you need to accept God's tithing challenge?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Sovereign Lord, I recognize the fullness of the earth is Yours and they that dwell in it. Thank you for all you've let me enjoy — and for the opportunity to give some of it back and to be a part of what You are doing in this church and around the world.

² Frances R. Havergal, 1874

It's About Jesus

It was a very likeable and fun guy who came to me after a worship service one Senior Adult Day. He spoke very approvingly about the service. He concluded his compliments with "That what it's all about!" I accepted his appreciation in the spirit with which they were given. However, I thought to myself, "No, that was good to do, but that's not what it's all about." It's about Jesus, and since it is, there are things church is not about. The book of Colossians gives us examples:

It's About the Kingdom of Christ. It's not about "our church" or "our group" or "our class." We were under the dominion of darkness when by God's mercy we were transferred to the kingdom of Christ—everything is now about His reign and rule. "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13).

It's About the Forgiveness We Received in Christ. It's not about your past or the skeleton in your closet that haunts you. Nor, is it about our self-righteousness. It is Jesus "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:14).

Jesus is the Creator; it's about our Creator's Design for Our Lives. It's not about the life we wish to create for ourselves. "...All things were created through him and for him" (1:16). Everything He made exists for His pleasure. If our car isn't running and isn't able to transport us from one place to another, then it is not carrying out the purpose for which it was created. If we are not pleasing Him, then we are malfunctioning. For all of creation, it's about Jesus.

It's About Being the Body of Christ. It's not about us being a big fish in a little pond. Before the days of smart phones, a man once drove into a town and asked someone for directions to the Church of Christ. The person started to give him directions. "You take the second left and go two blocks... No, Ole Man Smith runs that church. I tell you what: continue going straight for a half-mile and it will be on your left... No, come to think of it, the Brown family controls that church. OK, here it is; you take the next right and go two blocks... No, that's not it either. ...Sir, I'm sorry. Come to think of it; I don't think Christ has a church in this town."

Colossians tells us about Jesus, that "He is the head of the body, the church..." (1:18). And it is "...his body, that is, the church" (1:24). Jesus Christ is



the head of the church and its only owner.

It's About Jesus Having First Place, the preeminent place in our lives and in His church. "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent" (1:18). He is not merely called eminent, but *preeminent*. He is the first of the first. John warned a church about those who want to have it another way. "I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority" (3 John 9).

It's About Sharing in the Afflictions of Christ; Not Our Comfort or Convenience.

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (1:24). The afflictions of Christ include His finished work on the cross. There, he paid the penalty of our sin in full. It also includes the unfinished work of spreading the gospel. Not everyone responds well to the gospel. Sometimes Christian witnesses suffer at the hands of those who reject the message. That is the part which is lacking in Christ's sufferings. Paul was prepared to suffer because he understood that it's about Jesus.

It's About the Indwelling of Christ. It's not about us doing things "for" God; it's about "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). Jack Taylor told how he was at the end of his rope, successful, but depressed. He came upon this passage one day and the light came on! It's about the indwelling Christ living His life through us.

It's About Being Complete in Christ. It's not about the things we try to tack on to be considered "spiritual." Jesus is not only necessary; Jesus is enough. He requires no additives. Paul's goal was "That we may present every man complete in Christ" (1:28, NASB). We are to be "Rooted and built up in Him" (2:6-7). Many drift from one spiritual fad to another. It isn't about the fads; it's about Jesus.

Today's Questions:

Today, how much of your life is about Christ?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Heavenly Father, who initiates all divine action...

Jesus Christ, Head of the church and Savior of the body...

Indwelling Spirit, making known to us our fellowship with the Father and with the Son...

Please consume my life so completely that I may say, 'Not I, but Christ who lives in me.'

Church is Not a Show You Attend

People often talk about which church they “attend” as if church were a movie theatre. “I go to Chantilly” or “We go to AMC Festival.” When we think of church as a show we attend, then we can get the idea that our participation isn’t so vitally important. Who cares if you don’t go see a movie this weekend? You weren’t interested in what was showing. It feels very optional.

When we think of church as a show, then it is about how stirring the music was or how inspiring the sermon was. How moving the service was. It is all about what we get out of it.

When we think of church as the “God Show,” then we can become critics who evaluate the production quality, rather than as people under the authority of God’s Word.

If church is a show, then we don’t have a connection to our fellow members. They are merely random people who happen to attend the same showing. There are no relationships. There are no examples. There is no encouragement. There is no praying about it together. There is no one there for us.

Shows are safe. You can watch from a safe distance. There is no accountability or responsibility. The only responsible parties are those on the platform. For many, there isn’t much difference between going to a movie and church; they just sit and watch the show.

At a show, no one concerns themselves with the “one another” commands in the Bible. For example:

- ◇ “Love *one another* with brotherly affection.” — Romans 12:10
- ◇ “Accept *one another*, just as Christ also accepted you” — Romans 15:7, NASB
- ◇ “Encourage *one another* and build each other up.” — 1Thessalonians 5:11
- ◇ “Be hospitable to *one another* without grumbling.” — 1 Peter 4:9
- ◇ “Let us love *one another*, for love is from God” — 1 John 4:7

Thinking of church as a show is a far cry from the New Testament description of the church as the “Body of Christ.” The Lord is giving expression to his ongoing ministry through the members of the body. Each part of the body is a member of



the whole. They are interdependent. They are also the arms and legs and eyes and ears and mouths through which the Lord acts to bless the world.

A lot of the talk you hear about being a part of the “universal church” is actually spiritual sounding lingo to cover up for treating church like a show. When one church has the big name music group in town, that’s where they attend. The next week, they go hear the big name preacher at whatever church is hosting him. They see the local churches as a smorgasbord offering spiritual delicacies from which they may choose. Let’s see, what am I in the mood for today?

Even that person who faithfully attends the services at one particular church — but attends only the worship service and, then, slipping out as soon as the service concludes — this person too is thinking of church as a show.

When you join a local church, you are uniting with the rest of the congregation by covenant. Church members willingly commit to walk together, giving themselves to the Lord, and to one another. Until Jesus comes again, the local church is like a ‘colony of heaven’ (Philippians 3:20) and is a fellowship on a mission.

So, church isn’t a show one attends, but a fellowship with a mission. We should therefore be a vital part of the fellowship and engaged in the mission.

Today’s Questions:

As you read the eleven verses in today’s reading, what phrases communicate the idea of a fellowship on a mission? Do you see any phrases that communicate the idea of a show?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Dear Lord, we are so tempted to be lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God. We want to be entertained and pampered. Before we realize it, we’ve tried to turn even Your church into a consumer product. Please make me dare to commit my life to others. Please show how me to be a blessing in the lives of my Christian brothers and sisters. Make us, as a local church, more attuned to the mission You’ve given us in this world.

Healthy Churches Worship Well

One of the six main functions of a church is “Christ-centered worship.” Perhaps “Trinitarian worship” would be a better phrase. As Christians, we worship the one true God who has revealed himself to us in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For example, as we observe the ordinance of baptism, Jesus commanded us to do so “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Correspondingly, our worship is *through* Christ. “Through him we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18). It is through Jesus we can fellowship with the Father (John 14:6) and it is through Jesus we can praise the Father. As the Father’s viceroy, Jesus is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23). Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, “He will testify about me” (John 15:26) and “He will glorify me” (John 16:14). So, the church is Christ-centered.

Worship Must be Based on Truth: In our passage for today, Jesus tells the woman at the well in effect, “You Samaritans don’t know what you’re talking about.” He gives her no bonus points for sincerity.

Worship is not external, but internal—a function of our human spirits. For it is in our spirits that we commune with God. Thus, worship is not merely going through the motions nor is it defined by mere outward acts.

Wayne Grudem writes, “Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts.”¹ Worship is an expression of the heart and mind.

Heart and Mind: Some are uncomfortable with what they would consider emotionalism. However, one cannot love God with all his heart without his emotions being included. Others are just fine with expressing emotions, but feel that thought is too sterile and antiseptic. But we cannot love God with all our mind if we are unwilling to give him deep thought.

Worship is Expression: Thus, it is impossible for worship to go unexpressed. “Praise is always active, assertive, demonstrative, and open. It is not passive, presumptuous, undemonstrative, or secretive... Praise is adoration of God that is vocal, audible, or visible (any one or all of these at a time.”² One thing worship is not: worship is not a spectator sport.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, ©1994 Intervarsity/Zondervan, page 1003

² Jack R. Taylor, *The Hallelujah Factor*, ©1983, Broadman Press, pages 16-17

Expressions of Worship Vary: This includes words of praise, songs of praise, our body language (uplifted hands, standing), our giving, listening to the Word of God, and the yielding of our will to God. The ordinances of the Lord’s Supper and baptism are expressions of worship. Fawn Parish explains:

*Music is just one planet in a whole universe of possible responses to the Wonderful One. Worship is not merely an emotional gift. We worship with our wills. We worship with our minds. We worship with our imaginations. We worship when we obey God at great cost.*³

Worship is celebrating our victory in Christ... and it can be the slow savoring of the presence of God. Since worship begins with a glimpse of God, sometimes the natural response to this sudden realization is stunned silence.

It is God Whom We Worship, Not a Great Performance: Some church choirs and praise teams attract new members mainly because they love music, not because they particularly love Jesus. Ever notice how the soloists who can hit the high notes somehow seem to generate more “clapping unto the Lord”? And wouldn’t that be more like applause — the reward of an audience for a job well done?

Worship is a Matter of Focus: Sometimes, we talk about avoiding distractions in worship. True, this is not the time to plan our week. But rather than forgetting about our problems or struggles, in worship, we can take them to the Lord.

Who Gets Something Out of It: Sometimes, we discuss whether we got anything out of the service. The real question is whether God got anything out of the service. The words are about him. The songs are sung to him. The surrender is to him. He is the recipient of worship.

One premise of the free market system is that a product is worth what someone will pay for it. Each form of worship requires a measure of effort, concentration, sacrifice — confirming the worth we attach to the Lord, the worth-ship of God.

Today’s Questions:

When Jesus says that worship must be done in spirit and in truth, what do you think he means? And how close is your personal worship to that ideal?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Almighty God, giver of every good gift, please grant me a clearer view of You, to know You better and see You more clearly. Make me to rejoice in Your attributes more thoughtfully and more intensely. Loose both my heart and my mouth to give You praise.

³ Fawn Parish, *It’s All About You, Jesus*, ©2001 Thomas Nelson, page 43

The Vocabulary of Praise

To many people, worship is one specific way of responding to God. For some, it means a foot-stomping, hand-clapping good time. For others, it is a quiet contemplation of God, oriented around theological content. For most people, to worship properly means doing so in the manner in which they worshipped growing up. In the Bible, worship involves both joyful celebration and reverent contemplation.

Worship may include four basic ways of responding to God:

1. Praise Celebrates the Greatness of God
2. Praise Appreciates the Goodness of God
3. Praise Honors God for His Divine Attributes (i.e. qualities)
4. Praise Acknowledges the Wisdom and Justice of God

Praise Celebrates the Greatness of God (Boast, Hallelujah)

Boast: To glory in. “As it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31).

Hallelujah: It means “Praise the Lord!” to be boastful and to shout with joy. Psalm 149:1-2 says, “Hallelujah! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. Let Israel celebrate its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King” (CSB). As the Lord moves history toward its Christ-exalting conclusion, Revelation 19:6 “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.”

Praise Appreciates the Goodness of God (Thanksgiving, Blessing)

Thanksgiving: Thanksgiving is expressing appreciation to God for specific things He has done for us. I Thessalonians 5:18 says, “Give thanks in everything, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” This is an action, a command to obey, but it is also an attitude. Colossians 3:15 says, “Be thankful.” Thanksgiving responds to the giving of God and blessing responds to the God of giving.

Blessing: To acknowledge God as the source of all good things, to appreciate God as the bless-er. Ephesians 1:3 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, in Christ.” Psalm 31:21 says, “Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me” In the Old Testament, the word for bless literally means, “to kneel.” It is bowing and saying, “I wouldn’t be here without You.”

**Praise Honors God for His Divine Attributes.** (Magnify, Glorify)

Magnify: People in the New Testament are said to Magnify God when their view of God Has just been enlarged, holding Him in higher esteem. In Luke 1:46, Mary has just been told she is to bear Jesus the Messiah, and that He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit — “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord.’”

Glorify: Glorify is from a word meaning, “To appear.” Hence, glory is when the invisible attributes of the invisible God are made visible. And we glorify God when we take the qualities of God and bring them out into the light.

We can glorify God *by our lives* as He displays His character through us. “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8). We glorify God *with our praise* when we describe His specific qualities. The Gentiles could “glorify God for His mercy...” (Romans 15:9). When Jesus demonstrated God’s power to heal, the people were “awestruck and gave glory to God” (Matthew 9:6-8).

Praise Acknowledges the Wisdom and Justice of God (Confess, Amen)

Confess: We confess our sins, of course, but we can also confess truth. We can confess Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:10). We are urged to “hold fast the confession of our hope” (Hebrews 10:23). We are affirming the truthfulness of God.

Amen: So may it be. Amen is a title of Jesus: “The Amen, the faithful and true witness” (Revelation 3:14). It is affirming truth, spoken by others, about the perfect plan of almighty God. It says God is doing the right thing. Thy will be done.

Further, the Bible Describes Non-verbal Forms of Praise: Clapping unto the Lord, dancing before the Lord, lifting of hands to the Lord, kneeling, falling prostrate before the Lord, giving offerings to the Lord.

Praise Isn’t One Way to Respond to God, it is responding to God in the way that is appropriate to the glimpse of himself He has given us.

Today’s Questions:

What expressions of worship did you grow up with? With which expressions are you most comfortable today? Over the years, how have you changed and grown in praise?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Lord God, Your power and victory deserve loud celebration. Your wisdom is to be marveled at; Your holiness frightening! Help me to see You more clearly and to acknowledge You with all the varied expressions worthy of the greatness of Your Person.

Healthy Churches Are Unified Around the Mission

Imagine a new car with a blown engine. It looks great. Great paint job and it is clean and shiny. Its instrument panel lights up beautifully. Its turn signal flashes nicely. But its purpose as a car is to take its driver from place to place. And since it cannot do that; it is failing to fulfill its purpose. How could a church be considered healthy when it doesn't even try to fulfill a major purpose of its existence?

We call world evangelization *the Great Commission* because it is the one great, over-arching, all-encompassing, everyone-involving mission of the church. This mission is both local and global. "Witnessing is to be the main task of the whole church in the whole world throughout the whole church age."¹

Paul expressed gratitude for the church at Philippi, expressing much joy, "because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5). Likewise, he praised the believers in the church at Thessalonica: "The word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out" (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

When a congregation is agreed that winning their community and the global population to the Lord is their principal mission, then they won't fight over little things like the color of the new carpet. They have bigger things to think about. They have a job to do.

Churches are either mission driven and outwardly focused or they are inwardly focused. When a church is not about the mission, it will become ingrown. There are several ways this may happen.

A Church May Become Fellowship-Centric: They may perceive themselves as a friendly church, but the truth is they are friendly only to their friends. They may not even notice a visitor, but will walk right past a first-time guest to enthusiastically speak with a friend.

They May Be Spiritual Pulse Takers: They are constantly trying to go deeper. They want to be fed from the Word and to grow. They hone their doctrine. They long to experience the presence of God in their worship services. This is all good, but their problem is they are satisfied with being blessed, without being a blessing or a wit-

¹ Robert Coleman, *Every Member Evangelism For Today*, Harper & Row ©1922, updated by Louise C. Gill and Roy J. Fish ©1976, page 6



ness. They are constantly going deeper without ever reaching out.

They May Be Comfort Seekers: They arrive early and park in the most convenient parking spaces. They hog the ends of the pews and save the seats from which visitors would feel more comfortable in checking things out. They decorate their classrooms like a living room. Of course, the mission isn't *discomfort*. But, convenience is what this church is *all about*. They want a "‘nice pastor’ preaching ‘nice sermons’ about a ‘nice Jesus’ delivered in a ‘nice tone’ of voice."²

They May be Power Seekers: Some people don't have standing in the community or at work, but at church they hope to boost their self-esteem. There are factions in this church, each vying for control and resenting the other factions. This church, by definition, is not healthy but sick.

Ingrown churches come in several varieties, but they all have this one thing in common: they are oblivious to the spiritual condition of family and neighbors around them.

By contrast, a healthy congregation is constantly considering how they may best fulfill the Great Commission. How best to reach their own community. How best to have an impact in the world.

Today's Questions:

On the spectrum, where do you fall in between ingrown and missional? What about your Sunday School class? And the Christian friends with whom you spend time?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Dear Lord, You have made us a part of the greatest enterprise on earth... in history. Wow, what a privilege! Grant me the eyes to see the needs. Give me the desire for You to receive glory. Please give me the will to work and sacrifice for the cause.

² C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, Zondervan, ©1986, page 32

Healthy Churches Want to Grow

In Great Britain during the second world war, there were posters displayed in public places with a photograph of Winston Churchill. Underneath was the caption, “Deserve Victory!” He had told the nation that victory could not be guaranteed; it could only be deserved. Sometimes, the enemy comes in greater numbers, has superior firepower, or controls better ground on the battlefield. All a military force can do is place itself in the best possible position to win and then fight in such a way that they deserve victory.

Sometimes, a church is located in a community with a shrinking population. Sometimes, the soil into which they sow the gospel seed is hard. It may be that time will be needed to cultivate the soil. Sometimes, a harvest has come in recent years and it will be another while before a large harvest comes. The remaining unbelievers are the ones who said “No.” For now, there will be mercy drops, not showers.

Sometimes, the total population is the same, but the population make-up is shifting — and it will take a while for the congregation to figure out how to reach the population that is beginning to make up their community.

There are things beyond the control of a church. Growth cannot be guaranteed with some new program. However, the church can deserve to grow.

When is Growth Deserved?

“A sower went forth to sow.” The ground received the seed differently, but the seed was consistently the same... and it was consistently sown. Church members can control whether or not they pick up on the spiritual condition of people around them in their daily routines. If you are unsure of someone’s spiritual condition, is it because you haven’t asked? Church members can control whether or not they remain alert to witnessing opportunities and whether or not they have gospel conversations.

A church can control whether they find ways to reach into new pockets of people in the community. They will have more success with some groups than with others, but they will deliberately develop plans to reach people who are a little bit different from them.



Sometimes one hears in a church, “It’s ALL about numbers here!” We realize that not everything that counts can be counted. We realize also that a cemetery continues to experience growth, but there’s no life. However, sometimes what counts *can* be counted—and people count! Peter Wagner writes:

I was in a discussion group a while ago, and a person in the group was hung up against numbers. At one point in the discussion he exclaimed, “My Bible tells me to feed the sheep, not to count them!” I didn’t answer at the time, but later I was reading Phillip Keller’s book A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23. Keller is a professional sheep rancher who is also a sensitive Christian author. Keller has a great deal to say about feeding the sheep. But he also explains that it is “so essential for a careful shepherd to look over his flock every day, counting them to see that all are able to be up and on their feet.” He tells of what a great blessing it is when a ewe has twin lambs instead of only one. I believe that counting sheep is such a natural part of the shepherd’s life that Jesus took for granted His followers would know that. It is biblical to feed the sheep, but also to count them.⁷

Jesus told about a shepherd with 100 sheep, who discovered that one was missing, and went looking for the one. Question: How did he know?

A sower went forth to sow. That was his intention and his purpose. Nothing is watered down for the sake of getting a bigger crowd — “The seed is the Word.” The sower understands that not every seed he sows will come up or bear fruit. But the more he sows, the more he will reap. The sower sows because he wants to harvest.

Today’s Questions:

Does “And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47) sound like a wonderful thing to you? Can you find any “counting” in that verse? How much would you want your church to be crowded? Is that something you pray for? What would you give to see that?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Jesus, Lord of the church, please add new people to this body. Please do so regularly. Bring people to faith in Christ here. Bring people into our spheres of influence. Add people to our classes. Send them through the baptistery and into the life of discipleship.

⁷C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, Regal Books ©1984, page 22
Wagner cites Philip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Zondervan, ©1970, page 60

Healthy Churches Have Evangelistic Members

When we think about evangelism, we often think about knocking on the doors of strangers and persuading them, against their wills, to receive Christ. But evangelism might be a little less about cold calling than you thought. It's more about sharing the most precious thing you have with the people who are the closest to you—your children, your favorite cousin, or your best friend at work.

In recent years, evangelism has been perceived as that awkward part of our faith we don't know what to do with. There was a time when "revival services" were effective at reaching people with the gospel. People still knew enough about the gospel that the main thing they needed was to be urged to respond. Many, however, merely "walked the aisle" and joined the church without ever being saved.

Then, there were booklet presentations. Eventually, most folks had seen the booklet. Salvation involves an inward work of God, but the booklet sometimes seemed a bit mechanical. And we felt like door to door vacuum cleaner salesman.

There were the training programs which took weeks and involved longer memorized presentations. These have diagnostic questions (and alternate approaches depending on the answers). This approach has good content, but for it to work, you must have a list of a gazillion people to go visit or it will fizzle out.

Truth: An insufficient approach is better than not sharing the gospel at all!

Evangelism now takes more time and patience. We used to talk about gospel *presentations*, but now we talk about gospel *conversations*. With the lack of Bible knowledge these days, evangelism now must take place in slow motion.

In recent years, many have thought of evangelism as inviting people to church and letting the message sink in over time. Fewer training materials are available now days. Many churches are at a loss as to how to be evangelistic in this culture. So, let's rethink evangelism. And let's begin with two definitions:

A Definition of the Gospel:

The gospel is the joyous news of how God came to our rescue through the sufferings of Jesus Christ on behalf of people, all enslaved in sin, to secure their forgiveness and to put them in a right relationship with himself forever.

Evangelism: Roy Fish defined evangelism in this way:

The compassionate sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with lost people, for the purpose of winning them to Christ as Savior and Lord, that they in turn may share him with others.

You Know Lost People: Once a person has been in church for a while, all of his or her close friends are pretty much fellow church members. They tell their ministers, “I don’t know any lost people.” However, survey the relationships of your life. List the people living under your own roof. Then, list the members of your extended family — uncles and aunts, cousins, and everyone. List your friends. Name all your work associates. Think about all the people you know socially. You do know some lost people, don’t you?

You Have to Use Words: The gospel doesn’t communicate simply by example. There are truths to be believed. And people can’t read your mind.

Just get started: Here are four sample questions to help you start a conversation:

- ◇ Bob, you’ve been coming to our class for nine months now; would you say your questions about what it means to become a Christian have all been answered?
- ◇ Betty, you seemed particularly interested as we talked the other day about what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Would you say you have come to the place where you have such a relationship or do you still have some questions about it?
- ◇ Bert, you are the best neighbor I’ve ever had. I have a Bible I would like to give you as a gift. And I want to point out this page right here as a good place to start.
- ◇ Brenda, if it all makes sense, is there anything keeping you from committing your life to Jesus Christ right now?

People have been saved through awkward and imperfect means, including those listed at the beginning of this devotional. The Holy Spirit will work in peoples’ hearts and he will work through you. Take a step of faith! Start a conversation.

Today’s Questions:

In verse 5 of today’s passage, how does the gospel come? Have you seen this happen lately? Have a few awkward conversations made you lose confidence in that power?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Holy Spirit, please make me brave. Give me the words to start a conversation that would move someone closer to a personal relationship with Christ this week.

A Healthy Church Grows Through Evangelism And Not Transfer Growth Alone

Sometimes, a family moves to another town. After getting into their new house, the very first action they should take is seek a new church home. It would be wrong for them to retain their membership in a church miles away due to sentimental reasons or family ties. It is too difficult to be a “long-distance member.” They may commute on Sunday mornings, but they will miss out on the rest of the life of the church. Nor will they be able to serve well. They cannot invite their neighbors to the church they attend, so many miles away. On the walls of many rural Baptist churches is a covenant. The final paragraph of that covenant reads:

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will, as soon as possible, unite with some other church, where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

In this case, transfer growth is exactly what is needed.

Transfer growth within an area isn't always a bad thing. Some Christians NEED to leave their dead, liberal, un-evangelistic churches! Some people are in churches that have grown toxic. They don't want to join the fight, so they join a new church. Sometimes, the wisest thing a church member can do is quietly fold his tent and move on.

Sometimes, a person goes to a new church and gets a fresh start—in church and spiritually. It is not unusual for people to simply miss the message in the church in which they grew up. It wasn't that the church wasn't teaching the Word, or loving enough, or lacking in some way. In that phase of life, the person wasn't ripe. Perhaps, there weren't people with whom he related well. He made up his mind “church isn't for me.” But then, later, the person made new friends who invited him to their church. And suddenly, the light comes on. Everything they hear at the new church is the same thing that was taught at the old church, but it all sounds so new — now they *hear* it.

When a church is located in a growing community and their new members are almost exclusively believers who moved into the community seeking a church



home, that is mission failure, not success. It is not our mission to start new Baptist churches for people who are already Baptists. Nor to simply compete with the other churches for “market share.” Our mission is to make new disciples.

Transfer growth is sinful when deliberate “sheep stealing” is involved. This may involve comparison advertising — comparing our church’s strengths to another church’s weaknesses (“Our pastor is more dynamic and our church has a better band”). Sheep stealers often demean other churches and their ministers.

It has been said that “You can’t steal fed sheep.” The point is that if a person’s needs are being met in a church and they are being fed with good preaching and teaching, and there are good programs for their children, then they could never be enticed to leave the church of which they are a member. However, Paul warned against those who seek to do this very thing:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And men will rise up from your own number with deviant doctrines to lure the disciples into following them. — Acts 20:29-30

Sheep stealing is often unconsciously motivated by developing a personal following rather than developing Christ-followers. In extreme cases, it may be conscious and involve forms of manipulation akin to that of false prophets (2 Timothy 3:6; 2 Peter 2:14).

Even though transfer growth can be entirely *appropriate*, from the church’s point of view, transfer growth alone is *inadequate*. Transfer growth is not the truest form of growth; birthing new sheep is growth! Seeing friends and family members come to Jesus from the world and lostness, takes courage, initiative, effort, and time. But it is the most important kind of growth that a church can have!

Today’s Questions:

In this passage, what figures of speech from child-rearing do you see? What is Paul’s attitude concerning his willingness to sacrifice to see people come to faith in Christ and to grow? So again, how committed have you been in the past year, to seeing people converted from the world to become devoted disciples of Jesus Christ?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Holy Father, I pray that You would bring people to faith in Christ and bring them into this congregation. Give them the repentance and faith they do not have. I pray that You would make me a witness to You and not just someone who invites people to church.

Healthy Churches Start New Classes To Reach New People

Peter Wagner called planting new churches, "the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven."¹ New churches are over three times more effective in evangelism.² Tim Keller states, "...Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting."³ Convert this concept to the local church and you get starting new classes.

Because people are most effectively reached for Christ together with others of like interests, a church should identify and concentrate on reaching out to 'people groups' within their community. They can create new classes and new entry points to reach them. This requires a clear plan.

Ten Steps to Starting New Classes the Way New Churches are Planted:

1. A leadership team studies the community in the fall of each year, after the start of the new Sunday School year. They think like missionaries, looking for pockets of unreached people. These unreached people may represent anything from a language or ethnic group to a secular extended family. They may identify people with the same occupation or people with the same hobby or a socio-economic group which is under-represented in the church. However the group is defined, they are unreached (or under-reached) in the community.
2. The Team then enlists a Teacher to start a class for this unreached group. The teacher is assigned a coach, just like a church planter is, for encouragement and accountability. The teacher enlists prayer partners for the new class.
3. With the team's help, the Teacher enlists a Launch Team. They will work together in reaching the unreached group of people. These workers are enlisted from multiple existing classes, rather than "splitting" a class. Each Launch Team member has a role in the class: Teacher, Outreach Leader, Prayer Leader, Care Group Leader, Fellowship Leader, Secretary. In the beginning, some may have to fill two roles until new people come into the class. You want a

¹ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990), page 11. Cited in Ed Stetzer, "The Most Effective Evangelistic Strategy Under Heaven," *SBC Life*, June 2003, www.sbcilife.org/articles/2003/06/sla14.asp

² "Why Every Church Must Plant," Carol Pipes, *OnMission Magazine*, North American Mission Board, Summer 2011, pp. 11-13

³ Handout, "Why Plant Churches" by Tim Keller www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/why%20plant%202011%20TLeaders.pdf



Launch Team to be large enough have a decent class if only one or two new people show up during the start-up period. It's essential for each team member to be committed to their assigned role and to be faithful in attendance.

4. The Teacher and Launch Team meets to strategize how they can develop relationships with people in this pocket of people and be effective at reaching them, considering such things as teaching style and social functions. They make a list of people to invite.
5. Before having their first class, the Launch Team has "pre-launch events" — informal get-togethers at times other than Sundays — inviting people in the group they are trying to reach — to cook-outs and things like that.
6. The Launch Team has a "practice class" before "Launch Sunday" in which they test their teaching style concept for the group they are trying to reach.
7. They then have a "Preview Sunday" to which they invite trusted people from their invite-list to attend and seek their feedback.
8. They promote Launch Sunday through word of mouth, advertising, and social media. Other Sunday School classes and their members are enlisted to assist in promoting the new class in the community via word of mouth.
9. After all these preparations are made, then (and only then) does the class have "Launch Sunday" and holds its first "official" Sunday School class.
10. The new class works hard at making new members feel they are truly part of the group and remains alert to evangelistic opportunities with new people they meet. As people join the class, the Launch Team gives leadership roles to new members who are able and willing to fill them. They relinquish their own roles, if necessary, to enable the new members to feel ownership in the class.

Today's Questions:

What are you doing at this time to help start a new class to reach new people? Or is your class fighting to keep everyone together, refusing any part in a new class? Are you praying and helping to start new classes to reach new people?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Lord, we know in our community there are people — and groups of people — who need You. Some of them are insulated from You by their circumstances. Please guide us as a church to see them, and to know how to reach them. Please guide me in learning how to cross the normal lines of life to share Christ with others.

Missions is Evangelism That Crosses Cultural or Language Boundaries

Missions is a word that had to be. It is not a biblical word, but it is a biblical concept. It describes evangelism, but a particular kind of evangelism, that which crosses cultural and/or language boundaries. It gives us a handle on the kind of ministry which goes to people unlike us and to places away from us.

“A missionary is anyone sent by the Lord to establish a new Christian witness where such a witness is yet unknown. Traditionally defined missionary activity usually involves leaving our own immediate culture for another, taking the Gospel to people who differ in at least one aspect—such as language, nationality, race or tribe—from our own ethnic group.”¹

Sometimes a group will take on a "mission project" and take flowers and cards to some sweet elderly ladies at the nursing home. This is an act of kindness, and certainly, there are some lonely people there who need the love and attention, but it isn't a ministry which crosses cultural or language boundaries. That's why we have the word missions.

Sometimes people make remarks along the lines of, “Missions begins at home.” World evangelization may begin at home, but missions, by definition, cannot. If it is at home, with people like ourselves, it isn't missions. It may be evangelism. It may be ministry. It may be a wonderful thing. But it isn't missions.

Cartoonist Doug Hall in Leadership Magazine brings it to light: “The question is, How do we win the world to Christ... with a minimum of fuss and bother?” The word missions emphasizes that extraordinary effort is required. Crossing the street to speak with your neighbors is no great inconvenience.

Usually, when people make this comment about missions beginning at home, they are arguing for keeping the money and these resources at home instead of sending them overseas or taking them across cultural boundaries. I had a professor in seminary who commented, “Missions may begin at home, but selfishness stays there.” Similarly, Gordon Olson wrote:

If every Christian is already considered a missionary, then all can stay put where they are, and nobody needs to get up and go anywhere to preach the gospel. But if our only concern is to witness where we are, how will



people in unevangelized areas ever hear the gospel? The present uneven distribution of Christians and opportunities to hear the gospel of Christ will continue unchanged... So in reality the idea every Christian is a missionary is a “cop out.” It avoids responsibility for more than three and a half billion people who are not being effectively evangelized today. It means direct disobedience to the “Go” of the Great Commission! ²

Missions is a word which had to be—because it forces us to think across the boundaries of race and culture. Missions makes us think in an unselfish mode. Our own church doesn't grow and our budget isn't directly increased by this kind of work. The concept of missions forces us to think globally and about people from a "God's eye point of view."

The word missions forces us to think in terms of eternity and not just in the here and now. What matters in the truly long term? For no other reason would people learn a new language and adapt to a new diet and live with less luxury—if not for the fact that it will matter forever.

Sometimes, missions has a halo around it which might make one think that the souls of those across the globe are somehow more precious to God than the souls of those next door. That impression is generally due to the extreme sacrifices made by those who serve cross-culturally. Those they won to Christ were won at great personal expense. This word missions has served to remind us that our own people are no more precious to God than those from different cultures or in the most inaccessible places.

The word missions reminds us that evangelism is a dual effort, involving both Jerusalem *and* the uttermost parts of the earth. And, as stewards of the gospel, it is our responsibility to get the message to them as well as to our own.

Today's Questions:

In Acts 11:1-18, it came as a total shock to many that the gospel had gone to the Gentiles. But, as it was checked and verified, it proved to be a delightful surprise to the church. How are you involved in helping the gospel jump the fence to new people across cultural and language barriers?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Lord God, I recognize that You don't get up in the morning and lead the angels in the Pledge of Allegiance. I praise You that You have people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Please guide me in joining You in global evangelization!

² Olson, C. Gordon (2012-02-10). *What in the World is God Doing?: An Introduction to World Missions* (Kindle Locations 470-482). Kindle Edition.

Thinking Like a Missionary in the Local Church

Just as a missionary or church planter goes to a new place with the responsibility of reaching the people who live there, our local church is responsible to reach our community. Our congregation may not *personally* reach every pocket of people in every socio-economic, ethnic, and language group that lives here, but it is our assignment to see that it gets done.

Thinking like a missionary means we think evangelistically and strategically. So many congregations think along these lines: “We’ve got our group of friends, we have wonderful Bible study and fellowship together, we are able to worship with each other, listening to our kind of music in a comfortable setting.” Taken all together, this is a self-centered, consumer mentality. There is another way to approach our existence as the body of Christ. We can think like a missionary in our community. Below are some ways a congregation can think like a missionary:

Study the Community: Just like a church planter studies a community to know how to start a new church designed to effectively reach that community, we should study our own communities to see who's there. Are there unreached people groups in our community? The world is coming to our communities; are there people moving in who speak other languages, or of other ethnic groups, or from other socio-economic groups who are not being reached? Ron Blue defines missions in this way:

“World missions is a sending process in which trained individuals penetrate those places that are otherwise unreached in the normal flow of evangelism.”¹

If we think like missionaries, we won’t ignore those who are going unreached in the normal course of evangelism; instead, we will form plans to reach them.

Study the Church: Sometimes, church members wonder why we distribute surveys with questions about their income or about their education. The answer is, we need to understand ourselves to better know whom we can best reach. A church like ours can reach folks like us.

Studying our church also involves knowing our strengths. What is our church’s niche in the Kingdom and in our community? A church should play to its

¹ Ron Blue, *Evangelism and Missions: Strategies for Outreach in the 21st Century*. Word Publishing, ©2001. Page 6



strengths, not spin its wheels in repairing its weaknesses only.

Develop a Strategy: Once we've answered the questions about who lives in our community and who needs to be reached, we can develop a plan to reach them. This is done prayerfully! We could brainstorm and come up with all kinds of ideas, but it is very important to determine how *the Lord* wants us to reach them. What kind of church does the Lord want us to be? As we pray, we need to carefully consider what we are learning about our community and our church. The Holy Spirit will bring our observations to mind as He guides us.

Here are some questions church members should ask themselves as they pray for a God-given strategy to reach their community:

- ◇ What new skills do our members need to learn in order to reach the people we are supposed to reach?
- ◇ What new ministries do we need to begin in order to reach them? Is there a felt-need ministry we need to add? If so, how will we make that ministry evangelistic?
- ◇ How will we reach the men? As the men go, so go the families.
- ◇ What changes are taking place in the population we reach best? How do we need to adjust to a demographically fluid situation?

Sometimes, we can start a new Sunday School class to reach a new people group. That will work if there are no language barriers and everyone can agree on the style of worship. Sometimes, the most effective way to have a lasting impact is to start a new church designed to reach an unreached segment of the population.

Churches Think Either Strategically or Selfishly: It is important that this strategic approach to ministry is understood and embraced by the congregation as a whole. There must be a shared vision to have a lasting impact.

Today's Questions:

Who do you see in the community who wasn't there ten years ago? Who do you see who wasn't there five years ago? How different are they to most of our members? How similar are they? What could be done to reach them?

Prayer Guidance:

Father, You own the vineyard. The harvest is Yours. Guide me as part of Your church. Prompt me, in practical ways, to do my part. Lead us as a congregation to think strategically and not selfishly.

Healthy Churches Maintain a Vital Connection to the Lord

Most believers have been in worship services in which they experienced the presence of God in a powerful way. You may remember a worship service in which you sensed it entering the room. You could tell it during the congregational singing. The message felt very personal. Where does that come from?

The New Testament describes a very close connection between the church body and the Lord Jesus. Note that it's a connection to the body collectively and not simply to individual believers that is described. For example, in verse 15, we are urged, "Let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ." Notice how the church is compared to a body and Jesus, as the supreme leader of the church, is the head. Bodies and heads seem to work best when they maintain a close connection.

The phrase, "into him," concerns a *personal* connection. The writer is not merely describing their standing before God; he is talking about something far more relational than that.

The next verse, verse 16, goes to explain, "From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part" (CSB). Members all have their responsibilities, but the source of power and growth is the head of the church, Jesus Christ. Colossians 2:19 warns of the danger of "not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God."

In many ways, this aspect of a church's health represents the combined connections which individual members of the congregation have with the Lord. We can see it in the stories of the members — of how they came to faith in Christ, of how they overcame struggles from their past, of their journeys in Christian growth. Their leaders have a close walk with the Lord and set the pace. A preponderance of the members have a consistent devotional life. These people aren't there for social reasons or business purposes.



Healthy churches don't merely go through the motions of the order of service. Nor does their worship take place only in the formal times of corporate worship, but also in informal ways... because their relationship with Christ is a natural part of their lives. One can sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in their worship services and in their Sunday School classes.

For them, fellowship is more than eating, discussing the ball game, and telling jokes. There is an acceptance and a warmth and a spirit of joy as they relate to each other — which flows out of the acceptance and joy they experience in their personal relationship with the Lord.

There is a growth process. Members are no longer little children (verse 14), but are growing into maturity with “a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (verse 13, CSB). As verses 17-19 go on to picture, they are growing out of the old life and are leaving it behind. Presenting well and using all the right words may leave a favorable impression, but it is genuine holiness that carries genuine spiritual power. In one office at LifeWay, they often encourage each other with this phrase: “Stay close and stay clean.” Stay close to the Lord and live a clean life before him.

Prayer is crucial at this point. In a church with a vital connection to the Lord, there is a deep sense of dependence upon him for the smallest thing. And there is a daring desire to see God do... what only God can do.

Take each of these aspects together: personal growth, personal holiness, personal time with the Lord. Add it all up for each individual member of the church — then total up all the members of the church — that is what we mean when we say a healthy church (as a church) maintains a vital connection to the Lord.

Today's Questions:

How would you describe your connection to the Lord as an individual? How would you describe our church's connection to the Lord?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Lord Jesus, You did not come to earth to live in isolation from others. Instead, you came to get us connected to You. Please cause each of us in this local church to stay plugged in. When I forget, please remind me that I'm not a “soloist,” but a member of Your “sacred choir.” Enable us, as a congregation, to draw closer and stay cleaner.

When a Church is Unhealthy: Renewal

Churches and their members can become distracted. They can drift away from the love they once had for the Lord. This drift impacts the church spiritually, numerically, and organizationally. When this happens, revival is needed spiritually and renewal is needed organizationally. Since the outward symptoms are easier to see, let's consider the need for organizational renewal first.

What the Need for Renewal Looks Like Organizationally

Robert Dale observed how "Organizations move through a cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death..."¹ Dale describes the stages of organizational decline in the church (Nostalgia, Questioning, Polarization, and Dropout)² He writes:

*If the congregation doesn't take steps to open itself to revitalization, a plateau occurs. Decline begins. First, people doubt the structures. 'It isn't working as well as it used to, is it?' they ask nostalgically. Next, they doubt the goals. 'Is this the right way to work and minister?' Then, they doubt the organization's basic beliefs, and assert, 'This idea is wrong!' Finally, they become completely alienated and drop out in total disillusionment.*³

A warning sign is when members talk about the good ole days. There is nothing in the present to celebrate, so they talk about the past. "Nostalgic church members provide an early warning system of organizational decline."⁴

The nostalgia starts out pleasantly enough but, over time, it devolves into questioning. This stage often includes anger and assigning blame. "The content of the questioning focuses on, Is this the right goal for our church? Are we on the right track? Should our church provide this ministry? ...Questioning is the now or never point of congregational health."⁵ Dale explains that a church doesn't have to accept decline and death as inevitable; instead they can dream again!

What Revival Looks Like Spiritually

In years past, most Southern Baptists thought of revival as a series of services involving a guest preacher which had the purpose of reaching the lost. Revival is not to be confused with "revival services." The word *revival* means to impart new life. One cannot *re-vive* that which was never "vived" in the first place. Revival is a work of God in which he renews the spiritual vitality of his people—Christians. Revival is a fresh movement of God among his people.

¹Robert D. Dale, *To Dream Again; How to Help Your Church Come Alive*, ©1981, Broadman Press. Page 14

²Dale, page 106 ³Dale, page 14 ⁴Dale, page 113-114 ⁵Dale, page 120



In revival, God calls us to experience again the walk with him we once had. The Spirit plants within us a desire to repent of the sins which have pulled us away from him. We are awakened to the peril of lost family members and friends. We become more bold in our witness. There is a new hunger for the Word of God and an observable increase in faithfulness in regard to Christian fellowship. Believers become more consistent in their devotional lives. The Bible comes alive again. Our prayers are more passionate and our prayer times take longer. God's presence is felt more keenly. Relationships are restored as people get right with one another. Bold new steps of personal growth take place — and with the spiritual growth, there is a new glow. God has brought about a change in the hearts of believers.

Revitalization: Are You Willing to Pay the Price?

Church revitalization requires sacrifice on part of the membership. Of course, sacrifice means giving up things you didn't want to lose. It costs you! It may cost you your pride. It may cost you some recreational pleasure. It may cost you money. It will cost you time. Revival costs us the pain associated with repentance.

To the church, a revival means humiliation, a bitter knowledge of unworthiness and an open humiliating confession of sin on the part of her ministers and people. It is not the easy and glorious thing many think it to be, who imagine filled pews and the church reinstated in power and authority. ...It tells them they are dead; it calls them to awake, to renounce the world and to follow Christ. ⁴

Strategic planning can reorganize us and refocus us on our mission. However, revival is a work of God for which we must pray and prepare our hearts.

Today's Questions:

Have you, in some way, forsaken the love you once had for the Lord? Are there things in your life you know the Lord doesn't want there, but which you tolerate?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Holy God, please do a fresh work in me. Holy Spirit, please renew me and endue me with fresh power. Living Son of God, victor over sin and death, please give me power to overcome.

⁴ James Burns in *Revival, Their Laws and Leaders*, 1909, cited in Winkie Pratney, *Revival*, ©1983 Whitaker House, page 22

The Holy Spirit at Work In the Healthy Church

It has been observed that if the Holy Spirit were to withdraw his presence from many churches, no one would ever know the difference. Their services would go ahead as scheduled. They would continue through the order of service in the same old way. The members would walk out the door, shake their minister's hand, and say, "Good service, pastor." Alas, in most congregations, one would have to talk to members of "the church within the church," that cadre of spiritually-minded people who network together to share in the things of God, to find anyone with enough spiritual radar to detect that something was wrong!

Contrast this to the book of Acts. There we see people who are "filled with the Spirit," being "led by the Spirit," and empowered by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit's power wasn't for Bible times only. It is not for denominations more eccentric than our own. It is not just for people of a more emotional temperament. The Holy Spirit's work in a church is normal... and the Spirit's absence is abnormal.

How does the Holy Spirit work in a church? Here are some ways:

The Holy Spirit Indwells the Church: Believers are indwelt by the Spirit individually, but together, there is a sense in which the body of believers represents a temple of the Lord. In the following two verses the word "you" is plural each time it appears. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (2 Corinthians 3:16-17). You are God's temple means "Ya'll are God's temple."

The Holy Spirit is the Source of Unity in the Church: Paul urged the church at Ephesus to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). The Holy Spirit has already produced the unity; we are already one in the Spirit. We can't produce unity; we can, however, mess it up!

The Holy Spirit Imparts Spiritual Gifts to the Church: We speak here of supernaturally empowered specialties in Christian service. "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4-8). We don't even serve God in our own power. No, the Father's work has to



be done in the Lord's way and in the Spirit's power.

The Holy Spirit Directs the Church: For example, in Acts 13, we see the Holy Spirit directing the missions program of the church. "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" As the first of three missionary journeys was getting underway, it describes them as being "Sent out by the Spirit..." (verse 4).

The Holy Spirit Encourages the Church: After the conversion of Paul, we read this summary of the action: "So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers." (Acts 9:31, CSB) Notice how the Spirit's encouragement is tied in with the church growing stronger and larger.

The Holy Spirit Guides the Church in Making Decisions: The question was raised in the early days of the church regarding whether a person had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. After all, salvation was of the Jews. So, the Apostles and Elders who met in the Jerusalem council sent word to Antioch, where the controversy raged, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements..." (Acts 15:28).

The Holy Spirit Fellowships With the Church: In the Trinitarian blessing of 2 Corinthians 13:14, we read "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Some believers can remember a great movement of the Holy Spirit in a church. People could sense it getting out of their cars in the parking lot. Lives were being changed and many came to salvation. The worship services were powerful encounters with the living God.

We should be careful to be alert to the Spirit's promptings, to obey those promptings quickly, and to depend on his power.

Today's Questions:

No one could live in your house and you not know it. Certainly the Spirit of the living God could not indwell us and we be unaware of his presence. In what ways have you sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit in recent days?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Indwelling Holy Spirit, You who baptize with fire: Please fill me with Your controlling presence. Envelope me, transform me, consume me. Purge away the old life of death and dullness and satisfy me with rivers of living water.

Recovering Health Includes Regaining Our Vision

There are seasons in the life of a living church. There are seasons of growth and rapid advance. There are also less dramatic seasons for solidifying progress made. Like the farmer who has to get all of his family into the fields in order to bring in a harvest, there are busy times when everyone has to do their part to help. There are times of crisis when decisions must be made to save the future of the church.

Buried in a genealogy in First Chronicles is a great gem of truth. The tribe of Issachar had 200 leaders —“who understood the times and knew what Israel ought to do” (NIV).

These leaders from the Tribe of Issachar understood the times in which they lived. Their eyes were not closed to the world around them. They understood their season of history. They viewed the culture from God’s point of view. They recognized what forces were at work. They knew what scriptural principles applied to the situation. And they knew what God wanted done.

Vision involves three things:

- ◇ Vision is seeing the people God wants us to reach.
- ◇ Vision is seeing the connection between the “why” and the “what.”
- ◇ Vision is seeing the church God wants us to be.

Seeing the Lost: Sometimes, when we think of the people God wants us to reach, we see people in our own age group, or people in our own socio-economic bracket, or people of our own race, or people with similar occupations or levels of education. It’s not that we despise the others; we simply don’t see them. When we are challenged to think of the lost whom we could reach, these people never enter our minds.

Nevertheless, as a church, we are responsible before God to reach every living person in our community. Sometimes, the differences are too wide for us to bridge by ourselves. That’s not an excuse to ignore some people. In those cases we should partner with others who can bridge the differences. We can work together to reach them.

Jesus said, “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’?”



Look, I tell you, *lift up your eyes, and see* that the fields are white for harvest” (John 4:35, emphasis added).

Vision is seeing the people God wants us to reach.

When You Know the Why, You Know the What: These days, there is such a disconnect between what the church does and why it does it. Sometimes, churches do the things they do because of their traditions or because they are trying to keep up with other churches in the community. Sometimes, a church goes on cruise control and has forgotten why they do the things they do.

A true New Testament church is based on Scripture. The Bible tells us who we are and why we’re here. It tells us what to emphasize. It tells us about our mission.

So many church committees sit around tables trying to figure out what to do. But when you know the why, you know the what!

Vision is seeing the connection between the “why” and the “what.”

Vision is Seeing the Church We are Supposed to Be: This includes our corporate level of commitment, our spiritual growth, the tone and spirit of the church, and, very importantly, how the Spirit is leading us to carry out the mission of the church.

Our church is not supposed to be just like the “happening” church in the community. Our fellowship is God’s unique creation with its own unique niche. No church should photocopy another congregation’s ministry plan.

As we study the Bible and pray and seek the Holy Spirit’s leading, the Lord of the church will lead us to become the church we’re supposed to be.

Today’s Questions:

As you have been reading through these devotionals, has the Holy Spirit been prompting you about the believer you are supposed to be? Has He prompted you about the church this congregation is supposed to be?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Father, please give us vision to see what You want us to see about the church You want us to be. Grant us insight into the people You would have us reach. Please, make us to see it.

Healthy Churches Depend on the Lord

In 2 Chronicles 20, Judah was being threatened by an advancing multi-national force. The threat was overwhelming. So, King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a time of fasting and the people gathered for prayer. Admitting their strength was completely inadequate, he expressed dependence upon the Lord, saying, “Our eyes are on You” (verse 12). And the Lord’s prophet delivered God’s response: “Thus says the Lord to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15).

Everyone depends on something. Some depend on themselves. Others depend on some significant person in their lives. Some have a chemical dependency. Others want to depend on the government. And yet, these will all eventually let a person down. The Bible teaches us to put our trust in the Lord and to depend on Him.

Dependence on God is facing up to our inability and relying on the Lord, instead. We aren’t able, in our own strength, to accomplish things of eternal value; Almighty God is! Over and over again, the Bible urges us to depend on the Lord. A small sampling:

- ◇ “Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!” (Psalm 40:4)
- ◇ “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us” (Psalm 62:8).
- ◇ “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).
- ◇ Paul described experiencing circumstances God brought into his life “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:9).
- ◇ “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5).

There is a huge contrast between our inability and God’s sovereignty. It is hard for us, however, to let go of our sense of self-sufficiency. We go on thinking, that by the force of our will, we can make reality bend to our desires. We see it in the per-



son who stubbornly pursues a career track for which he is clearly not made. The person persisting in the arts with inadequate talent. The person who runs over others in her relationships because she always thinks she knows what is best. The prayerless man who puts his thumbs in his belt as he stands to speak in church conference and says, "I can tell you right now what this church ought to do."

Isaiah warns us: "'Ah, stubborn children,' declares the Lord, 'who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit'" (Isaiah 30:1).

Even if we could bend reality to our liking by the sheer force of our wills, would that be a good thing? No, that would be totally undesirable! For example, Paul described his approach to evangelism: "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5, NASB95).

We cannot accomplish "God things," eternal things, in our finite, human power. Nor can we make heroes of ourselves and of God at the same time. We cannot, at the same time, impress people with our skill-sets and with the omnipotence of almighty God. We cannot work our plans without ignoring God's plan.

For a church to fully recover its health, its members must come to the end of themselves. They have to cry out to God, confessing their inability, throw themselves upon the altar of his mercy, and ask the Father to do what only he can!

Today's Questions:

Have you been getting the sense of being at the end of the rope, out of options, at the end of human resourcefulness? It's a good place to be. Because only then do we have the opportunity to see what only God can do.

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Almighty, sovereign God, I cry out to You to intervene in this place! We are not able to serve You in our own power. We cannot fulfill the mission or bring You glory with better programming or production values. We are helpless without You. I call on You in trust and dependence.

Pushing the Re-Set Button

Ever have that experience when your computer wasn't working as it should? It was moving sluggishly. You clicked on an icon and nothing happened. So, you re-booted your computer, turning it off and back on, and suddenly it was responsive again. Smart TVs can be the same way. And we can, too. The Holy Spirit is clicking on us and we aren't responsive. We are moving sluggishly in regard to spiritual matters. There are times when we need to push the re-set button. James 4 describes in practical terms how we can experience a spiritual re-set:

Work on Being Less Proud: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). The path to the best solution is generally the path requiring the most humility. We can be sure God will never bless pride. God doesn't abide in the presence of human pride. He doesn't speak to our hearts in our pride. He doesn't give spiritual power to pride. The passage begins and ends with this key: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (vs. 10).

Submit to God: "Submit yourselves therefore to God" (vs. 7a). Submission means we arrange all of our life under the Lordship of Christ. His plans drive our plans. If there is a controversy between us and the Lord, then we bend the knee in submission to him.

Resist: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (verse 7b). Sometimes, we are so busy resisting the influence of someone else in the church, we fail to resist the devil and we let him into the church. Verse 7 contains a promise: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Draw Near: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (vs. 8). Here is a command, and a divine invitation, and a promise — all rolled into one. Christianity is more than a lifestyle or a moral code to live by. It is relational in nature. Sometimes, we need to reboot our devotional life—our time alone with God in the Word and in prayer. Many people have written in their Bibles an old saying: "Either this Book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this Book."

Clean Up Your Act: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners" (vs. 8). This refers to our deeds and habits. Our sin hurts the community of faith. Sometimes, in the same way Achan's sin brought defeat to the people of God (Joshua 7). Sometimes, our



sin hurts the fellowship because it keeps us from being the clean vessel the Lord could use to be a blessing to others. Sometimes, we are so driven by selfish desires and willfulness it brings division into the church. In verse 1, James asks, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”

Regain Your Spiritual Focus: “Purify your hearts, you double-minded” (vs. 8b).

Trying to live for the world and have the blessing of God isn’t an option. It is a common temptation to try to keep up appearances before the congregation while our heart is a swamp of sin and serpents. There comes a time to drain the swamp and purify our inner life.

Take Your Sins More Seriously: “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom” (vs. 9). We cannot flip-pantly admit, “I know I’m not perfect.” We must take our sins seriously. We cannot offer apologies that sound like the ones politicians offer: “If I offended anyone by my remarks...” What do you mean, “If”? Half the country was offended by what you said — and you know it! Instead, we need to offer heart-felt apologies that own up to what we did or said. We can’t act like nothing happened or like it was no big deal.

It is very easy to drift off course spiritually. And it takes energy to get back on course. Humbling ourselves and resisting and repenting and drawing near take energy. So we just keep going the way we have been going. It seems to be the easier way. However, if you have come to the point that the drift is no longer acceptable, then it may be that you are ready to push the re-set button.

Today’s Questions:

James 4, our passage for today, has some strong things to say about faithfulness to God, sin, and our need of revival. Do you feel that your walk with God is stronger than it has ever been? Or, do you feel there has been a time when you were closer to the Lord?

Today’s Prayer Guidance:

Holy God, I am prone to wander off course spiritually. I am often willful and sinful. I can be so prideful. I need Your cleansing, Your reminders, and Your power. Enable me to draw close to You that You may draw close to me.

Members of Healthy Churches Don't Think They're Too Big for Small Beginnings

Because of their sins, the nation of Judah had been defeated, conquered, and carried away from their homeland into captivity. For seventy years they were required to live in Babylon; God had put them in “time out.” But after this period was completed, they were allowed to return to the city of Jerusalem and to the land of Judah. In several waves they came home. But they returned to rubble. They would have to rebuild their homes and the city and the walls of the city. They would have to rebuild their economy and their civic structures. They would have to resume their religious life and rebuild the temple. It was going to be overwhelming. The book of Zechariah was written to encourage the people of Judah to complete the temple.

Think about it. Most of them were returning to a homeland in which they had never personally lived. They had heard the stories from their grandparents, but in their own experience, Babylon was all they knew. Their parents, with time, reestablished their lives in Babylon. At least, their parents had an established nation and a going economy to work with. They, however, would have to rebuild from scratch. Jerusalem was in ruins.

Small beginnings are hard work. Starting over again is even harder.

Not only are small beginnings hard work, they are... small. In The Return, the population was smaller, the foundation of the temple was smaller, the walls smaller, there was no economy so, of course, it was smaller. Everything was smaller and just getting started. And there were many who weren't exactly excited about the opportunities before them. The prophet described the kind of person, “Who despises the day of small things” (Zechariah 4:10).

There are church members who despise small things. They want to go to the exciting Bible study with their friends, not start a new Bible study for people who need one. They want to belong to a church with a fully programed ministry, not make a difference in a church where their abilities are needed. They want to worship in the church with the best band and the pastor who has the most personal charisma. They don't want to help start a new Sunday School class because they



are enjoying their established class. They aren't there when it is time to pray; prayer meeting isn't exciting enough. They despise small things. But Jesus said, "Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and whoever is unrighteous in very little is also unrighteous in much" (Luke 16:10).

To those facing the hard work of rebuilding in the days of small beginnings, Zechariah 4 records a vision from God. It pictures their two leaders: Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest.¹ Both were God-given and anointed with the Spirit. The vision pictures an unlimited supply of the Holy Spirit. And it is in this context, we read one of the more popular verses in the Bible, verse 6: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, Saith the LORD of hosts" (KJV). You cannot do it in your own power. However, God's Spirit provides unlimited power.

Yes, there is that kind of person "Who doesn't think much of a day when such minor events take place" (Zechariah 4:10, CJB). But it was this temple complex that, over time, would become one of the great structures of the world. It was marveled at by Jesus' disciples (Mark 13:1-2). In its courtyards the early disciples fellowshiped, worshipped, and witnessed. It was there because someone had been willing to be the first... because someone was willing to begin when it was hard.

"Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin..." (Zechariah 4:10, NLT).

Today's Questions:

What are some of the small beginnings in this church right now? Where are you so comfortable, it would be hard to accept a new assignment from the Lord to start (or re-start) a needed ministry? Is there some new beginning you would be willing to undertake for Jesus' sake?

Today's Prayer Guidance:

Almighty God, You have provided all the resources we need to do everything you have called us to do in Your church. Your indwelling Spirit empowers me. Please give me the spiritual grit to tackle the tough challenges, the willingness to sacrifice personal comfort for the sake of Your church, to engage in ministry that will have a lasting impact. Protect me from the temptation of despising small things and instill within me a sense of adventure in the fresh starts.

¹Zerubbabel was descended from David and an ancestor in the Messianic line of Jesus.

