

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rules and authorities in the heavenly places.

EPHESIANS 3:8-10

A PASSION FOR THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

Jared Mellinger

Lead Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

The church of Christ in many ways appears ordinary, weak, and unremarkable. Yet we know from God’s Word that the church is the most important institution in history, the greatest display of the wisdom and beauty of God in the world today, the focal point of God’s plan to save sinners, and the dearest place on earth. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). God is passionate about his church, and he calls his people to share his passion.

The theme of this issue of the Sovereign Grace Journal is “A Passion for the Church.” Several articles focus on what particular books of the Bible contribute to our understanding of the church: Acts, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter. Standard ecclesiology topics are covered, such as the marks of the church, the role of pastors and deacons, church membership, the importance of the Sunday gathering, and the mission of the church. We also selected less common topics that we were eager to address: singles and children in the church, ethnic harmony in the church, developing leaders, and more.

Brian Chesemore has written a helpful article on the value of a membership covenant, and how this functions in Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville. Bill Patton has written an article entitled

“The Benefits of Spending Decades in One Church.” Bill led the planting of Covenant Fellowship Church in Pennsylvania in 1984 and still serves the church as an elder. As with previous issues, we’ve included book recommendations on our theme.

I personally benefited from each of these articles, and I’m thrilled to share them with you. May God use the truths in these pages to strengthen our churches and deepen our love for the local church.

Jared

GOD'S GLORIOUS PLAN FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

Mark Alderton

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Picture a typical Sunday morning in an ordinary local church. People of all ages and backgrounds gather at the appointed time and place: single adults, families with teens or small children, empty-nesters, and gray-haired saints. Some have chronic disabilities, most don't have impressive careers, and all have experienced trials or tragedies, not to mention their own faults and failures.

They take their seats, many of which will remain empty. There is music and singing—perhaps skillfully, perhaps not. A parent leaves with a crying child. There is trouble with the pastor's microphone. Then there is a sermon—perhaps very good, perhaps not. The meeting ends, people mingle for a while, and the gathering disperses.

Meanwhile, outside is a complex and fast-moving world where massively influential events are taking place. Billionaires are being made and ruined, breakthrough technologies change our way of

life for better or worse, natural disasters overwhelm our resources, powerful people vie for dominance, and nations rise and fall.

It raises a question: does the ordinary local church really matter against that backdrop? Are our gatherings important, or even, dare we say, wonderful, in the big scheme of things? Most of the world has already answered “no” to that question. But the One who created the world and the church itself tells us differently.

The ordinary, imperfect, gospel-believing local church, as an embodiment of the universal church, is the most important gathering in the world. Why? Because it is the “blueprint of a broken world remade.”¹ The hope for fallen humanity is to have God our Creator dwell with us in peace and unending joy. And as we survey the Scriptures, we find that God’s glorious plan has always been to do exactly that. The local church is the focal point of that plan being fulfilled.

God’s plan to have a people for his own possession is first revealed in the Garden of Eden.

The Garden of Eden

A church (Greek: *ekklesia*) is a gathering of people called by God to himself. There is a sense in which the first *ekklesia*—the first worshipping community of God’s people and the first expression of the universal church—consisted of Adam and Eve with God in the Garden. They were the protological people of God.

¹ Christopher Ash, *Remaking a Broken World* (UK: The Good Book Company, 2019), 163.

Adam and Eve were made “in his own image” (Gen. 1:27) and they had no sin. They dwelt in peace with God, who spoke to them and walked among them (cf. Gen. 1:28; 3:8). And the “very good” world was given to them for their provision, pleasure, and productivity. This thriving existence of man with God is what God desires for his image-bearers. But it didn’t last. What happened? One word: sin.

Tempted by the serpent, Eve and then Adam disobeyed God’s command to not eat the fruit from one specific tree (Gen. 2:16-17). In doing that, their sin made a separation between them and their God (cf. Isa. 59:2), so vividly portrayed in their expulsion from the Garden (Gen. 3:24). Our Holy God cannot dwell with sinful man, for the wages of our sin is death (Rom. 6:23), both physical death and the “second death” which is God’s judgment (Rev. 21:8).

But God is merciful and his plan to dwell among his people in peace would not be undone. He spoke of a Savior who would “bruise” the serpent’s head, dealing a death blow to the power of evil and bringing mercy to those in its power (Gen. 3:15). God would yet dwell among a people of his choosing. This led to a people called Israel.

The Nation of Israel

God told Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). It would spring from his grandson, Jacob, who God named Israel. God made a covenant with Israel: “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God” (Exod. 29:45). If they kept the terms of the covenant with its sacrificial system of atonement for sin, God

would dwell among them in the tabernacle, and they would be greatly blessed (cf. Deut. 28:1-14).

But they could not keep the covenant. Israel continually rebelled until God removed them out of his sight and scattered them to the nations (cf. 2 Kgs. 23:27). They returned to Jerusalem from exile in a season of recommitment to the covenant, but the old sin problems were still there.

God then promised that a new covenant was coming that would result in him dwelling with his people forever.

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ezek. 37:26-27).

Jesus would be at the center of this new covenant, which he called “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). His death was the once-for-all sacrifice that satisfied God’s justice for his people’s sin so God could dwell with them forever (cf. Heb. 10:14). On the cross, Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God*” (1 Pet. 3:18). There he obtained the *church* of God “with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

We often think of Jesus’ death as saving individuals, which he certainly did, but he did more. He died to gather the people of God

together so that God could dwell among them and bring great blessing to them in his presence. The local church is that gathering. This brings us to Pentecost.

The Church after Pentecost

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Israel gathered for the feast of Pentecost. At the preaching of Peter, thousands put their trust in Christ and received "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Their immediate impulse was to meet together in the temple and in homes to worship and fellowship and witness (cf. Acts 2:44-47).

With the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, God's people were reconstituted as the new covenant church, in continuity with the old covenant people of God but now brought to fulfillment by the work of Christ.²

This was the beginning of the local church as we know it today. We meet in church buildings and in homes, and "God's Spirit dwells in you," that is, in the church (1 Cor. 3:16). Every gathering of faithful believers in Christ is a blood-bought assembly where God blesses us with his presence, maturing his people, and saving sinners. There is nothing else like it on earth because the local church, with all its limitations and flaws, is nothing less than the lived-out realization of God's glorious plan to dwell among his people.

Yet, as glorious as it is, this is only a foretaste of what is to come.

² Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*, "The Church of Christ."

The Church in Glory

John saw a vision of God's plan reaching its fulfillment when Jesus comes again to usher in the new heaven and earth. The voice from the throne said, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God... the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

This is "the assembly [church] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:23). This is the new redeemed humanity obtained by the blood of Christ. This is the broken world remade. God will dwell with his people in peace and unending joy. And the local church is the foretaste of it as well as the focal point where God is calling and preparing people to receive it today.

The Importance of the Local Church

Do you see why the ordinary local church is the most important gathering in the world? It may not look impressive with its crying babies, walker-bound elderly, and sin-sick people. Yet, it is the only institution that Jesus said he would build, and the only one that will prevail against all evil (Matt. 16:18). It meant enough to Jesus that he died on a cross to purchase it. What could matter more, indeed what could be more *wonderful*, than that?

THE CHURCH IN 1 PETER

BEAUTY IN EXILE

Jon Payne

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Do you see her? Cast out, maligned, mistreated, and unimpressive by any worldly standard, yet to eyes of faith beautiful, magnificent, and glorious. She is the church, in exile in this world yet chosen and precious in the sight of God. She endures hardship and remains faithful to her Lord. She suffers false accusations yet stands approved in him. She is holy in an unholy culture. She is pure despite her past of impurity. She is a warrior, resisting the roar of the satanic lion yet living in weakness under the pagan authorities of this age. She finds honor in reflecting her Savior who bore her sins and cares nothing for the reproach of this age. She is an assembly of living stones, a magnificent temple, standing tall in the sin apocalypse of this age. She is birthed by the Word of God, lives by the grace of God, and hopes in the inheritance of Christ. She is a sojourner with no place to lay her head yet destined for a heavenly inheritance that will never fade. She preaches revolution but not of political power or social control. She holds out the message of a crucified Savior and an eternal invitation.

She is the church of Jesus Christ. Do you see her? And do you love what you see?

How Peter Saw the Church

We must see the church as Peter saw her, as God sees her, lest we fall prey to the false expectations and delusions of phony modern descriptions of the church or become seduced by alternative visions of her mission and identity. Most importantly, this vision must shape how we engage in our own local church. Peter is not writing for philosophical speculation or academic theory, but for real Christians in the real world. He is writing for you and me. And God has sent Peter's letter through the ages to countless Christians who need this vision to be restored to their soul and to shape their lives.

Peter establishes the ironic definition of the church in his opening greeting. By writing to elect exiles (1:1), he crafts a phrase that communicates both the church's value and her vulnerability. To be an exile is to be cast out, in the way that Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, or Israel out of the promised land. An exile has no refuge, no protector, no prestige. Yet here there is a change.

We are "elect exiles ... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (1:1-2)." We are cast out, but we are known. We are counted as unworthy in the world, but cleansed before God. And far from our exile revealing God's judgment, Peter believes that "grace and peace" will be multiplied to these dear saints (1:2).

The irony of the church is that she is at once outside of the power and prestige of this world, yet chosen and precious in God's sight. She has no present claim to earthly glory, but she has unparalleled honor as those chosen in Christ. She is at once priceless and powerless. She is in and out at the same time. This irony establishes the main vision of God's people that will carry through the book and ought to rearrange our view of the church.

In Peter's day, the vulnerability of the church was quite clear. The Christians knew they were exiles. They knew they weren't popular or powerful. They knew they were falsely accused and mistreated. Peter's goal is to help them view their present suffering through the lens of their eternal identity. He seeks to raise their vision to the spiritual glory of the church and to motivate their faith to look beyond their current pain.

In American culture, the church faces different temptations. For a couple of centuries now, Christianity has had a relatively favored status in America. In an aberration from most of church history around the globe, to be a Christian has not felt like being an exile. Though such a reprieve from suffering should cause us to rejoice, it also created a subtle temptation, which the church in our day must resist. The temptation was to disagree with Peter's vision. And the temptation was to change the vision of the church. Perhaps, we began to think, the church is not in exile in this age. Perhaps we should expect to be made at home in this world. Perhaps we should expect political power rather than enduring oppression. Perhaps the church should normally be spiritually glorious *and* socially powerful. Perhaps our unfading inheritance is meant to come to us in this age *and* in the age to come.

And behind this temptation of expectation, there is the temptation of compromise. If we are meant to be popular and powerful rather than maligned and vulnerable, perhaps we should conform ourselves to the ways of this world so that we can retain their approval, rather than stand apart and risk their wrath.

But Peter has gone ahead of us. He plants his feet firmly to block this false path and points us back to the truth.

Your inheritance, he says, is unfading (1:4), but in this age, in this life, if necessary, you may be grieved by various trials (1:6). This is good, he says, because your endurance proves that you are made for eternity. In your soul is the gold that cannot be ruined by the heat of this life. And lest you dislike this calling, remember that the prophets of old longed and searched for the things that have been handed to you (1:10). So do not conform to the passions of this age (1:14), but be true to your holy calling. Your glory is in your purity and in your love by which you prove that you are born of that Word that has come from above.

So, Peter says, our value is not in compromise with this world, nor in prestige or ease or power in this age, but rather in our calling as God's special people. And lest we don't understand the privilege we have been given, Peter describes the church in chapter 2 with language that reaches one of the high points of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) in the New Testament. "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:4-5).

Built on Christ the great Cornerstone, we are

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2:9-10).

And lest we think that this status entitles us to pride toward our non-Christian neighbors, Peter reminds us to "keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12). This command carries through to the most personal and painful aspects of life, including Christians of the first century having to honor the pagan and ruthless emperors (2:13), or slaves having to honor their masters (2:18), or Christian wives having to submit to their non-Christian husbands (3:1), or Christians suffering unjustly (4:12-16).

Peter's vision is of a church that cherishes her heavenly calling and privilege, is not surprised by the suffering of her exile status in this age, and steadfastly refuses to return evil for evil but is ready at any moment to give a reason for her hope. That hope is evident precisely because she remains joyful and righteous and loving even in circumstances that would cause a normal human to complain, compromise, or seek revenge.

Do You See Her?

So, is this your vision of the church, and does it motivate your church practice on a week to week basis? *Do you see her? Do you love her?*

Peter's vision (and it ought to be ours) is not a church mobilized toward political power or expecting earthly comfort. She does not seek suffering but is not surprised if it comes. She does not willfully provoke accusations but is not shocked by them. She resists doing any evil yet she is not disturbed by unpopularity or unrest.

Peter's vision is of singing sojourners, eyes fixed on heaven, fighting aggressively against every evil impulse, loving the family of God, and proclaiming the gospel of grace. He envisions us to see this beauty and belong to it. He wants us as happy members of this holy temple, built together into this magnificent priestly family. He exhorts us to defend her holiness and worthiness, continuing to drink in the Word which is her source of life and continuing to exalt the Savior who bore her sins.

Do you see her? There she is on Sunday, gathered in small numbers but adorned by praises reverberating with worship. There she is receiving the Lord's supper and humbly hearing God's Word. There she is in prison, unwilling to compromise her faith for her freedom.

And there she is in the future, in heaven, receiving her inheritance, which even now shines with undimmed glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Do you see her? Do you love her? She is the church of Jesus Christ.

THE CHURCH IN ACTS

A SPIRIT-FILLED COMMUNITY

Chad Haygood

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Beginnings are important moments. They often set the direction, define the purpose, and lay the foundation for what is to come. In Scripture, we know that the first three chapters of Genesis inform the direction of everything that proceeds from them. In those first chapters we learn of creation, the fall of man, and the promise of redemption. All that follows after those chapters is informed by what is revealed to us at the beginning.

In the book of Acts, we learn of the beginning of the New Testament church. Here we see that God established a pattern for the church at its inception. He led the church into practices that foster its growth and maturity. From these practices we learn about our roots.

In what follows, my aim is to encourage you from the testimony of the church in Acts. I hope that you will be inspired by what God has revealed to us from the birth of the church and will be eager to serve your local church in ways that have been modeled to us in Acts.

The church in Acts exemplifies at least four community traits for us to follow: a Spirit-filled community, a doctrinal community, a missional community, and a persevering community.

A Spirit-Filled Community

Acts begins with the disciples waiting in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. As the first chapter of Acts continues, we are told of Jesus' ascension. Before departing, Jesus gave his disciples this promise: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Having made this promise, Jesus then ascended to the Father's right hand.

Then, in Acts 2:1-4 we read,

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The Spirit had descended upon Jesus' people symbolizing that a new day had arrived, the old was yielding to the new. This was the dawn of the era of God's Spirit. The fire of the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, showing that God's presence would not be limited to a bush or a temple, but dwell within all of his people in power.

Today the church is characterized as a Spirit-filled community. We live according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:13) and are empowered by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11). Without the Spirit we are weak, but by the Spirit we are empowered to testify about Christ, produce fruit that pleases Christ, and crucify the flesh that dishonors Christ.

A Doctrinal Community

John Calvin said that doctrine is “the soul of the Church.”³

Doctrine is not secondary to the nature of the church, but at the center. The Book of Acts reveals to us that doctrine is essential to a Spirit-filled community.

In Acts 2:42 we are told that the church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching . . .” When Luke describes doctrine here as “the apostles’ teaching,” he is saying that this church was committed to the teaching that had been delivered to them from Christ, through the apostles. At the core, this teaching centered on Jesus Christ. The doctrine that Peter proclaimed through his sermon was centered on the gospel of Christ. Jesus is the Christ, he was sent from heaven and crucified according to the plan of God, and he was raised by the power of God, now seated at the Father’s right hand as Lord.

The core of doctrine is the gospel. The center of a Spirit-filled community is that Jesus is the Christ; he is Lord. And every doctrine and teaching flows either toward this truth or out of this truth.

³ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 127.

As churches, we must plant our roots in the soil of sound doctrine. We must be devoted to it so that we will be protected by it. And in our devotion, we must become so familiar with it that it governs our very thoughts and actions.⁴

A Missional Community

A noticeable shift happens in Acts 13. Although there is foreshadowing of things to come, the focus of chapters 1-12 is primarily dedicated to one person and one church: Peter and the church in Jerusalem. Then, as chapter 13 begins, a new church and new person become the center of the action. The focus is moved from Jerusalem to Antioch and from Peter to Paul. This new focus remains in place for the remainder of the book.

In chapter 13 we notice the church in Antioch being devoted to prayer. Seemingly, the church in Antioch sensed the significance of this time so they committed to fasting together. While they were fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to the church saying, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

Think for a moment about the men that the church in Antioch sent out: Paul and Barnabas. They sent their best. It is not hard to imagine someone protesting by saying, “We need them here!” Perhaps someone said, “Let’s send out one, but not both!” Yet this church was willing to send out their best in obedience to the Lord.

⁴ As a denomination, we have been blessed by the recent formation of our new *Statement of Faith*. If you have not read it, I would encourage you to do so. It is a wonderful, God-honoring document. It is the soul of our churches.

They had a sense of God's calling, not only on the lives of Paul and Barnabas, but on their congregation as agents to send out these men. The church in Antioch demonstrates what a humble, gospel-centered community looks like. May we also be willing to send our best for the sake of gospel growth!

From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to Cyprus where they proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews and eventually throughout the whole island. It is important to notice the substance of this mission: these men were devoted to proclaiming the Word. The church is built by the Word, the Word who became flesh to dwell among us, and she advances as we prayerfully proclaim the Word.

A Persevering Community

As the church was established and grew throughout the book of Acts, she encountered tremendous persecution. John and Peter were arrested because they were proclaiming the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:1-2). The apostles were arrested because the high priest and Sadducees were filled with jealousy (Acts 5:17-18). Stephen was stoned because of his proclamation of the gospel (Acts 7:58-60). The entire church was threatened by Saul prior to his conversion (Acts 9:1-2). Herod killed James the brother of John and had Peter arrested, intending to kill him also (Acts 12:1-2). Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:9). In the face of such persecution and attack, the church was not crushed (2 Cor. 4:8-9). No, the church persevered.

Paul told Timothy that everyone who desires to live a godly life in this age will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Our natural inclination,

however, is to avoid persecution at all costs. We recoil at the idea of being out of favor with our communities. We shrink back when people revile and slander us. The natural tendency of man is to resist persecution.

Jesus told us to rejoice when people say evil things about us on account of our faithfulness to him (Matt. 5:11-12). If faced with persecution, we should follow the example of the church in Acts by praying for boldness, never relenting from speaking the Word of God (Acts 4:29-31). Like Peter, if we happen to find ourselves chained in prison between two soldiers, may we lay our heads down to sleep peacefully (Acts 12:6). Let us pray that God may choose to bless our boldness with a fruitful harvest.

An Enduring Community

In a day when we are tempted to look for something new and exciting to advance God's kingdom, let us be people who return to our roots. Let's return to our beginning and be inspired by the testimony of the church in Acts. This is the need of the hour: churches that follow an enduring example that has been set before us. Our identity is a Spirit-filled, doctrinally sound, unified, missional, and persevering community. And like the church in Acts, we can trust God to sustain us and use us for his purposes. May our prayer be that we will be faithful, and that, by God's grace, we see multitudes brought into this glorious community by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

THE CHURCH IN 1 CORINTHIANS

UNITED IN CHRIST

Joel Shorey

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I love the book of Acts, but sometimes my local church experience doesn't seem to line up with what I read there. My church in Newark, DE is the dearest place on earth to me, but it does not always seem to echo Acts 2:42-44:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

But 1 Corinthians? First Corinthians is different. This early letter of Paul to the messy and seemingly dysfunctional church in Corinth is exactly what I often need to read. God's love for these messy people and their local expression of church life is powerful to consider. What we see here is that our sin affects church life. Yet, while the church might not always look like the book of Acts, it is no less a part of God's powerful plan for this world. God is

present in both the shine of revival and in the dirty mess of personal conflict, wrong priorities, prideful spiritualism, and over-realized eschatology.

Lessons from Corinth

Unity Matters

If you were to look for a main idea or thesis statement for 1 Corinthians, a solid choice would be chapter 1 verse 10 where Paul says, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you...” Paul wants the Corinthian church to be united—and for good reason! They were deeply divided by loyalty to different leaders, disagreements about liberties, economic division while celebrating communion, one-upmanship with spiritual gifts, and many other issues. This led the church to have more discord than harmony, more conflict than communion, more division than unity.

But Paul earnestly desires them to be united. He *appeals* to them to be united. And what reasons does he give for them to be united? Well, there are many, but one stands out. The centrality of the cross. All of the secondary and tertiary things that divide our churches are *nothing* compared to the singular priority of Christ crucified. The world around us is so divided because of its many different priorities, but our local churches are able to remain united because the cross has taken center stage in our lives.

Our unity displays the centrality of the cross. In fact, the presence of division often means that the cross is no longer central to us.

Paul says that divisions come when we live with *worldly* wisdom. This is because we quickly focus on ourselves. But unity comes about when we center on the cross because we see there the ultimate example of selflessness and the greatest priority in this world. The cross for Paul is a rallying point. When the cross is at the center of our lives, it draws Christians together. When the cross is displaced, division is not far away.

We are not people of titles, positions, or power. To be so is to be *merely human* (3:4). But we are not merely human. We are people who have been enabled by the Spirit of God to see the foolishness of God as our greatest hope and confidence.

Membership Matters

In the midst of so much weakness, Paul still assures the Corinthians of their significance. He *always* thanks God for them, and he *envisions* them for who God has called them to be. They are “called to be saints” (1:2), they are “God’s building” (3:9), they are “God’s temple” (3:16), they were “bought with a price” (6:20), and they have been “called into the fellowship of [the] Son” (1:9).

This heightened perspective of who God has called the church to be, despite our great weakness, has multiple effects upon us. First, it steers us away from condemnation. Our status before God does not rest with our performance. That would lead only to condemnation. By God’s grace, we are spared condemnation because God sees us in Christ.

Second, it leads us to value the *whole* church. Paul is not addressing individuals. He is addressing a local church family. There are

different issues among them, but Paul is addressing them *together*. This is significant if we are going to understand the call of 1 Corinthians. What we do, we do together. We are called together (1:2), we grow together (3:9), we assemble together (5:4), and we hold each other accountable and fight sin together (5:1-13).

It's hard to study the church in 1 Corinthians and not have a heightened value of official church membership. Paul may not use the word "membership" here (but see 1 Cor. 12:12!), but the reality he describes assumes such a formal connection. God's design, as seen here, is that we be officially and identifiably committed to each other. What we read here is not possible without such membership.

Love Matters

The resounding call from this letter is to be united, and this happens when we remain cross-centered. When we do, we will walk in love. Paul says in chapter 8:1 "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." He loves this building imagery. Our lives within the local church are to be lived in a way that does not make much of ourselves or our own perspective, but that honors Christ through earnestly loving others. We can be the fastest growing church in our area, we can have countless programs, we can express every spiritual gift, but if we do not have love, we are building nothing (13:1-3).

Through 1 Corinthians, it is clear that people of the cross are people of love. How can we not be? If we resolve to know nothing else but Jesus Christ and him crucified, we *will* walk in his

footsteps and we *will* build our lives and our churches with love. We will reflect our Savior as we love those who differ from us. We will build our church as we live lives of sacrifice and praise. When reviled, we will bless. When persecuted, we will endure. When slandered, we will entreat. We will labor in every way not for our own good, but for the good of others (4:8-21).

The Resurrection Matters

Many scholars speak of the Corinthians' over-realized eschatology. They suggest that much of the chaos and carnality in this church came from how they thought of themselves as so victorious in Christ that sin could no longer touch them.

They viewed themselves as victorious kings and queens (4:8) who could not be troubled or bothered by the brokenness and sinfulness of this world. But their claims of victory led them to not care about practical holiness or personal love.

In their over-realized eschatology, their perspective seemed to be limited to this life and to this world. Once they began to think about life after death, there is a sense in which the Corinthians actually seemed to have an under-realized eschatology. They had very little hope of a future life. With dualistic tendencies, they denied the physical resurrection and lived as if this world was all that there was.

And so, Paul speaks directly. The most theologically rich section of this letter comes at the very end when Paul takes fifty-eight verses to speak about our resurrection hope. He exhorts us to “wake up” to the hope of the resurrection (15:34), then to live accordingly.

It becomes very clear that in Paul's mind, the content of chapters 1-14 is not even possible if we do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead. Jesus's victory over sin and death not only removes the ultimate sting of the grave, but it also fuels our obedience right here and right now. Living with resurrection power does not lead us towards an over-realized eschatological indifference to practical holiness. No, it compels us to live with joyful confidence as we apply the gospel to every area of our lives. We are able to die to ourselves every day and face any trial for the sake of Christ because we know that eternity is before us. If our churches are to grow into the churches that God intends, we must remember how much resurrection hope we have been given.

Finding Hope in Corinth

While we should all hope and pray that our churches will be a clear reflection of the beauty and power of the church in Acts, we should also be very grateful for the mess in Corinth. Even though there were countless issues to address, Paul is still able to say "I give thanks to my God always for you" (1:4). Why was he able to do this? He was able because of his confidence in God's plan to use imperfect churches to display his perfect grace.

As weak as your church may be, it is built on a very strong foundation, "which is Jesus Christ" (3:11). May the church in Corinth remind us of how God intends to display his glory through our imperfect unity, our selfless love, our united membership, and our joyful confidence in the resurrection.

THE CHURCH IN EPHESIANS

GOD'S PLAN FOR HIS CHURCH

Derek Overstreet

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What kind of church are you?" is a frequent question for pastors and church members. One such question came as I was greeting on a Sunday morning. I had barely uttered the word "Hello," and the question came, "What kind of church are you?" I don't know how you would have answered that question, but I gave the answer I always give: "Sovereign Grace Church is a church that trusts in a sovereign God as we live and do ministry together in the grace of the gospel for God's glory."

It's a simple answer that represents a profound reality regarding the Church. Ephesians 3:10 says that God's manifold wisdom is revealed through the Church. Like the multi-faceted cuts of a diamond are meant to radiate its beauty and brilliance, the Church displays the multi-faceted wisdom of God in such a way that his glory is revealed in the earth and the cosmos.

The implications for how we view the church could not be more significant. Our ecclesiology matters for the sake of God's glory! Whether it's your church or my church, no matter how big or small, no matter how rich or poor, and no matter how known or unknown, the Church is God's primary means of bringing glory to himself in this world. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus envisions a God-glorifying, Christ-exalting ecclesiology in three foundational ways.

The Church Trusts in the Sovereign Plan of God

If I had to choose one word to describe the church, it would be grace. If I had to choose two words, they would be sovereign grace. In 1:3-14, Paul pens a breathtaking list of God's multi-faceted grace: election (v. 4), sanctification (v. 4), love (v. 4), adoption (v. 5), redemption (v. 7), forgiveness (v. 7), revelation (v. 8), inheritance (v. 11, 14), and the Spirit (v. 13). Every one of these spiritual blessings represents God's merciful initiative toward us and his gracious work in us as he creates his spiritual community called the Church.

Before the world existed, God determined to set his grace and affection on sinners like you and me. While we were still his enemies, dead in our sin and by nature deserving of his wrath, God reconciled us to himself in Christ. He sealed his work in our lives by his Spirit, making us part of his Church. We do not deserve it. We did not merit it. We could never accomplish it. God's mercy makes us alive in Christ and members of his spiritual household called the Church (2:1-22).

In his grand purpose of saving sinners in this world, God saved us in a way that ensures his immeasurable grace and glory will reverberate throughout this world and the heavenly realms. From before the foundations of the world, this has always been God's sovereign plan: to build his church to the praise of his glory (1:6, 14).

I love that our family of churches cherishes God's sovereignty in our salvation. Whether it is the songs we sing, the preaching we sit under, or the counseling we receive, the steady reminders of God's sovereignty in our salvation continually produce humility, gratitude, and worship in my heart as well as the confidence to share Christ, knowing God is at work in it all!

The Church Identifies with Christ Alone

The Church is central in the display of God's manifold wisdom. At the heart of the Church is the ultimate display of God's wisdom, Jesus. The person and work of Christ are the heartbeat of the Church. Ephesians makes this clear in rich and powerful ways.

Jesus is head of the Church (1:22-23, 4:15, 5:23). He is supreme. He stands over all things. As one in whom the fullness of deity dwells (Col. 2:9-10), Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. His reign from the right hand of God is worked out in and through the Church as she follows him.

At the same time, Christ is head to a body, and his body is the Church. As the Church, we live in union with our transcendent king in a profoundly intimate way. Jesus is not like a king living in a high castle, disconnected and distant from his people.

His transcendence is intimate. As Charles Spurgeon puts it, “The head is to the body indispensable to life; it is the seat of mental life, the temple of the soul; even so Jesus Christ is the vitalizing Head of all his people. He is our life.”⁵

This intimacy is revealed at the cross, where Jesus willingly laid down his life for us as our substitutionary sacrifice on the cross (5:25). The blood he shed provides forgiveness from sin and reconciliation with God. He took our sin upon himself as if it was his own. He bore the judgment we deserved as if he deserved it (2 Cor. 5:21). He is our Great Savior!

As our **Great Savior**, Jesus is also our **Great Sanctifier (5:26)**. Jesus is at work sanctifying those he saves (5:26-27), purposefully preparing his bride in love for the wedding of the Lamb in the glories of heaven (Rev. 19:6-8). In the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones,

Jesus cannot stop at the first step [justification]; He goes on to sanctify her. In other words, his death upon the cross for us, and our sins, was simply the first step in this great process. He does not stop at the first step. He has a complete purpose for the Church, and he will go through it all step by step.⁶

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, “The Head of the Church.” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol 14. 1868.

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 151.

The gospel changes the way we think and live as new creations in Christ. Our desire for our churches is the assurance of Christ's ongoing work to change us, which is a promise that should continually compel us to marvel at and worship the Lord!

Jesus is the cornerstone of the Church (2:20). A cornerstone was part of the foundation that ensured the building would be plumb and safe. Jesus is the one true foundation for God's people. As we continue to center and build churches on the person and work of Jesus, we can have every confidence that our lives and the ministry we have been called to as a church (4:11-16) will result in our spiritual maturity, the exaltation of Christ, and the glory of God.

From beginning to end, the church's very existence is determined by Jesus, who fills all things with his power and glory (1:23). For decades, the person and work of Christ has been central to our ecclesiology, as it is for all of theology. As C.J Mahaney reminded us in a memorable sermon, "Keep the main thing, the main thing!" May a gospel-centered ecclesiology be our testimony in this world long after we are gone, to the praise of God's glory!

The Church Joyfully Pursues God's Purposes

The first three chapters of Ephesians reveal that God has sovereignly set his Church apart in Christ through the work of his Spirit. Now, the Church, which is the body of Christ, the fullness of him (1:22-23), is called to give herself to displaying the wisdom, grace, love, and power of the Lord. Paul explains this calling in 4:1 as "walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

We live a life worthy of our calling as we humbly submit ourselves to Christ through a life of Spirit-empowered ministry (4:3-16) and a grace-motivated pursuit of holiness (4:17-6:18). These are the fruit and consequence of our salvation in Christ. As redeemed sinners saved into God's Spirit-filled community, we pursue ministry and holiness to the praise of his glorious grace because God has graciously loved us and saved us for this very purpose (2:10, 5:1-2).

The Church displays the manifold wisdom of God as she gives herself to imitating him and representing Christ in the world. As we serve one another in love, our faith is strengthened and we mature in Christ together. As the Church follows Christ in righteousness, we become who we already are, growing as a body and bearing spiritual fruit in our relationships and respective stations of life. That's God's plan as we eagerly await Christ's return!

I see God's plan for his Church in our ecclesiology, and I am grateful. I pray the eyes of our hearts will be increasingly opened to the wonder and glory of God's manifold wisdom in and through our churches. He can do this. God can do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power that raised Christ from the dead and is at work in us now. May he build churches around the globe that trust in his sovereign plan of salvation as they live and do ministry together in the grace of the gospel to the praise of his glorious grace in every place and for all times!

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

From the Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith

Editors' Note: Sovereign Grace Churches is a confessional family of churches. Our Statement of Faith represents a summary of the teaching of Scripture on key points of doctrine essential to the beliefs, conduct, and witness of our churches. The following section is on The Church of Christ. The full Statement of Faith is available on our website at sovereigngrace.com.

The Universal Church

The universal church is the true, worshipping community of God's people, composed of all the elect from all time.⁷ Throughout salvation history, God by his Word and Spirit has been calling sinful people out of the whole human race to create a new redeemed humanity,⁸ whom Christ purchased with his blood.⁹ With the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost,¹⁰ God's people were reconstituted as his new covenant church,¹¹ in continuity with the old covenant people of God but now brought to fulfillment by the

⁷ Heb. 12:22-23; 2:12; Eph. 5:25; Rev. 21:2

⁸ Gen. 12:1-3; Exod. 6:7; 19:3-6; Deut. 4:10; Eph. 2:11-22; Col. 1:13

⁹ Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; 5:25

¹⁰ Acts 2:1-4

¹¹ Acts 2:42-47

work of Christ.¹² All of God's people are united in one body¹³— with Christ as the supreme, sustaining, and life-giving head¹⁴— and set apart for God's own possession and purposes.¹⁵

The Local Church

As an expression of Christ's universal church, the local church is the focal point of God's plan to mature his people and save sinners.¹⁶ Therefore, all Christians are to join themselves as committed members to a specific local church.¹⁷ A true church is marked by the faithful preaching of the Word,¹⁸ the right administration of the sacraments,¹⁹ and the proper exercise of church discipline.²⁰ Even true churches are imperfect: they often contain a mixture of unbelievers hidden among the true flock²¹ and are vulnerable to theological error and moral failure.²² Yet Christ is unwavering in his commitment to build his church and will surely bring it to maturity.²³

¹² Jer. 31:31-33; Rom. 11:25; Eph. 1:23, 2:13-22; 3:6; Heb. 8:8-10

¹³ Eph. 7:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:12-27

¹⁴ Col. 1:18; 2:19; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:23

¹⁵ 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Lev. 19:2

¹⁶ Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 3:15; Matt. 28:18-20

¹⁷ Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1

¹⁸ 2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Titus 1:9

¹⁹ Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3-4; Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:17-34

²⁰ Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13

²¹ 2 Tim. 2:16-19; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Tim. 4:10

²² 1 Cor. 3:1-3; 5:1; 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; Rev. 2:5, 14-16, 20-23; 3:2-3, 15-19

²³ Matt. 16:18; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7-9

Christ has given the offices of elder²⁴ and deacon²⁵ to the church.²⁶ Elders occupy the sole office of governance and are called to teach, oversee, care for, and protect the flock entrusted to them by the Lord.²⁷ Deacons provide for the various needs of the church through acts of service. God gives these and other people as gifts to serve and equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.²⁸ In keeping with God's created design Scripture reserves the office of elder for men,²⁹ yet men and women alike belong to a royal priesthood in which each member is gifted by God to play a vital role in the life and mission of the church.³⁰

The Sacraments of the Church

The sacraments are precious means of grace that signify the benefits of the gospel, confirm its promises to the believer, and visibly distinguish the church from the world.³¹ The Lord Jesus instituted two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper,³² for faithful observance by the church³³ until his return.³⁴ Baptism is an

²⁴ 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 14:23; 20:28; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; Heb 13:17

²⁵ 1 Tim. 3:8-13; Phil. 1:1

²⁶ Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:28

²⁷ 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; 1 Tim. 5:17

²⁸ Eph. 4:11-12

²⁹ 1 Tim. 2:12-13

³⁰ Rom. 16:1-16; Acts 1:14; 9:36-42; 16:14-15; 18:2; Phil. 4:2-3; 1 Tim. 5:9-16; 2 Tim. 1:5; Titus 2:1-6; 1 Pet. 2:9

³¹ Rom. 4:11; cf. Gen. 17:7; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 10:16-20; Gal. 3:26-28; Col. 2:11-14

³² Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; cf. Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23

³³ Acts 2:42-46

³⁴ Matt. 28:20; 1 Cor. 11:26

initiatory, unrepeatable sacrament³⁵ for those who come to faith in Christ that pictures their remission of sins and union with Christ in his death and resurrection.³⁶ Through immersion in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,³⁷ the believer publicly proclaims his faith in Christ and signifies his entrance into the body of Christ.³⁸ Although commanded by Christ and a true means of grace, grace is not so inseparably tied to baptism that no one can be saved without it, or that everyone who is baptized is thereby saved.³⁹

In the Lord's Supper, the gathered church eats bread, signifying Christ's body given for his people, and drinks the cup of the Lord, signifying his blood shed for our sins.⁴⁰ As we observe this sacrament with faith and sober self-examination,⁴¹ we remember and proclaim the death of Christ, commune with him and receive spiritual nourishment for our souls, signify our unity with other members of Christ's body, and look forward to the Lord's triumphant return.⁴²

³⁵ Acts 2:38-41; Gal. 2:16; 3:26-27; 5:2-6; cf. Col. 2:11-14

³⁶ Rom. 6:3-5

³⁷ Matt. 28:19; Acts 19:3-5

³⁸ Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3-14; Col. 2:11-14

³⁹ 1 Cor. 10:1-5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Rom. 2:28; cf. Col. 2:11-14

⁴⁰ 1 Cor. 11:23-26

⁴¹ 1 Cor. 11:26-30

⁴² 1 Cor. 11:26

The Purpose and Mission of the Church

As the body of Christ, the church exists to worship God,⁴³ to edify and mature his people,⁴⁴ and to bear witness to Christ and his kingdom in all the world.⁴⁵ Governed by Scripture, the church gathers for the teaching of the Word,⁴⁶ prayer,⁴⁷ the sacraments,⁴⁸ congregational singing,⁴⁹ fellowship, and mutual edification through the exercise of spiritual gifts.⁵⁰ As the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus has sent his people into the world in the power of the Spirit.⁵¹ The church's mission is to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded.⁵² We do this by proclaiming the gospel, planting churches, and adorning the proclamation of the gospel through our love and good works. There will always be a gathering of believers on earth because the Lord promises to build, guide, and preserve his church to the end of the age.⁵³ When Christ returns, he will gather and perfect his church from every tribe, tongue, and nation as a people for his own possession, and he will dwell with them forever.⁵⁴

⁴³ Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:18-20

⁴⁴ Eph. 4:12-13; Col. 1:28

⁴⁵ Matt. 28:19

⁴⁶ 2 Tim. 4:1-2; 1 Tim. 4:13; Eph. 4:11-12

⁴⁷ Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 2:1-2

⁴⁸ Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 11:17-34

⁴⁹ Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:18-20

⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26; 1 Thess. 5:11; 1 Pet. 4:10

⁵¹ John 17:18; 20:21; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:5-8

⁵² Matt. 28:18-20

⁵³ Matt. 16:18

⁵⁴ 1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 John 3:2; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 2 Cor. 5:1; Titus 2:13-14; Rev. 7:13-17; 19:6-9; 21:1-4

THE MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

Shawn Woo

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The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord,” and yet, in this age between Christ’s two advents, the church is “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.”⁵⁵ As the Belgic Confession states, since “all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of ‘the church’,”⁵⁶ how can we ensure that a local church is part of the *true* Church?

The Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* identifies three marks of a true church: “the faithful preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of church discipline.” These three marks are not the only attributes and activities of a true church, but they are the distinguishing marks. Preaching identifies Christ as the head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18), and the sacraments and church discipline identify the church as the body of Christ that is

⁵⁵ Samuel J. Stone, “The Church’s One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Her Lord,” 1866.

⁵⁶ Belgic Confession, Article 29

spiritually united to him (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 4:12, 16; Col. 1:24).

Faithful Preaching of the Word

Jesus is building his church on the foundation of the apostles (Matt. 16:18-19; cf. Eph. 2:20), who “once for all delivered to the saints” “the faith” of the gospel (Jude 3; cf. Luke 1:2; Acts 2:42). A voluntary association that stands on another foundation might be a synagogue, a mosque, a lodge, or a temple, but it is no church. Even if an apostle or an angel from heaven preaches a different gospel, we must reject them and their message, for there is no other gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul uses two metaphors to describe “the church of the living God.” The first one is familiar, “the household of God,” but the second less so, “a pillar and buttress of the truth.” The church exists to prop up “the truth,” namely the mystery that “[Christ] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16). The church stewards “the knowledge of the truth” by which “people [are] saved,”—that “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5-6). “The word of truth, the gospel of ... salvation” (Eph. 1:13) is the keystone of the church, and a congregation that does not uphold it cannot properly be called a church.

More broadly, a true church upholds the written, God-breathed Word, the Scriptures—all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The Bible itself

does not save us, but only the Bible leads us to Jesus who alone saves, for it is "able to make [us] *wise for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). In the book, *The Insanity of God*, the author Nik Ripken tells the story of five Muslim-background believers, who came to faith in Christ in a country where Christians are intensely persecuted and where there is virtually no access to the gospel:

One of the five men told me, 'I dreamed about a blue book. I was driven, consumed really, by the message of the dream. "Look for this book," the dream said, "read this Bible!" I began a secret search, but I could not find a book like that anywhere in my country. Then, one day, I walked into a Quranic book shop and saw this sea of green books lining the walls. I noticed a book of a different color on a shelf in the back of the store, so I walked back there and pulled out a thick blue volume to discover that it was a Bible. It was published in my own national language. I actually bought a Bible in the Islamic bookstore, took it home, and read it five times. That's how I came to know Jesus.' Another one told me, 'I dreamed about finding Jesus, but I didn't even know how or where to look. Then one day I was walking through the market when a man I had never seen before came up to me in the crowd. He said, "The Holy Spirit told me to give you this book." He handed me a Bible and disappeared in the crowd. I never saw him again. But I read the Bible he gave me three times from cover to cover, and that's how I came to know and follow Jesus.' Each one of the five men told me a different variation of this same story. Each one of them had come

across a Bible in some unusual, miraculous way. Each one had read the Gospel story of Jesus. Each one had decided to follow Him.⁵⁷

Scripture is where the gospel of salvation is recorded permanently and preserved reliably, and “the word of God is living and active” (Heb. 4:12). In the inscripturated Word, we encounter the incarnate Word.

Buttressing the word of truth involves more than preserving the Scriptures in some safe deposit box somewhere to be preserved for all time. It must be *preached*, for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). No one can call on the Lord who saves without first believing in him, and no one can believe in him unless they first hear of him, and no one can hear of him unless someone preaches to them (Rom. 10:14). So we must “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2-3). It is when we “speak the truth in love” that the church “grow[s] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

Right Administration of the Sacraments

The faithful preaching of the Word *alone*, however, does not make a true church. John Calvin added that a true church exists where “the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected.”⁵⁸ A lone preacher might proclaim the gospel faithfully and fervently, but if no one else hears it and believes it,

⁵⁷ Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 280.

⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), IV.i. 10, 1024.

a church does not exist, for a church is “where two or three are gathered in [Christ’s] name” (Matt. 18:20). The faithful preaching of the Word ensures that Christ is the Head; the right administration of the sacraments ensures that the Church is his Body.

Jesus instituted two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Baptism is an unrepeated, initial sacrament (Acts 2:38-41; Gal. 2:16; 3:26-27; 5:2-6; cf. Col. 2:11-14) for those who have repented and come to faith in Christ, and it signifies the washing away of guilt and the purifying of our conscience (1 Pet. 3:21). We are baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38), signifying our union with Christ in his death and resurrection and our participation in the body of Christ (Rom. 6:3-4).

The public and corporate dimension of baptism is important. Baptism is an outward expression of an inward faith. John 12:42-43 speaks of those who “believed in [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees ... did not *confess* (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” An inward faith must be confessed outwardly. Those who do not “*acknowledge* (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) [Jesus] before men” will not be acknowledged before the angels of God (Luke 12:8-9). It is those who “believe in [their] heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead,” and also “*confess* (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) with [their] *mouth* that Jesus is Lord” who are saved (Rom. 10:9-10). This is why, throughout the New Testament, a public baptism,

and not a private recitation of the Sinner's Prayer, is used to mark the beginning of a Christian's life (Acts 8:36; 19:2-4). Baptism is the stake in the ground that publicly marks the believer as belonging to Christ and his Church.

As baptism signifies the believer's new *birth* into the family of God, the Lord's Supper signifies the believer's ongoing *participation* in the family of God. By eating the bread, which signifies the body of Christ broken for us, and drinking the cup, which signifies the blood of Christ poured out for our sins, we confirm our union with Christ and fellowship with the church (1 Cor. 10:15-16; 11:27-29). By faith, the hand and mouth of our souls, we consume the flesh of Christ and drink his blood, receiving spiritual nourishment for our souls (John 6:40; cf. John 6:54). The Lord's Supper *unifies* the Body of Christ as participants in the one Bread of Life, and thus *identifies* the Body of Christ in contradistinction to the world.

This *visible* participation in a local church via the sacraments is important, because it is our love for the brothers and sisters in Christ whom we have seen that prove our love for the God whom we have not seen (1 John 4:20). Our membership in the invisible, universal church (2 Tim. 2:19; Matt. 13:24-30), must be evidenced by our membership in the visible, local church (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 John 2:19). We must not have a docetic view of the church that considers only the invisible, transeclesial fellowship as the "real" church. The gathered church, as it cherishes and proclaims the gospel, really does have the power of the keys to bind and loose on earth what shall be bound and loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23).

Proper Exercise of Church Discipline

This is why the proper exercise of church discipline is the third mark of a true church. It is really an entailment of the right administration of the sacraments.⁵⁹ A church that indiscriminately baptizes people and admits them to the Lord's table will soon cease to be a true church. For the sake of preserving its integrity and witness, the church must dissociate from unrepentant sinners who are bringing disrepute to Christ (Matt. 18:17). Scripture lists several sins for which the church should excommunicate a member, for example, "sexual immorality or greed, or [someone who] is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler" (1 Cor. 5:11), those who are unwilling to work and "walking in idleness" (2 Thess. 3:6), those who neglect to "provide for his relatives ... especially for members of his household" (1 Tim. 5:8), those who "[stir] up division" (Titus 3:10), those who are "lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:2-5), and those who preach a different gospel (Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:17-21; 2 John 10-11). There is no definitive, exhaustive list, but it must be a demonstrable sin for which the lack of repentance evinces his or her unregenerate state.

One might ask, "If Jesus 'receive[d] sinners and [ate] with them' (Luke 15:2), who are we 'not even to eat with such a one' (1 Cor. 5:11)?" Paul clarifies in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, "For what have I to do

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, IV.i.15, 1029.

with judging *outsiders*? Is it not those *inside* the church whom you are to judge? *God* judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’” These two verses follow a neat A-B-A-B structure, speaking of how we should not judge *outsiders*, then about how we should judge *insiders*, then about how *God* will judge *outsiders*, and again about how the *church* ought to judge *insiders* and “purge the evil from your midst” (Deut. 13:5).

We cannot dissociate from the unrepentant sinners “of this world ... since then [we] would need to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:10). We leave their judgment to God. However, it is the church’s responsibility to judge its own members who are living a double life of unrepentant sin, because by doing so they are besmirching the name of Christ and belying the corporate witness of the church. Jesus is, indeed, the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34), but he

gave himself up for [the church], that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

Sinners who spurn God’s grace by refusing to repent have no part in the bride of Christ. Church discipline ensures that the church remains distinguishable from the world. And when it is exercised with faith, sobriety, and humility, it often becomes, by God’s merciful grace, a means of restoring wayward sinners (Matt. 18:15; Gal 6:1).

A True Church

When the resurrected Jesus met with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus did two things with them. “[B]eginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27), and “he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30; cf. 22:19). It was when Jesus “opened to [them] the Scriptures” (Luke 24:32) and “took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30; cf. 22:19) that “[their] hearts burn[ed] within [them]” (Luke 24:32) and “their eyes were opened” to recognize Jesus (Luke 24:31).

A true church is a gathering of believers where the Word of Christ is spoken and the Bread of Christ is broken. Such a church is a battering ram of Christ against which the gates of Hades cannot stand.

WHAT IS A PASTOR FOR?

Walt Alexander

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Like every other Sunday morning, he stood up to pray.⁶⁰ It was 11:20 a.m. in London on June 18, 1944. The British empire that had controlled nearly a quarter of the world's land was essentially over. And the capital of the British Empire was under attack.

Sirens blared. Chaos reigned in the streets. People ran about in terror because of the routine air assaults from German planes, but also because of the remote-controlled bombing that had begun by the Nazis only days before.

Nevertheless, it was Sunday morning and Martyn Lloyd-Jones had a congregation to lead.

Even though at this point in the service everyone in the church began to hear a bomber plane closing in overhead, Lloyd-Jones began his "long prayer"—his pastoral prayer—and did not stop.

⁶⁰ This illustration was borrowed from Kevin Vanhoozer & Owen Strachan, *The Pastor As Public Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 37-38.

He continued to pray until the noise overhead was so loud he could not even hear himself.

The congregation braced for the explosion.

The bomb fell. The chapel structure cracked. Bits of the ceiling and dust fell from the roof. The congregation rose to their feet, assuming the service was over.

But, after a brief pause, Lloyd-Jones continued his prayer as though nothing happened! The congregation sat down again.

After he concluded his prayer, Lloyd-Jones advised anyone who was nervous to move into the seats under one of the galleries. Then, he climbed the steps to the sacred desk and began to preach from the book of Jude.

Though the world was at war and though the war was literally at the door of the church, Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed it was no time for him to abandon the office and calling of a pastor to build up the people of God for the glory of God.

We long for the pastors of Sovereign Grace to continue to have a similar resolve and devotion to the office and calling of a pastor. May no world events deter us, no cultural movements distract us, no personal ambition divert us from devoting ourselves to the office and calling of pastoral ministry: *to build up the people of God for the glory of God!*

Acts 20 lays out at least four imperatives for pastors from Paul's final sermon to the Ephesian elders. Though several of these imperatives are embodied in the example of the Apostle Paul detailed in this sermon, each imperative is commanded of all pastors in the New Testament.

Serve the Lord

The very first thing Paul underlines for the Ephesian elders is his example of serving the Lord. He reminds them of how he lived among them the "whole time," "serving the Lord" with all humility, tears, and trials (20:18, 19).

Later, in one of the most well-worn verses about pastoral ministry, he proclaims that the main ambition of his life is to "finish ... the ministry," literally, his service (20:24).

Often, we think of serving in such a way that the emphasis is upon how we are serving—whether preaching, counseling, leading corporate worship, or whatever else. But for Paul, the emphasis is not upon how he is serving but who he is serving: the Lord Jesus Christ!

More than that, Paul says his life reduces down to his calling to serve the Lord. Nowhere does Paul describe what this reality means to him more powerfully than Acts 20:24, saying, "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus."

The siren calls to serve other things will never cease for the Lord's servants. It may be prominent members pressuring us to advance their initiatives, social media encouraging us to articulate our commentary, or life coaches urging us to build our platform. But churches don't exist to serve pastors. Pastors exist to serve churches and give their lives away to serve the Lord.

We serve *the Lord*.

Do Not Shrink From Suffering

In underlining his example, Paul reminds them of how he did not shrink from suffering. He points out how he served the Lord "with tears and with trials through the plots of the Jews" (20:19).

Rarely did he finish a speech in the book of Acts. Often, he was stopped mid-sentence to be arrested, beaten, or run out of town. As he begins making his way to Jerusalem, he knows more suffering is coming: "*the Holy Spirit testifies to me that imprisonment and afflictions await me*" (20:23). But he does not shrink from preaching the whole counsel of God and suffering for it.

Pastoral ministry is not the hardest job in the world, but it does bring with it a degree of suffering from which pastors must not shrink. Is it persecution and imprisonment? In some countries, it is right now. Is it execution? In some countries, it is right now.

But, in every church in every generation, the suffering that pastors must not shrink from is the daily anxiety of watching while everyone else is sleeping. John Flavel once said, "[Pastors] are fittingly compared to the toil of men in harvest, to the labors of a

woman in travail, and to the agonies of soldiers in the extremity of a battle. We must watch when others sleep.”⁶¹

I’ll never forget a conversation with my former pastor, Bill Kittrell, after I returned giddy-and-green from the Sovereign Grace Pastors College in 2009. Someone asked him, “What motivates you to read your Bible in the morning?” Bill responded, “I am terrified.”

He was no doubt anxious about many things concerning his soul and family, but I never saw one specific anxiety disappear in ten years working alongside him—the anxiety of watching the sheep while others were sleeping.

Proclaim the Gospel

After reminding the Ephesian elders of how he served the Lord, Paul reminds them again and again of how he proclaimed the gospel and the Word of God to them. Seven times in Acts 20 he reminds them of how he proclaimed the gospel: *declaring* (v. 20), *teaching* (20), *testifying* (21), *testify* (24), *proclaiming* (25), *testify* (26), *declaring* (26).

The point is clear. Pastors are not called to be creative or innovative. Pastors are not called to be hip and original. Pastors are called to proclaim what they have heard, what they have received.

⁶¹ John Flavel, “The Character of a True Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ” *The Works of John Flavel*, vol 6. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 569.

Behind the word *proclaim* is the idea of a herald. Before radio waves, newspapers, and social media, news was shared by a herald: someone sent to announce what had happened. So too, pastors are called to herald and proclaim the good news of the gospel.

A herald isn't anxious about his hair, image, or following. He's anxious about the message of the gospel getting out. The news we herald is news that demands a response.

Behind the word *testify* is the courtroom (20:21, 26). Everyone who hears the good news of the gospel is on trial. How they respond to the gospel is a matter of life or death, heaven or hell, mercy or judgment.

Pastors are called to witness and testify to what they have seen and heard about Jesus before it's too late. Pastors are called to defend Christ, commend Christ, lay out the evidence about Christ, and urge all who hear to turn in repentance and faith to Christ.

One of the most stirring paintings of the Reformation is that of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach. In the painting, Luther is standing in the pulpit, holding the Word of God with one hand and pointing to the cross of Christ portrayed before his hearers with the other hand.

Preaching is not merely telling the old, old story. Preaching brings about an encounter with God and the free offer of salvation in the gospel. This free offer demands our real-time response, a response to which we will be held eternally accountable.

Care for the Church

In verse 28, Paul commands the Ephesian elders to care for the church. There are many important things contained in this verse, but foremost for pastors is the metaphor of the shepherd that ties it together with the reference to “the flock” and the call “to care” or shepherd.

The shepherd is a vital biblical metaphor. Again and again, when the Bible uses this metaphor, it emphasizes the Lord is our shepherd. He leads us. He guides us. He feeds us. He protects us. We are his sheep and the sheep of his pasture.

And it's no different in this verse. It is the *church of God*—the church is not my church or your church. *Which Jesus obtained with his own blood*—it belongs to God and has been bought by Christ. *Over whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*—we serve those he entrusts to us.

While this verse strongly affirms God's role in purchasing and gathering his people, it nevertheless also strongly affirms the privilege and responsibility of men to shepherd and care for specific people in specific local churches. Pay careful attention to the ones over whom “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Care for them.

We are all sheep, pastors included. Sheep are not the fluffy, cuddly creatures we often imagine. They are unintelligent, stubborn, and often need to be rescued. Yet, shepherds do the dirty work. They lead, guide, and feed. They rescue and protect. They are not fragile

animal lovers. They are rough, hard, and weary from many sleepless nights.

That's the work pastors are called to do. To shepherd and care. To pay careful attention. To watch while others sleep.

That's why pastoral ministry is no place for a man who wants to do other things. No place for a man who is easily distracted or easily discontented. It's for men who are ready and willing to stand immovably underneath the Great Shepherd for all their days to care for specific people in specific local churches.

Labor On

When Martyn Lloyd-Jones stood up to pray and preach in the midst of Nazi Germany's bombing of London, he gave a powerful testimony to us. The church labors in the midst of its own war against sin and death, against suffering and disease, against pride, in the midst of a fallen world. May she labor on. And may her pastors labor on, resolved and devoted to the office and calling of a pastor.

WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS DEACONS

Rick Gamache

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If the elders are the servant leaders of the church, then the deacons are the lead servants. And both offices (official, biblical, recognized roles) are vital in a healthy, mature, growing, vibrant, active church. God graciously bolsters his body of believers by giving deacons to care for the temporal needs of his household as we live our lives here under the sun. So let's unpack some aspects of the diaconate office to remind ourselves why the church needs deacons.

A Supporting Office

Elders govern, elders lead, and elders teach. Elders are the ones who determine how best to position deacons as lead servants in the church. And deacons are positioned to serve the church by supporting the elders.

In Acts 6 we have a proto-type of the office of deacon. The church is growing rapidly and the apostles are ministering without the support of deacons. The office hasn't been established at this point,

which is why the term “deacon” (the noun) is not used in the chapter. But a variation of the word is used three times. You know the story. The Greek-speaking, Jewish widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution (6:1). In the following verses we learn that time is being taken away from the ministry of the Word and of prayer so that the apostles can tend to situations like this. And they recognize this “is not right” (6:2). So that they can “devote [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (6:4), seven men are appointed to serve the temporal needs of the fledgling church, that is, to serve the church by supporting the elders in their call to govern and to teach. It’s not that serving practical needs like taking care of widows is somehow beneath pastors; it’s simply that they have another function to fulfill. So God raises up others to fulfill a different function in the church: to lead in serving and meeting needs. Thus, the diaconate is a supporting office.

A Situational Office

The diaconate is also a situational office. Here’s what I mean. A need arose in the church and saints appointed by the elders served to meet that need. Devotion to the ministry of the Word cannot be compromised, but neither can the ministry of meeting needs. It’s not either/or; it’s both/and. God cares about the needs of his people. He’s full of compassion and mercy. So much so that when he established his church, he created an office dedicated to serving others in order to meet needs.

An elder’s job description is clear: he fulfills his call mainly by leading and teaching. That never changes; that’s always what the elder does. But there is no specific job description for the deacon.

They simply serve. It's ambiguous because it's a situational office. There are different needs in the church at different times so that the office of deacon might look different from church to church. Or perhaps it will look different in the same church from season to season. It will always be about serving to meet needs and it will always be about serving the church by supporting the elders, but there is freedom to determine what deacons specifically do in their service to the church.

So we ask questions: What is taking time away from the pastor's ministry of the word that could be passed along to a qualified deacon who will lead out in serving and so support the elders in their call? Are there needs that are not being adequately met that would be if there was a deacon in place? We have the biblical freedom to think that way about the diaconate because the office is situational.

A Spiritual Office

The diaconate is also a spiritual office. In Acts 6, the apostles give these instructions about appointing lead servants: "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (6:3). By the time the office is officially established, requirements are laid out that parallel those for an elder in that they relate to the character and maturity of the one given the spiritual charge as a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The implication is that the deacon doesn't just "do stuff," but serves by the power of the Spirit for the glory of Christ.

A Significant Office

The fact that it's a spiritual office means that it's a significant office. The diaconate is an important office in the church. It's a lofty office. We see that in the required character of those who fill it. It's lofty in that it supports the ministry of the Word. It's lofty in that it expresses the character of God by meeting needs. It's lofty in that the office comes with a stated reward: "For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 3:13). What a reward: honor in the church and confidence as they draw close to God in Christ!

A Shared Office

Lastly, the diaconate is a shared office. That is, every individual member of God's household is called to serve. The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 5:13, "through love serve one another." It's what we do. Even the teaching ministry of the elders is all about helping us fulfill our call to serve. In Ephesians 4:11-12, the Apostle Paul writes, "And he (God) gave ... the shepherds and teachers (elders), to equip the saints (the entire church) for the work of ministry (for serving), for building up the body of Christ ..."

Elders and deacons don't do it all. Elders equip the church to serve and deacons lead out in serving. But we all serve, imaging forth our Savior, who said in Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served (not to be deaconed) but to serve (to deacon), and to give his life as a ransom for many." And when we image forth Christ, we fulfill our mission as a church.

Deacons and the Mission of the Church

The Apostle Paul, after giving the qualifications for elders and deacons, states that we are God's household, his family (1 Tim. 3:14-16). We are the church of the living God, the place where God is uniquely present. We are a pillar and buttress of the truth. We support the truth as a church and we hold it up on a pillar for the world to see. When that happens we stay on mission and Jesus is magnified. That's what verse 16 is all about: "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."

This is likely a quote from an ancient hymn of the early church. Jesus was manifest in the flesh. He came in the flesh so that he could die for the sins of his people. And he was vindicated by the Spirit. He was raised from the dead in victory over death and sin. That was all seen in the spirit world by angels, and it is being proclaimed by the church to the nations. And some are believing and being added to the church of which the ascended Christ is the head. That hymn is our mission. Our mission is Jesus.

The church is to be an army of servants, equipped with the Word, passionate about the glory of Christ, and putting him on display in all our serving. No one sits on the sidelines. It involves sacrifice and commitment. No one said being part of the church was easy. But it's glorious because we all get to be part of making Christ known, which is worth the sacrifice.

The officers of the church—elders and deacons—are commissioned to keep the church on mission. And when we stay on mission, Acts 6:7 happens: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” That sounds good, doesn’t it? May it happen through our churches, churches that need deacons!

THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION

Rob Flood

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Christ died for his church. We celebrate this glorious truth together and say, “Amen!” When Christ died for his church, he died for the people, not for our church buildings. While our buildings are certainly a blessing, the church is still the church without the building. Christ died for those who were dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). All who are in Christ comprise the church universal. All of this is according to the wonderful plan of God, but God’s plan goes even further.

Throughout the world, Christ gathers his universal church into smaller groups of believers known as congregations forming local churches. These congregations contain men and women, young and old, clergy and lay members alike. They contain those in whom is all our delight (Ps. 16:3), “a people for [God’s] own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9), and those “who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7).

From the members of each congregation, God calls some to govern the church. These are the elders, men who are equipped and called

by God but affirmed by the very congregation from which they are selected. One is not better than the other and there is no difference in value. The distinction between elder and congregant is one of function rather than significance or rank.⁶²

The Scriptures have a number of clearly defined and thorough descriptions for the role of elder in the local church (1 Tim. 3, Titus 1, etc., see BCO 2.3). If the governing responsibilities rest with the elders alone, what role does the congregation play in the life and health of the local church? To facilitate the church's health and welfare, Christ calls the congregation to function and thrive in at least these three ways: commitment, accountability, and support.

Thrive in Commitment

Naturally, this commitment begins with a full-hearted devotion to Christ as our glorious Bridegroom (1 Pet. 1:8). But such devotion goes further and overflows as it expresses itself in action.

Committed to Attend

The first and primary expression of commitment is attendance at the gatherings of the church (Heb. 10:25). Being present for the preaching of God's Word, for the edification of the other saints in the congregation, and to lift in praise the great name of the Lord our God is a fundamental and primary responsibility each member of every congregation carries.

⁶² The SGC Book of Church Order explains that "the historical distinction between 'clergy' and 'laity' is an unbiblical idea that creates an illegitimate dichotomy within the body of Christ" (BCO 4.2).

Committed to Serve

One primary elder responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). This could only result in failure if congregations do not subsequently and faithfully exercise their gifts by serving. This includes serving the local church as an organization as well as the individuals within the local congregation. Churches that rest on the work of the elders are churches in trouble. But those churches whose congregations carry the lion's share of the work, with each member active in service, are churches fully committed to mission.

Committed to Unity

The church has an enemy who delights to sow doubt and division. Therefore, each member of the congregation must be committed to maintain unity within the body of Christ (Eph. 4:3). For this reason, we are called to conduct ourselves in a manner that preserves and protects unity: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (Eph. 4:1-2). We are called to overlook sin (Prov. 19:11), even choosing to be wronged rather than risk our unity (1 Cor. 6:7). We know that we cannot stand if we are divided against one another (Matt. 12:25), so we commit to fight for unity.

Thrive in Accountability

The Proverbs teach us that wounds from a friend are a blessing (Prov. 27:6). Therefore, we welcome correction and adjustment shared by fellow believers. Such graces hold us accountable and keep us walking on the path of belief and faithfulness. So the congregation is called to thrive in receiving accountability.

Yet there is more to accountability than simply receiving. The congregation is called to provide accountability to one another and its eldership. This accountability can take many forms and have many different points of focus. Three of those areas are doctrine, character, and finances. It is crucial that the congregation carry out this responsibility with a spirit of love and humility, not seeking fault or sinfully judging, but eager to help in all truth.

Accountability in Doctrine

Elders are called to guard the doctrine of the church. At the same time, the saints in Berea are held out to us as an example of how a congregation can foster health in the local church by listening through the lens of Scripture (Acts 17:11). The congregation is not to hold elders accountable to preferences or any other extra-biblical standard. Rather, just as the Bereans did, congregations are to test teaching by the Scriptures to be sure it remains faithful to the will and Word of God.

Accountability in Character

All Christians are called to exemplify the mind and character of Christ. Yet, those who hold offices in the church—the elders and deacons—are to be identified by their character (1 Tim. 3). For this reason, it is imperative that the congregation knows its pastors and deacons, able to affirm their godly character in an ongoing way. Also, when pastors or deacons are added to those already serving, it falls to the congregation to testify to the elders' selections for those offices.⁶³

⁶³ See BCO 4.4.

Accountability in Finances

The management of money is an element of church administration that requires great care and integrity. Wise elders lead with transparency and welcome financial scrutiny knowing how important it is for trust to be established and maintained between them and the congregation. Thus, financial accountability is a wonderful responsibility of grace that falls on the shoulders of the congregation. This doesn't mean every member of the church shares in this equally. It simply means that the elders are not only accountable to God for their financial management, but to the congregation as well.

Thrive in Support

Graciously, the Scriptures balance the congregation's role of accountability with the call of enthusiastic support of its elders and the mission of the church. In this way, the tone does not become primarily one of critique or investigation, but one of appreciation and support. Generous giving is perhaps the most obvious way that congregations can thrive in supporting the local church and her mission (2 Cor. 9:6-7, Mal. 3:10). But there are at least three other ways congregations can support their leadership: encourage, follow, and pray.

Support by Encouraging

The call to eldership is a weighty one. It is filled with work and responsibility, making the elders accountable to the congregation and to the Chief Shepherd himself. It contains the great joy of administering the Word of God through preaching and counsel, but it also comes with the weight of caring for the saints in their various forms of brokenness and sin. This is why faithful members

of a congregation will express gratitude to their elders regularly (Heb. 13:7). They will not simply wait for an encouraging thought to occur to them, but they will intentionally encourage those who are watching over their souls.

Support by Following

While elders are accountable, they are also “overseers” (1 Tim. 3:1) and “leaders” (Heb. 13:17), called to “exercise oversight” (1 Pet. 5:2) and “rule” (1 Tim. 5:17) in the church. A congregation will follow and obey its leaders, making it a great joy for them to serve (Heb. 13:17). This is for the sake of the leader, the sake of the congregation, and the sake of the name of Christ. Making a leader’s job difficult only makes for discouraged leaders, which is of no gain to the congregation. In our age of individualism and self-sovereignty, we as congregants must work at this trait. Few of us default toward following and even fewer of us default toward joy. We must strive to follow our leaders in joy, with our hope and faith set on the God who placed them in leadership over us.⁶⁴

Support by Praying

The enemy knows that striking the shepherd will scatter the sheep (Matt. 26:31). Additionally, your elders will also be held to a higher standard since they teach you the Word of God (Jas. 3:1). When you add to these sobering truths the reality of the troubles found in any church and the difficulty of life in general, you will soon discover that your leaders need your prayers. Paul’s pattern of

⁶⁴ Naturally, I’m not including corruption in this call. If there is corruption, then the congregation’s call is to accountability, as expressed above. (See BCO Part IV for details and instructions on how SGC handles these situations.)

asking for prayer reveals the great need our leaders have for the support of our fervent prayers.

Relationship between the Congregation and Her Elders

In light of the role of the congregation, it is imperative for the relationship between the congregation and her elders to be one of openness, honesty, humility, graciousness, patience, and faith. As godly pastors humbly lead with the Word of God, a godly congregation will respond with faith, trust, and support. As a healthy eldership invites feedback, a healthy congregation brings it in humility and kindness, wrapped in genuine and specific encouragement. As we all—pastors and congregation—seek to honor Christ and his Word, the entire church will breathe the air of joy, humility, and grace.

When this relationship is marked with charity, the welfare of the church is protected and secured. When doubt or suspicion is tolerated in this relationship, division and destruction are not far behind. As elders are called to love their congregations well, congregations are called to love their elders. With the members and elders each doing their part, may the household of God thrive and may his name be made great!

IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP BIBLICAL?

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Who's in your family? The answer seems straightforward starting with our closest family: spouse, children, siblings, parents, and spiraling out to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. But where do we draw the line? Second cousins? Third cousins? Our pets? How far back do we go? Technically, we're all connected at some point through Adam and Eve, so is everyone in the world our "family"?

Who is in your church? Again, this seems straightforward: those with whom we worship on Sundays. But what about the visitors, or those who attend but aren't really connected, or those who don't come anymore? What about our broader family of churches or even the universal Church?

Church membership can be defined simply as the practice of joining a local gathering of believers and submitting to the leaders of that congregation. In a highly individualistic age which fears

(or disdains) commitment, with a church on every corner (or even online), this practice is very useful and helpful. It's one that we've adopted globally as Sovereign Grace Churches: "All Christians are to join themselves as committed members to a specific local church."⁶⁵

But the crucial question is this: is church membership biblical? If you search the New Testament, you won't find an explicit text commanding "membership" anywhere. However, you will see that the practice of church membership is implied throughout.

Let's survey four ways in which membership is implied biblically.

Implications from the Metaphors for Church

Various images and metaphors are used by way of analogy to help us picture and understand what a "church" is.

- The Church is described as the body of Christ made up of many individuals and various parts: eyes, hands, feet, head that are all interdependent on one another for health and maturity (1 Cor. 12:12-27).
- The Church in Ephesus is pictured as a collective unit as a flock of sheep bought by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28) and as a "temple" being built together made up of various stones (Eph. 2:19-22).
- The Church is also called the "household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15) where the elders are the heads of house called to manage and steward the home (1 Tim. 3:5).

⁶⁵ Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*, "The Church of Christ."

You put these images together and you have a clear sense that each local church, though fully included in the universal Church, is its own collective unit. Therefore, every Christian is called to be a part of the unit, not a foot kicking around on its own, a sheep wandering off, a lone-ranger brick making one-stack buildings, or a family consisting solely of one person. No, the church comprises individuals who are members of one another (Rom. 12:5).

Implications from the Teaching on Leadership

The writer of Hebrews says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). This sounds like a nice idea, but then he goes on to command us to “Obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb. 13:17). What at first seems like a pleasant and motivating call to imitation is ratcheted up considerably.

We are called not just to be inspired by our leaders but also to obey them. We are even called to *submit* to them.

Which leaders are we called to look to in order to fulfill these verses? Does this include all the pastors in our city or town? No, this passage implies that Christians are meaningfully a part of a local gathering of believers with clearly established leaders that they are to look to. Remember, the church is the household of God, and her leaders are like the fathers of that family.

On the flipside, these leaders are responsible for those in their church, “...for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17). For whom are leaders meant to give to God an account? As Peter taught, they are called to shepherd the flock of God that is *among them*, exercising

oversight (1 Pet. 5:2). Clearly there is a definable group of Christians, a flock of sheep, that the under-shepherds know, love, serve, protect, care for, and—of utmost importance for membership—for whom they will give an account to God.

Implications From the “One Another” Commands

There are at least thirty “one another” commands in the New Testament. For example, in the book of Romans, after Paul expounds upon our glorious salvation in Christ (Rom. 1-11) he moves on to command the church in Romans 12 to “love one another” (10), “outdo one another in showing honor” (10), “rejoice” with one another (15), “weep” with one another (15), and “live in harmony with one another” (16). To live a life worthy of our glorious calling is to live a life in loving, unified, and intimate community.

How else are we going to obey these commands unless we are meaningfully a part of a local church? We can’t do this for every Christian worldwide. This requires investment and involvement in a local church community.

Implications from Church Discipline

Finally, it’s clear in Matthew 18 that Jesus expects his followers to gather as a church and lovingly hold each other to a standard of holiness and unity. If a brother or sister in this new community is to continue in a pattern of sin that is known, verifiable, and unrepentant, Jesus says we are to confront them individually, and then with witnesses, and then “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17).

This implies a noticeable, identifiable, and necessary demarcation of who is in the church and who is out of the church.

This is also seen in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul instructs the church, in the case of grievous sexual immorality, to “let him who has done this be removed from among you” (2). And note, they are to do this “when you are assembled” (4). That is, there is clearly a gathering of a local body of believers who are now restricting access to this gathering of one of their members. This is done not as punishment but as corrective discipline, “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (5).

Removing someone from membership is a protective element of church membership. It protects the soul of the unrepentant person by creating the hopeful desire to be brought back into membership. And, removal is also protective for the flock, as “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (verse 6). Membership maintains the integrity of the people of God, and thus helps protect the name of the one who saved us.

Final Word

Most of the newcomers to our church plant had never been an official member of a church. They had attended, been assimilated into, and then left their previous church in organic and unofficial ways. Those who have now joined us as members have routinely commented how they appreciate making the process more official. They know who their leaders are and what their leaders believe, which makes it easier to follow and submit in faith. They know who they are committing to love and serve and join in community. And they know who isn't included.

Although the language of church membership isn't used in Scripture, the idea is everywhere implied and required. It is how we fulfill the glorious calling to which we've been called. Through membership, we are a sheep in a flock, a stone in a temple, a part of a body, and a member of a church family. We have leaders to follow and care for us, with other Christians to serve and be served by. Membership, when lived out biblically, provides safeguards of biblical discipline to keep us on the straight and narrow path which leads to life.

A CHURCH COVENANT

REHEARSING OUR GOSPEL COMMITMENTS

Brian Chesemore

Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (Louisville, KY)

A few months ago my wife and I were tired of hearing about how much better Costco was than our beloved Sam's Club. Concerned that we might be missing out, we decided to see for ourselves. Sure enough, after about three minutes, we were convinced. We went straight to Customer Service and asked, "Where do we sign up?"

In order to enter the esteemed world of mega-grocers, you have to sign the paperwork to make the deal official. Membership has its privileges—and its responsibilities.

In my early years as a Sovereign Grace pastor, our church had a very thorough membership process. Unlike Costco, this was no simple "just step over here and sign the paperwork" process. Joining entailed not only attending a dozen classes and meeting with a pastor, but also the signing of a membership covenant.

“What in the world is that?” you may rightly ask. The covenant⁶⁶ was carefully crafted and sought to meaningfully express how church members pledge to live life together. In order to formalize one’s membership, signing this document was one of the final steps.

I confess that for me, and probably for most members, signing the document was the only time we truly engaged with its content. Too often prospective members skimmed and signed the agreement and happily moved on. Corporately it functioned as little more than a well-intended formality. And it was never referenced again—maybe akin to the fine print of my now-beloved Costco membership.

Why Have a Membership Covenant?

Why should a local church go to all the trouble to craft such a statement? If it functions as merely a formality, pastors and their ever-faithful administrative assistants have far more important projects to attend to.

But what if that same document could capture and position our churches to think more soberly about the privileges and responsibilities of membership? What if revisiting its content produced a deeper gratefulness for the gospel, a greater longing for holiness, an increased concern for fellow members, and a growing zeal to share the gospel? What if reading it became another corporate moment to delight in the grace of God?

⁶⁶ Some churches prefer to use the terminology of “membership agreement” or “membership statement” to avoid potential confusion associated with the language and significance of the biblical covenants.

Delighting in a Membership Covenant?

When our pastors met to discuss the initial membership process for our young church plant, we unanimously agreed to incorporate a membership covenant. We all recognized the potential for a covenant to drift into mere formality and functional irrelevance. To counter that tendency, we aimed for one that would be rich in content which we could rehearse twice a year as a congregation during our Membership Sundays.

Content of a Covenant

We wanted a church covenant that captures the ecclesiological priorities found in Scripture. What does the Bible say about essential questions such as,

- Exactly who can join my local church?
- How does the gospel inform the priorities and pursuits of my church? What is our core mission?
- How important is it to faithfully gather together? What does our Sunday gathering entail?
- How does the gospel turn me outward in love towards my fellow church members?
- How does Jesus intend to orient my prayers, service, and giving around my church?
- How should we live together amidst the joys and trials of the Christian life?

Just as a Statement of Faith captures the richness of what we believe and unites us around particular doctrinal convictions, a membership covenant clarifies how those glorious doctrines shape our life together in the local church. Such a statement reinforces

how our gospel centrality and doctrinal convictions profoundly shape us as a believing community. Disciples both know and do. In signing a membership covenant, I am in effect telling my fellow members, “This is what you and I can expect of each other.” So these two documents reinforce a burden that God’s people have always cherished; it’s who and what we believe that shapes how we live.

Context of a Covenant

Our church has found tremendous encouragement from corporately reading our covenant twice a year as we welcome new members. On these two Sundays we briefly explain the significance of membership and read the names of each of those joining, inviting them to stand when their names are read. Then we ask all of the members to stand as we read the covenant aloud together. This is consistently a holy moment for our church—where we stand in the presence of God, and offer to him and one another a sincere rehearsal of our commitments. Finally, we close in prayer thanking God for sovereignly placing these new members in our church (1 Cor. 12:18) and asking for his grace to faithfully walk out the covenant together.

If these ideas are new, or if they serve to revive a vision for the use of such a statement, ponder the benefits of the following two steps. First, consider carefully crafting a membership covenant that is rich in content and lends towards heartfelt expression.⁶⁷ Then find

⁶⁷ Editors’ note: Several Sovereign Grace churches use the same Membership Covenant as SGC Louisville, which is a great option for churches and provides another point of continuity among our congregations.

a consistent occasion when your church might be edified in its rehearsal. This practice may surprise you in its impact as your congregation remembers what the Lord has done—and the privilege they have to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called” (Eph. 4.1). May God give our churches an ever-increasing delight in his grace and a corporate resolve to live by that grace.

Here’s How it Looks at Our Church

This is the language of the Membership Covenant of Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville:

Having been brought by God’s sovereign grace to repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ and his saving work, and having been baptized upon our profession of faith, we do now, relying on His grace, solemnly and joyfully affirm our covenant with each other.

We will pray and labor to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, devoted to the glory of God, resting in the gospel of his Son, and dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit.

To that end,

We will not forsake assembling together, but will faithfully attend our corporate worship, treasuring our church’s weekly opportunity to sing, pray, and receive the whole counsel of God’s Word. We will defend and maintain a gospel-centered ministry by upholding and

attending to biblical preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a local church: we will pray for and serve one another, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other, and reject all opportunities to speak or hear gossip or slander. We will instead seek to encourage one another and build each other up in the faith.

We will rejoice with those who rejoice and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

We will seek to proclaim and adorn the gospel of Christ before our family, friends, and neighbors and faithfully transfer the gospel to future generations.

We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of our local church, to the care of our members, and to the spread of the gospel locally and to all nations.

We will, if we move from this place, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the teaching of God's Word.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.
Amen.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The Membership Covenant of Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

THE MOST IMPORTANT DAY OF THE WEEK

THE GIFT OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

Devon Kauflin

Lead Pastor, Grace Church (Clarksburg, MD)

Every Sunday morning offers an endless variety of opportunities. To-do lists can be attacked. We can finish what we started or never got to on Saturday. Or we can sleep in and enjoy a lazy morning with a fresh brew while we binge on Netflix.

Or if you're more adventurous, countless locations vie for our attention (and our children's attention)! Beaches, lakes, sports, pristine golf courses, and hiking trails beckon us to enjoy life to the fullest.

With so many possibilities, it might seem strange that Christians take multiple hours every Sunday morning together in a building with a diverse group of people to sing, pray, read the Bible, listen, and talk to each other. Certainly, we can arrive more aware of duty and obligation than expectation and joy. But that's only because we might have forgotten what makes the church gathering together so significant. How can we ensure that congregational worship is

more than just one good option among many equally appealing options?

Who Is There

First, we want to remember *who* is there. Of course, we'll see friends and family, members of our small group, other church members, and guests. But the one whose presence defines, shapes, and fills every meeting of the church is God himself. As we walk through the doors of whatever building this Sunday morning, we aren't just walking into the presence of other believers but into the very presence of God, the Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of all things.

But isn't God everywhere? Yes. God is everywhere, but he loves to make his presence especially and graciously known wherever his people gather together to worship him. As Paul points out, it is the Spirit of God that shows up through our speaking and through our singing, all for our good (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 5:18-19).

In the late seventeenth century, David Clarkson, the co-pastor and eventual successor to John Owen, composed an essay on why public worship is to be preferred before private. He chose as his text Psalm 87:2: "The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob."⁶⁹ The gates of Zion, Clarkson explains, represent the place where God's people assemble to worship him. Clarkson writes, "It was the Lord's delight in affection to his worship, for which he is said to love the gates of

⁶⁹ David Clarkson, "Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private" *The Practical Works of David Clarkson, Vol. III*. 1865.

Zion, more than all the dwellings of Jacob.”⁷⁰ God is everywhere, but he loves to make his presence known when his people come together to praise his name.

Who We Are

Second, we want to remember who we are. Both Paul and Peter use the metaphor of the church as a building being built together, stone by stone (Eph. 2:22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Each individual isn't a building. Rather, the people of God together make up the building.

This means that the church is now a temple, the place where God's presence is particularly known. Paul reminds the church in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” To be the temple of God serves as an ongoing reminder that God is our God, that we are his people, and that he is with us. This is who we are as we assemble in corporate worship. And as those united to Christ, the assembled church gathers to be “built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22).

Where We Are

Third, when we gather we want to remember where we are. Every Christian parent of young children is familiar with the Sunday morning conversation that includes, “Get your shoes on! We're going to church.” But how does the Bible fill out what is implied in the phrase, “going to church”?

⁷⁰ Ibid.

The epistle to the Hebrews describes in remarkable fashion what is happening: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). This means that when the church assembles to worship through the astonishing grace of God and work of the Spirit, we enter the heavenly places. We join with “innumerable angels” celebrating, saints rejoicing, and through the Spirit’s work, we come into the very presence of “God, the judge of all” (Heb. 12:23-24).

Each week as we gather with the church this is what we get to participate in. This is what we enter into. Though we don’t see it and can’t touch it, this is where we go. And so we go in faith, having “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The spiritual reality that we cannot see is the very thing that we are made for. We are made to worship God. This is what it means to long for God, to look to God, to hope in God.

Satisfying Our Longing

Psalm 42 begins with the psalmist longing for God like a deer pants for flowing streams. What he remembers and longs for are the times he would go with the people of God to the house of God—the temple. He remembers voices joining together in “glad shouts and songs of praise” (Ps. 42:1-4). It isn’t private times of devotion the psalmist thinks about, but the joyful and grateful assembly of God’s people in the presence of God. His antidote to discouragement is a hope in God that takes the shape of corporate worship: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5).

Each week, rather than seeing the church's gathering as one option among a host of other options, we gather to remember what we are made for and how we are to live. We are reoriented to reality that exists in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For that reason, what we do on Sunday morning when the church gathers is far more extraordinary, far more astonishing, than anything else we participate in. For as we assemble for these few moments and participate in the seemingly ordinary activities of public worship, we remember this truth: "Our God comes; he does not keep silence" (Ps. 50:3). Out of his abundant grace, the very God of heaven comes to bless his people.

Now, how could we not eagerly look forward to that each week?

SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN THE CHURCH

Mike Plewniak

Pastor, Cornerstone Church of Knoxville (Knoxville, TN)

I still remember the first symphony I attended. I was in middle school on a field trip that I was not excited about. My 7th grade posse mocked it the whole way there. We joked about “needing a nap anyway” that day. Why couldn’t we go to a football game for a field trip, or better yet, wrestling! We filed in, took our seats, and waited with grumbling hearts for it to start.

When the first note struck something changed. I was mesmerized. It took my breath away. I couldn’t comprehend how all those different instruments could come together in perfect unison to play a piece of music so thrilling. I studied each one, tried to pull it out from the group, but I was drawn to the overall sound. Violins and cellos, trumpets and tubas, bass drums and crashing cymbals, though all playing different things came together in perfect unity.

That is how spiritual gifts are to work in a local church.

The variety of “instruments” playing their part, each one coming in at the right moment. The unity this produces is a beautiful work of art. And it’s all conducted and arranged by the Holy Spirit.

This is the message of 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good ... All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

This passage (and almost every spiritual gifts passage in the New Testament) addresses two distinct yet simultaneous realities occurring when we use spiritual gifts: unity and diversity.

The Unity of the Holy Spirit

Wayne Grudem defines a spiritual gift as “any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.”⁷¹ Paul emphasizes to the Corinthians that these abilities come from the “same Spirit” and “same Lord” and “same God.”

Imagine an orchestra where every member was playing from a different sheet of music, each one wanted to be heard above the other instruments. Now, imagine this in the Church of Jesus Christ.

⁷¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 396.

If you've ever studied Corinthians, you know the church loved the gifts of the Spirit, but they also misused them. It seems spiritual gifts were used for self-promotion and competing to see who was most "spiritual." The result was division. While zealous for spiritual gifts, the Corinthians lacked an appreciation for all the ways God's Spirit was manifesting himself around them.

The main point is not individual expression but corporate edification. It is not primarily wondering "what is my gift?" The point is to ask the question "what is the Spirit doing in the church?"

The Holy Spirit does many powerful things in our lives. For all those in Christ, the Holy Spirit has regenerated you and given you new spiritual life (Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are a child of God (Rom. 8:16). The Holy Spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2). The Holy Spirit is sanctifying you to be more like Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

The Holy Spirit is making you wise (Eph. 1:17), guiding you into truth (John 16:13), helping you (John 14:16), bearing fruit in your life (Gal. 5:22-23), pouring out God's love (Rom. 5:5), helping you pray (Rom. 8:26), and empowering you for evangelism (Acts 1:8).

The same Spirit that does these mighty works also empowers us with spiritual gifts. They are not given to us so that we might appear powerful, impressive, important, or extraordinary. They are given so that we might build one another up, and so that Christ may be glorified by his Church. He is glorified when we proclaim his gospel, care for his people, and serve his body. The Holy Spirit is empowering us for that very purpose.

A Diversity of Spiritual Gifts

Just as there is one Spirit empowering these abilities, there is also a diversity of gifts the Spirit is empowering. There are “varieties of gifts,” “varieties of service,” and “varieties of activities.” This is essential for a healthy church. An orchestra of tubas is not the goal! We need all the instruments playing their part.

The New Testament has several passages listing spiritual gifts. I encourage you to take a minute and review them: 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11.

You’ll notice the diversity in these lists: prophecy alongside serving, healing alongside administration, helping alongside miracles. And it continues: giving, teaching, acts of mercy, leading.

The gifts are so diverse within the body of Christ that theologians do not believe we have an exhaustive list in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit knows exactly what each church needs to accomplish the purpose God has set for it. Spiritual gifts are not a “set it and forget it” Holy Spirit work. The Spirit is continually manifesting himself in the life of the church by empowering us to serve others. Just as our needs change, so does the gifting the Spirit provides to meet those needs.

You might not think of yourself as being prophetic. But as your small group is praying, God might give you a picture or word that encourages the weary, builds up the faint hearted, or consoles someone suffering. The Spirit can do that. You might not think you have the gift of healing, but your heart might be breaking for

someone who is sick and you might pray for them and God might heal them. The Spirit can do that.

You might not think you have the gift of helping, but then you see a family with sick kids and you have the idea of going to their house and cleaning, doing laundry, or bringing them a meal. Where did that idea come from? God! Who empowers you to do that? God. The Spirit can do that.

If we want the church to be healthy and strong, others to be encouraged and edified, the gospel to be proclaimed and lived out in our midst, then we should “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 14:1). We don’t have the option of admiring gifts from a safe distance. We are called to pursue them, because they are not really about us; they are about God, the church, others. They are “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7).

God is at work building his church. The Holy Spirit is manifesting himself all around us. The orchestra is tuned. The conductor is taking his place. The crowd is quieting. Are you ready to play your part?

SINGLES IN THE CHURCH

Andy Farmer

Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Twenty-five years ago Sovereign Grace asked me to write a book for singles in their *Pursuit of Godliness* study series. The result was *The Rich Single Life*, which came out in a small wave of books on singleness in Christian publishing and actually did fairly well. A quarter century later I thought I'd dig up a copy and see how the book has aged over the years.

Overall, there wasn't too much to cringe about. I'm not sure I'd try to reach for cultural relevance by quoting Madonna now. And I came pretty hard against online dating, which seems quaint in a world where all of our relationships are now navigated to a considerable degree on social media. On the plus side, I made a strong appeal for singles to "express your unique attributes as a man or woman under Christ in this gender-blended culture."⁷²

But I know for a fact I had no clue what gender issues we'd be facing now. I'm most grateful that the "richness" of

⁷² Andy Farmer, *The Rich Single Life* (Gaithersburg, MD: PDI Ministries, 1998), 35.

gospel-centeredness that drove our publishing back then is the main theme of the book.

One area I do feel like was a miss was a lack of emphasis on the church. All I say about the church is in a three-page section on personal impact under the heading, “What we are a part of is more important than the part we play.” I’m scratching my head on why I didn’t address the role of the church for singles more robustly in the book. Maybe a reason is that the intended audience for the book was Christian singles, and we all knew that all Christians, single or otherwise, go to church. I’m not sure how much that logic fit the reality back then, and I’m very confident it doesn’t work a quarter century later.

In the 1990’s, the successful church had a successful singles ministry. A successful church singles ministry was attraction-based; it was a magnet location for single Christians who were looking to belong and build relationships in a Christian context. For singles it gave purpose beyond work, connection beyond loneliness, and a potential place to find a life partner. For the church, a successful singles ministry brought a sense of life and vitality to the congregation, but also fresh troops free to serve, well-resourced potential givers, a pool of potential babysitters, and the raw material for new families in the church.

This classic singles ministry concept worked, until it didn’t. Singles ministry as a method for gathering did produce energy in churches, connected single believers in community and healthy relationships, and percolated outreach. But the methodology was prone to flocking, where singles would tend to float around

various churches looking for the new hot spot. Churches without the resources to build vibrant ministry for singles often lost their single adults to churches that did. And the system didn't serve singles all that well either.

In churches where there was segmented ministry for single adults, a sense of being an appendage to the real (as in "marriage and family") membership of the church was inescapable. The singles ministry approach also didn't facilitate smooth life transitions in the church. College-age singles graduated and found themselves wandering into groups of folks a decade or more older. Singles who got married saw their whole relational world change at the end of a honeymoon. Divorced and widowed people and single parents always struggled to fit in. The calls and needs of men and women in their mature years cannot be conflated with those just starting adult life in their twenties under the situational category of "single".

So what now for "the rich single life" in the church? First, the same biblical truths for singleness that were relevant twenty-five years ago are relevant now. God's kingdom has no classes of people (Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11). Singleness is a state of opportunity, not of purgatory (1 Cor. 7). Our identity in Christ fills every season of our lives with dignity and purpose (Eph. 2:4-10). Contentment with where I am in life is a gospel pursuit, not a function of what I have or do not have (Phil. 4:12-13). God's church is a community of saints, sinners, and sufferers (thank you Mike Emlet for this rubric), therefore we are always more alike than we are different (Eph. 4:1-6).

The Rich Single Life in the Church Today

There are some big things that have happened over the last twenty-five years that should shape how the church approaches singleness. In no particular order, here are a few.

Cultural Shift

The traditional role of marriage and family in the church is not what it used to be. Churches are no longer filling up with people raising families looking for a supportive environment. Marriages and families in the church are increasingly being shaped by ideas and commitments outside the church. The practical result in my view is that people can carry on their day-to-day business in the church as individuals, not always as covenant partners and families. This is not healthy or wise, but it has softened the wall of separation between the experience of being single and the experience of not being single.

Social Media

The uploading of huge portions of our lives into social media has created layers of virtual community and connection that were not available to singles in the previous century. The Saturday night singles gathering is no longer the place where one goes to feel a part of something.

Pocket-Sized Internet

The explosion of streaming content and hand-held entertainment options (including news feeds and podcasts) has sucked all of us into a world of escapes that we share at various levels. I may be at a party and have no idea how to relate to my single brother and his spiritual experience, but we can spend a whole night following

fantasy teams, debating the quality of Marvel spin-off shows, and trading funny memes. And married and non-married people can bond with someone on the basis of common thinking on political or social issues without having to address different seasons of life.

A Way Forward

So what is a church to do for its singles in these days? A few suggestions:

- Care for your marriages and families, but preach and teach to the whole church.
- Build resilient community structures that allow all of your people to go through life situations and transitions in the blessing of long term relationships, not merely (or exclusively) season of life compatibility.
- Conscientiously provide resources and ministry for single adults in your church without treating them as if singleness is their defining life experience.
- Purpose to include single adults for opportunities to lead in the church.
- Prepare your church for the single adults who may come in through outreach. What pastor doesn't love to see Jesus-loving single disciples throw themselves into its ministry. But that isn't the only kind of single person who will come. In addition to the divorced and widowed and single parents who have become dear members of our churches over the years, there may also come unmarried cohabitating couples with children, survivors of sexual

abuse or domestic violence, people who have struggled with substance abuse or mental disorders. Can we find a place for these folks as well?

God willing, the singles in the church over the next quarter century will also include refugees from the gender and sexuality chaos to which the world around us genuflects, but which has no soul and no sustaining ethos besides self-exaltation. If we can be a place where people fleeing that disastrous social experiment find the redemption and rest that only Christ offers, we may see in our churches a whole new chapter for the rich single life.

THE VALUE OF WOMEN IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Jace Hudson

Lead Pastor, Covenant of Grace Church (Copley, OH)

While Scripture clearly teaches that God has given men the responsibility to lead in the home and church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Tim. 2:12; 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9), this does not mean that in all other matters men and women are interchangeable. They are not. To assume so is a very egalitarian idea.

The project of egalitarianism has been to file down the uniqueness of the sexes. Equality *for* all has become equality *of* all. Our culture argues that men and women are equal in worth and in every other way. Women can go off to war while men stay home and raise the kids. The two sexes are interchangeable. But think about that. If men and women are interchangeable, neither is indispensable. Said another way, if the two are interchangeable, either is dispensable.

This is where egalitarianism leads, but complementarianism goes somewhere altogether different. We believe men and women are

inherently equal in worth but that each uniquely contributes to the health and fruitfulness of the church. Yes, God has given men the responsibility to lead, but leadership doesn't mean "superior," and leadership cannot do it all. Men cannot do it all! Women in all their glorious complementarity are needed to bring their unique gifts and indispensable contributions. The church *needs* a feminine touch, and this makes women as equally valuable as men are to its mission.

Celebrating Countless Contributions

In general terms, much could be said about the invaluable contribution of women to Christianity. Examples in Scripture abound. There were the women who traveled with Jesus and provided generously for his mission (Luke 8:2-3). Paul commended Phoebe as a trusted and valued helper, Prisca as a hostess of a house church, Mary as a hard worker, Junia as a fellow prisoner, and Tryphaena and Tryphosa as workers in the Lord (Rom. 16:1-16). Women were known in their communities for acts of kindness and charity (Acts 9:36-42), they nurtured future leaders in the church (Acts 18:2; 2 Tim. 1:5), and women provided hospitality for house churches (Acts 16:40). Scripture demonstrates how women worked in various ways for the cause of the gospel, laboring side by side with Paul as fellow workers (Phil. 4:2-3).

In his excellent book, *Men and Women in the Church*, Kevin DeYoung stresses the many ways women can make a profound and lasting impact in the church:

Women can minister to the sick, the dying, the mentally impaired, and the physically handicapped. They can share

their faith, share their resources, and open their home to strangers. They can write, counsel, mentor, organize, administrate, design, plan, and come alongside others.

They can pray.

They can serve on committees of the church. They can come alongside the elders and deacons in difficult situations involving women or those needing a woman's perspective.

They can minister to single moms, new moms, breast cancer survivors, and abuse victims. They can bring meals, sew curtains, send care packages, and throw baby showers. They can do sports ministries, lead women's Bible studies, teach systematic theology to other women, and plan mission trips. They can teach children. They can raise their kids to the glory of God, and they can embrace singleness as a gift from God.

I pray for women who love to cook and quilt and work in the nursery. I pray for women (not the male elders, but women) to counsel almost-divorced wives and mentor young ladies and teach the Bible and good doctrine to other women (oh, how we need women who love the Bible and good doctrine!).

Women can help widows; they can care for those struggling with the remorse of abortion; and they can show the glory of the gospel in racial and ethnic

reconciliation. And they can do all of the above cross-culturally in unreached places and with the unwanted peoples of the world. In other words, there are ten thousand things women can be doing in ministry. Pastors especially need to make this point abundantly and repetitively clear.⁷³

This is indeed a point that pastors must make abundantly and repetitively clear. DeYoung also encourages pastors to have women share publicly in appropriate ways:

As a general rule, I believe most complementarian pastors could do a better job finding biblically allowable ways to use women in church gatherings to pray, to relate a story of God's grace, or to share an encouraging word.⁷⁴

Among the many ways women are valuable in the life and mission of the church (and there are many!), I want to highlight three commonly overlooked and undervalued contributions found in particular callings and seasons of life.

The Invaluable Contribution of Wives and Mothers

Healthy churches are built with healthy families, and for wives and mothers, a woman's ministry is uniquely focused on nurturing and serving her family. We see this right at the start of Scripture when

⁷³ Kevin DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 94-95.

⁷⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 62.

Eve was made for the specific purpose of being Adam's "helper" (Gen. 2:18). Adam was responsible for working and keeping the ground from which he was made (Gen. 2:7, 15), while Eve was responsible for serving and nurturing the man from which she was made (Gen. 2:18, 24-25). All of this was God's plan *before* the fall. Man would primarily advance the cause of God *in the world*, and woman would primarily advance his cause *in the home*. A wife and mother could (and should) contribute more than service to her family, but never less (Prov. 31:10-31).

Turning to the New Testament, the same focus remains on a woman's ministry to her family. She is to submit to her own husband, as to the Lord (Eph. 5:22). Women are to work out their salvation through childbearing (1 Tim. 2:15). With their husbands, they should bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), and children should learn the faith through their mothers and grandmothers (2 Tim. 1:5). Younger widows are to marry, bear children, and manage their home (1 Tim. 5:14), while older women are to train younger women to love their husbands and children and to work at home (Titus 2:3-5).

When it comes to the question of how a wife and mother should steward her time and direct her labor, wisdom is required, and decisions will vary from one family to another. We should never lay down rules that are not given in Scripture. But we do need to value what God values. And we should be concerned when a growing number of young married couples embrace cultural assumptions about career in a way that doesn't give sufficient attention to the importance of the family, including what Scripture

says about the blessings of many children (Ps. 127:3-5) and what Scripture says about the unique responsibilities a mother has in the home (Titus 2:4-5, Prov. 31:10-31).

When a wife and mother supports her husband, raises her children, and orders a warm and hospitable home, she's not just doing her half of the chores. She's living out God's good design for women. Nurturing a life-giving home powerfully advances the cause of God and distinctively adds to the health and fruitfulness of the church's mission. Such women will be blessed by their children, praised by their husbands (Prov. 31:28), and ought to be honored by their pastors and their church (Rom. 13:7).

The Invaluable Contribution of Single Women

Singleness is not a curse; it is God's gift. It is not a problem, and neither is marriage a right. Both are given as divine gifts (1 Cor. 7:7). And like every other spiritual gift, they are given for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). Singleness is a gift *to* the church. God gives it for the upbuilding of his body. So unmarried women are not wallflowers waiting to be plucked. Neither are they imprisoned in a sub-Christian experience. These single women have *a lot* to contribute as good stewards of God's varied grace (1 Pet. 4:10).

The Proverbs 31 woman is a portrait of the excellent wife, but we often forget that it was written to instruct a young man on what to look for in a *single* woman. The *role* that's described in this passage is that of a wife, but the character and conduct are what all women should desire. She is a savvy businesswoman, skilled cook, and tasteful homemaker. She speaks with wisdom, joyfully trusts the

Lord, and is thoughtful of others. This godly woman is ambitious but always puts others first. She opens her hand to the poor and reaches her hand out to the needy.

This is all included in God's portrait of femininity. And a single woman can use her God-given freedom from the responsibilities of a family (1 Cor. 7:32-34) to pursue her femininity for the church's good. An unmarried woman might meaningfully contribute to the church's mission by vocational faithfulness, generous giving, volunteering to serve (like Mary Magdalene, Luke 8:2), meeting with unbelievers, going on mission trips (Rom. 16:3-16), investing her time in discipling others, hosting a small group in her home, devoting herself to prayer and fasting (like Anna, Luke 2:36-37), making and delivering meals, or in countless other ways.

The Invaluable Contribution of Older Women

In Titus 2:1-10, Paul teaches how women adorn the gospel through their femininity. By cultivating the qualities listed in this passage – love for their husbands, care for their children, a well-ordered home, and gracious character – women present the gospel as attractive, impressive, and pleasing to a watching world. Women do this uniquely through their femininity, and older women are specifically given the responsibility to cultivate this in the church (Titus 2:3-8).

Some unique difficulties women face can be hard to discuss in detail and at length with male pastors. But this is where godly, older women can serve so effectively in the church by sharing their time, life experiences, and encouragement through Scripture.

Younger women *need* older women to disciple, mentor, and care for them. Indeed, it is one facet of fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), as mature women “make disciples” by helping a rising generation “observe all that [Jesus] commanded.” The investment of older women into younger women is an essential part of a healthy church’s mission, and pastors would do well to promote this kind of ministry among the women of the church.

Gender: Different and Indispensable

While the battle of the sexes rages on in our culture, God’s glorious design of male and female presents the church with an unprecedented opportunity. The biblical vision of manhood and womanhood, equally made in his image, positions us to honor the equality and value of women in the highest way possible.

Scripture’s presentation of God-ordained distinctions between the sexes provides all of us clarity and faith in pursuing our respective callings. Contrary to our culture’s assumptions, gender means something. Men and women are not interchangeable—they are far more significant than that. And neither is dispensable. And so, as complementarians, we are freed to experience God’s grace through his wise design for us as men and women. This means far more than preserving the responsibility of men to lead. We must also promote and pursue the unique and invaluable contributions women make to the church’s mission.

CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH

Marty Machowski

Executive Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Without children, a local church will grow old. The once bustling lobby and sanctuary grow quiet and still. The remaining congregation ages year by year until merely a handful of senior members remain. The church becomes increasingly unattractive to new families searching for a church home and, in the end, must close its doors.

That was the condition of the Malvern Baptist Church when Nick Kidwell inquired into renting space from the historic church. With only fifteen senior members left attending services and no children, Malvern Baptist stood as an edifice of quiet stone with no echo sounding off its walls. The multiple classrooms that once served as the training ground for the next generation were now leased to outside tenants to help cover the upkeep costs for the two-hundred-year-old church building.

But everything changed the day Valley Creek Church and its forty children poured through the stone doorway, up the stairs, and into

the sanctuary. The sound of family and the cry of an infant over the patter of feet brought life and, with it, joy. The original members of Malvern Baptist shared how much they loved seeing the kids all around. Life is what children bring to a church. Though Malvern Baptist's membership dwindled in the preceding years to the point of death, in the months since Valley Creek was planted dozens of adults and children now call Valley Creek their church home.

When your church is flush with children it is easy to take them for granted or even complain of too much running around or noise during the service. *"Would somebody please get that crying baby out of the sanctuary?"* But hundreds of churches hope and pray that even just one family with children would join their congregation to give them a needed shot in the arm.

It is vitally important that we celebrate and welcome the children that pass through our doors. It is also critical that we protect and guard the children in our care, looking to partner with their parents in passing on the gospel to the next generation.

Welcoming Children into your Church

Jesus welcomed the little children that the administratively minded disciples tried to turn away. "Let the little children come to me," Jesus told them (Matt. 19:14). Children are not a bother; they are a blessing we must welcome. When a family steps through our church's front door, let's ensure they are greeted with a smiling face and helped to find their way. Remember, the first two minutes of a new guest's experience shapes initial impressions of your congregation. Families with kids want to know, "Is there a place

for my children here?” A warm greeting to the parents and a joyous welcome of the children, along with directions to your children’s ministry, answers a resounding “yes.”

It helps if the entrance to your children’s ministry is clearly visible from where folks first come in. If your ministry is hidden down a hallway, decorate the entrance and add fun signage that directs families in the right direction. Have children’s ministry staff on the lookout for new families, ready to escort them through the registration process and guide them to the proper classrooms. If children participate in the service, post families on the lookout for guests with children ready to greet and guide them to a seat in the sanctuary, offering to answer any questions they have.

Adding events to your church calendar that include children, such as a summer Vacation Bible School, hosting a homeschool ministry, starting an Awana program, or hosting children’s sporting programs, all communicate—children are welcome here.

We recently began a ministry for eighteen to thirty-five year old adults. The ministry we call 20-30 is for both single and married people. By offering childcare, we drew in some young married couples who would otherwise not have come. Childcare communicates an awareness of the needs families have. It provides an opportunity for mom and dad to receive ministry and a safe place for children to form lasting friendships.

These goals require that we think through our Children’s Ministry relationally. As we do, we must also think through our Children’s Ministry through the lens of security.

Safeguarding the Children under Your Care

Protecting our children is a serious responsibility. Jesus taught, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42 NIV).

Every time we gather children, whether for instruction or simply to watch over them, we are responsible for their safety and well-being. Carpeted, child-safe rooms ensure active and curious children are less likely to injure themselves. Holding to a policy of turning away sick children can reduce the spread of infections. Monitoring snacks vigilantly can help prevent a severe allergic reaction.

Outside of these housekeeping safety measures are the more serious safety concerns such as protecting against sexual predators and preparing an emergency response plan. The best defense against child sexual abuse is a comprehensive plan that includes training, background checks, screening volunteers, and classroom safety policies. Deepak Reju wrote a helpful book, *On Guard: Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse at Church*. In this accessible resource, Deepak outlines eleven straightforward strategies to protect children from abuse.

Providing a copy of Deepak’s book to all your key children’s ministry leaders and teachers and reviewing it with them equips your team to ensure they know how to keep the children safe. Training through an organization such as MinistrySafe (ministrysafesafe.com) is available for your parents and workers,

which will help them identify the grooming behaviors of sexual predators.⁷⁵

While local fire codes require churches to prepare for the event of a fire with adequate exits, fire alarms, and classroom evacuation maps, most churches are not prepared or know what to do in an active shooter incident. FEMA offers an online free active shooter preparedness course called *Active Shooter: What You Can Do*. Encouraging your teachers to take this online course will help them protect your children in the event of an active shooter incident. Bottom line, we need to protect the children under our care.

Discipling the Next Generation with Gospel Truth

I love Asaph's declaration in Psalm 78 when he says, "We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done" (Ps. 78:4). While it is clear from Scripture that passing our gospel faith to children is primarily the responsibility of parents, Asaph calls the congregation of Israel to partner with parents. Asaph understood the importance of passing on the glorious deeds of the Lord to the next generation and partnering with parents in this task. We (that is, the congregation) will not hide them (the glorious deeds of the Lord) from their children (the children of the gathered people of God.) Whether your church offers a formal children's ministry or includes children in the main service, we share a responsibility to disciple the next generation.

⁷⁵ In fact, the importance and value of this training is so significant that Sovereign Grace Churches makes this training available for partner churches at no cost to them.

The gospel is the most glorious of all God's glorious deeds, and it alone has the power to transform the hearts of our children and ensure the life of our church carries from one generation to the next.

Asaph wrote,

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments (Ps. 78:5–7).

The most effective training plan for the next generation is a cooperative strategy where the church equips the parents for their role as the primary discipler and then partners with them through the teaching the church offers. If children remain in the sanctuary for the main message, the preaching pastor must remember that children are in the service and address them in the message on a regular basis. For churches with an organized children's ministry, keeping your teaching gospel-centered will ensure the children receive that life-transforming truth. A curriculum with a home component can facilitate a robust partnership between church and home.

The Gospel Project offered by Lifeway is a gospel-centered chronological Bible study for adults and children. *The Gospel Project* is designed so that adults and children study the same content.

The Gospel Story Curriculum offered by New Growth Press also provides a gospel-centered chronological Bible study for the classroom. In addition, the companion family devotionals, *Long Story Short* and *Old Story New* provide parents with prepared family devotions that follow the classroom instruction. By using one of these programs and encouraging parents to use the family devotions, you can ensure the children of your church understand how to apply the gospel to their lives.

Putting it All Together

Should a guest family with children walk into your church and receive a warm greeting at the door, experience a well-organized, safe children's ministry, and discover help for their role in discipling their children, they are likely to return the following Sunday. Families who are equipped and well cared for are far less likely to leave your church. Why is this? It is because churches that provide such care are rare. We want our children to grow up with a positive outlook on their church experience—a place of friendship and discipleship where gospel seeds were sown in love which later sprouted and transformed their hearts.

Two hundred years from now, if you've provided a safe, welcoming environment and solid gospel discipleship for parents and children, the patter of little feet and the newborn's cry will yet echo off your walls. New families visiting will find a home, and their children will grow up to take the place of the generations before them.

THE BEAUTY OF ETHNIC HARMONY IN THE CHURCH

Mark Prater

Executive Director, Sovereign Grace Churches (Glen Mills, PA)

How do you define beauty? One definition that I found helpful is this: “Beauty is a quality that makes something especially good or attractive.”⁷⁶ There are many qualities about the church of Jesus Christ that make it especially good and attractive, one of them being ethnic harmony. When men and women of different ethnicities lovingly and peaceably share life together in the church they provide a good, attractive, and distinctive picture of gospel fruit in a world filled with ethnic disharmony.

God Created All Ethnicities

One of the qualities that makes God’s creation beautiful is that he created people of different ethnicities, in his image. God’s creative beauty is displayed in people who are black and white, Hispanic and Asian, European and Middle Eastern. What enhances that

⁷⁶ Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/beauty>.

beauty is when people from every tribe, tongue, and nation live in harmony together in the church for the glory of God.

However, because of the fall in Genesis 3, things are not the way they are supposed to be. God's beautiful design for harmony was corrupted by sin and we now live in a fallen world marred by disharmony, including ethnic disharmony. But God declared in Genesis 3:15 that he would conquer sin by sending One who would bruise the head of Satan. This sin-conquering work would be for people from all ethnicities.

God promised as much to Abraham when he said, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). We know that this sin-conquering blessing was not just for Abraham's physical descendants but for all those who place their faith in Christ.

As Paul writes,

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith...
There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:26, 28-29).

God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ in the gospel, where the blessing of salvation is offered to people of all ethnicities.

God Saves From All Ethnicities

One of the qualities that makes the gospel beautiful is that it reaches people of different ethnicities granting them salvation, uniting them in Christ, and creating harmony where there was disharmony. Paul writes,

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph. 2:13-16).

In other words, there will be no true ethnic harmony apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ because our sin-conquering Savior broke down the dividing wall of hostility and united people of all ethnicities in him.

God Desires the Unity of All Ethnicities

One of the qualities that makes the church beautiful is that it is filled with people from different ethnicities who love and serve one another. Ethnic harmony is an area of recent growth in Sovereign Grace. We celebrate God's grace at work there, and we pray for more. As I talk with the pastors and members of Sovereign Grace churches, I hear a clear desire to grow in ethnic diversity and ethnic harmony.

That desire springs from the gospel itself and not a desire to artificially create ethnic harmony by our own efforts. It's a gospel desire, not a cultural trend. It's a right desire that the pastors and members of our churches have because only the gospel will produce authentic, genuine, lasting ethnic harmony that brings Christ glory. Therefore, with a dependence on God, and with a hope in the power of the gospel, let's pray for ethnic harmony, share the gospel with all people in our community, and seek ways to share life with the people of different ethnicities in our churches.

Of course, your ability to do these things is dependent upon the context your church is in. However, keep in mind that the world is changing, we are more globally diverse now than in the past. You may be surprised at how God answers earnest prayers for diversity. Maybe people from different ethnicities will move near you.

Presently, we have partner churches, or churches pursuing partnership in Sovereign Grace, from at least 21 different nations. Our churches are filled with Filipinos, Australians, Indians, Nepalese, Koreans, Africans, Germans, British, Italians, Belarusians, Jamaicans, Mexicans, Costa Ricans, Colombians, Bolivians, Brazilians, Canadians, Americans, and others. My hope is that through missions trips, conferences, and other events we can learn from one another, serve one another, and increasingly experience the beauty of ethnic harmony that the gospel creates.

Ethnic Diversity in Heaven

One of the qualities that makes Scripture's portrayals of heaven so glorious is the beauty of ethnic harmony that we will enjoy. The book of Revelation portrays it so well.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" ... and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."
(Rev. 7:9-10, 12).

One day you and I will stand in the midst of a great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, and people singing in the most beautiful worship service we have ever experienced. It will be beautiful because people of all ethnicities who have been redeemed by the Lamb will sing with one voice praising the One who conquered sin and broke down the dividing wall of hostility. My prayer for Sovereign Grace is that God would use this beautiful portrait of a future reality in eternity to stir us to pray for ethnic harmony so that the beauty and the power of the gospel can be revealed in our churches for the glory of God alone.

DEVELOPING LEADERS IN THE CHURCH

Greg Dirnberger

Senior Pastor, Emmaus Road Church (Sioux Falls, SD)

A significant weight that church leaders bear is the need for more leaders in the church. Some, perhaps many, who are reading this are feeling the burden to identify and deploy capable and trustworthy servants in your church to fulfill a necessary task. If only you had 2-3 more Community Group Leaders, or a point person to oversee the Children’s Ministry, or that third “called and qualified” elder for a fuller plurality.

Our focus on developing leaders in the church can be dominated by the need to enlist workers for the various activities of the church. This process begins with a “slot to fill” followed by the hard recruiting work of finding people to fill those many slots. The anxious energy spent on discerning and developing “who” to do “what” can be overwhelming. And this doesn’t even begin to address questions such as, *What exactly are we developing? Competencies? Character? “Soft skills” such as self-awareness or others-awareness?*

There is much to consider. Nevertheless, we understand the task of developing others as central to a spiritual leader's Christ-given job description.

He gave ... shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13).

Spiritual leaders are Jesus' gift to the church for the purpose of developing spiritual leaders in the church.

Spiritual Leadership

In the 1980's, John Piper gave an unpublished, unrecorded teaching on leadership.⁷⁷ He said, "I define spiritual leadership as knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God's methods to get them there in reliance on God's power." God-centered spiritual leadership, then,

demands that the goal be not merely man's goal, but God's goal. And the methods for mustering a following be not merely man's methods, but God's methods. And that all the labor expended to get there must be expended in reliance not on man, but on God.

⁷⁷ A version of this teaching can now be found in *The Marks of a Spiritual Leader*, by John Piper.

What if we were to consider God's method by which he takes the initiative for developing leaders who will accomplish his purpose? What would we learn that might inform and inspire our methods and goals for developing leaders in the church? According to the apostle Paul, "We are his [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Developing people for the work of ministry is what God is already doing. We are his workmanship created for works *he* has prepared, in advance, for us to walk in. He chose us and pre-planned tasks for each of us, according to his sovereign and saving grace. God is the ultimate leadership developer.

Salvation and service are joined together in the person and work of Jesus. Developing people in our church for the work of ministry is a practical implication of our gospel centrality. Therefore, developing leaders in the church starts with the gospel, is empowered by the gospel, and is fruitful on account of the gospel. The "heavy lifting" of developing leaders has already been done.

Then consider this. Every Christian has strengths and abilities with which they were born. Every Christian also has skills and competencies which they have learned, and in which they've been trained. Every aspect of who we are in Christ, including temperament, talents, affinities, aptitudes, interests, education, language, culture, family, ethnicity, limitations, are all an expression and fulfillment of God's sovereign workmanship.

But, perhaps, the most remarkable aspect of God’s developmental process in our lives is our lives themselves. The Psalmist observes, “in [his] book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:16).

Our entire lives are an epic story authored by God. Every relationship, every transition, every gain, every loss, all the sweetest experiences of our lives, and all the saddest experiences of our lives were written for us in God’s book. He composed them all “beforehand” as developmental steps to prepare us for the works he planned for us “beforehand.” God is not making it up as he goes along. He is the ultimate leadership developer.

So, what do we learn from God’s developmental process in our lives that might inform our steps for developing leaders in the church?

Leaders Are Developed Biblically

If spiritual leadership begins (and ends) with knowing “where God wants people to be,” then the entirety of our development work must be governed and guided by all that God has communicated through the Bible. According to our Statement of Faith, God “has revealed himself through specific words, that we might come to a fuller knowledge of his character and will, learning what is necessary for salvation and life.”⁷⁸ Whatever else our development of leaders includes, equipping them for careful interpretation and right handling of God’s Word is foundational.

⁷⁸ *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, “The Scriptures.”

Leaders Are Developed Relationally

Reflecting even briefly on the most significant influences in our development as a leader will take us back to individuals whose example, or ideas, or vision, or teaching, or values we chose to follow. And often those who had the greatest impact were those who came alongside us, paid attention to us, asked meaningful questions, and sought to really know us.

Isn't that essentially how God has shaped us—walking with us, communing with us, offering his time and attention to us in Christ Jesus? One writer suggests that the "language of telling people what to think and what to do dominates most leadership paradigms in the church."⁷⁹ Whether that's true or not—and I'm grateful it's not been my experience in Sovereign Grace—I'm persuaded that our potential and emerging leaders need help in cultivating the crucial skills and practices of asking good questions, developing curiosity, understanding what it means to be fully present for others, and a growing awareness of what it's like to be "on the other side of you."

Leaders Are Developed in Community

When I consider the most transformative and fruitful learnings in my life, they have consistently happened in the context of a small and committed group of fellow believers. So, over and over, I have repeated the simple process of inviting 8-12 people to make a 9-10 month commitment to gather weekly, to know and hear one another's joys and sorrows, cares and fears. I invite them to pray

⁷⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Deep Mentoring* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 8.

and worship together, to learn together, to eat together, and to recreate together. Ministry flows relationally. Ministry is unleashed relationally. Ministry leaders are shaped relationally. Isn't this why our Sovereign Grace Pastors College leaves such an indelible impact on those who participate in this cohort-style of learning? They not only grow theologically—they grow relationally.

Leaders are Developed in the “School of Affliction”

An essential aspect of God's development process in the life of spiritual leaders is the work he gets done by walking us through hard things. It is in those deep valleys where we learn to engage his kingship. We get better acquainted with the man of sorrows and experience the kind of comfort and resilience only the Spirit of Jesus can supply. The apostle Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Of course, we do not build disorienting or disheartening experiences into our developmental plans. But it is crucial to train our potential and emerging leaders with the capacity to frame their setbacks and sufferings as “transformational windows” through which God makes them deeper, wiser, and more tender-hearted. Gospel-shaped meekness is a trait that opens the door to significant influence.

Andrew Fuller once preached,

Perhaps the best instruction, the most useful learning, that any Christian minister can attain, without any disparagement of other kinds of learning, is that which is attained in the school of affliction. It is by this he becomes able to feel, to sympathize, and to speak a word in season to them that are weary.⁸⁰

Leaders are Developed Over Time

When it comes to developing leaders, we tend to be in a hurry. The needs are urgent, and the clock is ticking. But God develops leaders through a lifetime of lessons.⁸¹ His best practice is not to be hasty in their deployment. Dr. Harv Powers writes,

We navigate a lifelong formation process as leaders. At each stage we gain new competencies, glean new meaning, face the crisis points in our lives, and discover (often painfully) the ways in which we still need to grow. Counterintuitively, God uses these very events to unleash our redemptive influence.⁸²

⁸⁰ Andrew Fuller, “All Things Working Together for Good” *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller, vol. 1* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 391.

⁸¹ Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 1988), 27.

⁸² Harv Powers, *Redemptive Leadership* (Illumify Media Global, 2018), 15.

So, be patient with your potential and emerging leaders. God is not done developing them yet. Even in the process of sanctification the Lord is refining them to be workers for his glory. In his sovereign plan, God is taking his time developing each leader to conform them to his will.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

WORSHIP, EDIFICATION, AND WITNESS

Leo Parris

Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Prior to pastoral ministry, I taught in a school that saw manageable and measurable objectives as the key to turning around failing public schools. They yielded impressive initial results by pushing a mission of “Excellence, no Excuses,” even being name-dropped by a president.⁸³

This progress makes sense to us, even if our names have never claimed headlines. Whether you are a potty-training mom geared up for war or a CEO steering a massive corporate ship, a clear mission is pivotal to avoiding a mess. The most productive among us know to keep objectives manageable, measurable, and close to that which is central.

⁸³ Barack Obama, “On Education Reform at the National Urban League Centennial Conference.” Delivered at Washington Convention Center. 07/29/2010. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamaurbanleaguecentennial.htm>

What about the church's mission? More than the individual Christian's calling, what are we called to do as a whole and keep at the center of our activity?

God's Word blows our manageable and measurable expectations completely out of the water. The church's mission is breathtakingly ambitious: worship, edification, and witness.⁸⁴

Worship

From the beginning, God made mankind and then formed a people to be his treasured kingdom of worshipers who were called to invite all nations to join in their song of gladness (Exod. 19:5-6). So too the new covenant church.

Our churches consist of living stones, joined in Christ as a temple, "to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). We were made and saved for worship.

What is our central aim? The glory of God! The zenith of our worship is in the gathered church as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, the sacraments celebrated, prayers lifted, and songs crescendo to the glory of God.

⁸⁴ Or as Edmund Clowney put it, "The church is called to serve God in three ways: to serve him directly in worship; to serve the saints in nurture; and to serve the world in witness." Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 117.

Edification

The church exists to worship God and build up the church, not merely numerically, but in the way that Jesus promised to his disciples. “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Jesus starts his church, nurtures his church, and unstopably preserves his church. This is Christ’s work that he accomplishes through us.

The Great Commission specifies that the primary way we participate in the edification of the church is through the making of disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).⁸⁵ The local church is the main context where believers teach one another in conversation and song (Col. 3:16), and especially through the preaching of the Word (1 Tim. 4:6-16).

Each member, however, is gifted differently with an integral role to play in the edification of the church as they use their spiritual gifts and practice the “one anothers” (Rom. 12). It is only when each part is working properly that the church truly builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16). This is not the job of the pastor, deacon, or small group leader only; this is your task. Every member works, but none does so independently. Like the apostles, we are utterly dependent on the purifying and unifying work of the Spirit (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:6-8).

⁸⁵ Going, baptizing, and teaching are all aspects of the main imperative of the Great Commission: make disciples. Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2004), 355.

The mission of the church is to edify, but this is not in contradiction to its goal of worship. The bride is beautified, branches vivified, living-stones put into place, and members continue to grow to glorify God.

Witness

In Revelation, John sees churches symbolically displayed as lampstands shining the gospel into a dark and sinful world (Rev. 1:12-20). Even as the Father sent Jesus as the Light of the World (John 20:21), so Jesus sends us as his light bearers into our communities (Acts 13:47). We are called to make disciples and to proclaim the gospel to the lost, baptizing those who come to Christ. And we see in the pages of the New Testament how this comes about: God gifts men (Eph. 4:11), sent from local churches (Acts 13:1-3), to take the gospel to new areas, planting churches and making disciples. While none of us would claim the role or authority of Paul, his example, along with that of his many co-workers, provides us with an inspiring missional model to follow.⁸⁶

The witness of the church is not insular; it is missional in nature. Our commission from Christ requires that we preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations (Mark 13:10; Matt. 28:19).

⁸⁶ Consider, for example, Barnabas who is only called an apostle after being appointed to join Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:4, 14). See also Matt. 28:19; Rom. 16:7; 1 Cor. 4:1; 15:5-8; Eph. 4:11). Thirty-eight different collaborators traveled with Paul from a diversity of backgrounds and gifting, 18% of whom were women. And this is only those who are recorded! Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2004), 1426-28; Don Dent, *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2019), 103-104.

One reason Christ has not yet returned is that he has more sinners to save! Churches must engage their neighborhoods, work to spread the gospel in their area, and send gospel messengers to the ends of the earth in partnership.

But once again, this is not in competition with the primary aim of worship; we are inviting others to join in our eternal song of praise! As John Piper says,

Missions⁸⁷ is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.⁸⁸

This mission is worldwide, this mission includes all peoples, and this worship aims at the adoration of an incomparably awesome God.

The biblical mandate and model for mission is clarifying. The mission of the church is not to transform the culture or to eradicate suffering from this world (as wonderful as those goals are); our mission is to worship God, edify the church, and witness

⁸⁷ Here Piper uses "missions" in the sense of gathering worshipers throughout the world.

⁸⁸ John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 3rd ed), 35.

to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do pray for the good and peace of our world, but we keep our mission targeted on our God-appointed task.

In his kindness, God will uniquely give burdens to individual Christians in how they are to conduct themselves as salt and light in the world, but our greatest energies and ambitions must be towards the worship of God, edification of the church, and the salvation of the lost through Christ's body, the church.

What most animates you? What inspires your dreams? What do you long to see happen in your city and the world? May it be that the mission of the church is what most excites you.

What a mission! Manageable? Hah! Measurable? No way! Our inadequacy would crush us if not for God's faithfulness. But God has graciously chosen the weak for this powerful work. We get to be his treasured possession and worshipful community. We get to build one another up, immersed in the help of the Spirit. And we get to radiate the gospel to those who live in darkness. And, happily, our mission is unstoppable! Christ will remain with us unto the end of the age, the Spirit will build us up into the full stature of Christ, and our Father's plans cannot be thwarted.

May our greatest ambitions, energies, and zeal be directed towards the incredible mission we've been given.

THE BENEFITS OF SPENDING DECADES IN ONE CHURCH

Bill Patton

Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

The biblical metaphors used to describe the church teach us that long-term membership in a local congregation ought to be the norm. Yet many strands of contemporary life work against that norm—against putting down roots in one church for decades. The independent, consumer-driven culture we inhabit pulls us away from the kind of “staying” which in turn makes for healthy Christians and healthy churches.

Restless for something new, we leave one church to attend another down the road. Or, drawn by a range of programs better suited to meet our needs, we leave a good church and dear friends, to go where the perceived benefits are greater. Or, experiencing relational difficulties, we uproot ourselves from a faithful church to start over again in a place where we are relatively unknown, where little is expected of us, and where church life is, frankly, easier.

Christians and churches are worse-off whenever a casual, impermanent, transitory approach to local church life prevails. Believers benefit from maintaining a long-term church identity and local churches benefit from having long-term members. The fact is, “There’s always a core group of faithful people at the heart of every healthy congregation. Our lives and our churches are better because of them.”⁸⁹

The metaphors the Bible uses to describe the church and illustrate church life make the case that we should aspire to be among that core of faithful saints who remain in one church for a long time. For example, the “body” metaphor (1 Cor. 12:27) assumes continuity of local church membership—hands and feet don’t jump from one body to another.

The “living stones” metaphor likewise suggests immovability. Once built-together by God (1 Pet. 2:5), the living stones stay put. The “family” metaphor implies continuity of both relationship and identity. In healthy families, one’s family members don’t change even as the family grows.

The “planting of the Lord” metaphor (Isa. 61:3) suggests that putting down roots in God’s house leads to a lifetime of flourishing and fruitfulness. A plant must stay rooted to thrive. Constant transplanting stifles growth.

⁸⁹ Karl Vaters, 2018, “7 Advantages of Long-Term Church Membership.” *Christianity Today*, accessed January 6, 2023. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2018/november/7-advantages-of-long-term-church-membership.html>

[The righteous] are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green to declare that the LORD is upright. (Ps. 92:13-14).

Those metaphors leave us not with legalistic rules about remaining in one church under all circumstances but with consciences sensitized to the normative ideal—that of a deep-rooted staying.

What are the benefits of spending years, even decades, in one local church?

Relational Continuity

Chicago pastor Nathan Carter says,

In my experience, it usually takes about three to four years to really start to get to know people. Then they leave the church. They move away or have a disenchantment of some kind and are gone. We are still Facebook friends. We may text from time to time, but we are not in each other's lives anymore. And so, they must reset the relationship clock at a new church.⁹⁰

“Resetting the relational clock” again and again forfeits the kind of deep, meaningful relationships which, by God's design, can make all the difference in our walk with the Lord.

⁹⁰ Nathan Carter, 2018, “Why staying in your church longterm is good for you.” ERLC, accessed January 6, 2023. <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-staying-in-your-church-longterm-is-good-for-you/>

Tim and Cindy Campbell helped plant our church nearly four decades ago, and they remain here today. They rejoice in “the grace of knowing and being known; the blessing of sojourning with beloved friends through the good years and the bad years.”

Dan and Jeanne Welch, dear long-time members of our local church, put it this way, “We have deep, long-lasting relationships with brothers and sisters we have known for decades, who have walked with us through so many joys and trials.” Those relationships have been a critical means of grace and encouragement to them.

Karl Vaters, touting the benefits of long-term church membership says,

There’s nothing like knowing and growing with a group of people over a lifetime, or a major segment of your lifetime. There are so many life lessons that simply take time to learn. No matter how smart we are or how hard we work, nothing can replace living life with people who know, love and watch out for each other year after year and decade after decade. There are no shortcuts to deep relationships. You have to put in the time.⁹¹

Fruitful Service

Discovering where we can best serve the cause of Christ is a process of trial and error for most of us. We join a church and begin serving wherever there are needs. But then over time,

⁹¹ Karl Vaters, *Ibid.*

we find one or two avenues of service where we are most effective and most satisfied. We then settle into that work, using the gifts God has given in ways that make a real difference. But if we change churches again and again, that process cannot play out, causing wonderful talents to remain inadvertently buried in the ground (Matt. 25:18).

Thus another benefit of staying in a church for decades is that it affords the time required to find and be faithful in avenues of service, for which we are promised an eternal reward. Fruitful service is at stake as we remain in one place.

Witnessing God's Slow Work

Another benefit of staying is the joy of watching God's unfolding faithfulness—often in ways we never expected. The Campbells say, “We have watched what God accomplished from the church's infancy to maturing adulthood. We have witnessed God's faithfulness through difficult seasons. We would never have imagined 38 years ago all the wonderful things God would do.”

The Welches say, “We have a wonderful historical perspective which causes us to thank and praise the Lord. We can testify, that in every situation, Jesus has never failed us!” They add, “Because we know our history, our pastors, and the people of the church, we have been able to discern and stand against unfounded attacks. We have seen the Lord's hand actively at work for decades and what he has done...is amazing.”

Only those who stay experience the joy of watching a local church grow, endure, and mature.

Building a Legacy

Staying in one church for decades also enables us to build a tangible legacy. Tim and Cindy speak of the deep joy of watching the passing of the baton to the next generation and even to the generation following them: “It’s wonderful to see so many children grow to embrace the faith, then come into the callings that God has for them.”

Dan and Jeanne reflect on the satisfaction they have of knowing they will leave behind a healthy church, and an enduring legacy, for posterity. Dan says, “When a man or woman commits to being a faithful member of a church, and does so for decades, they leave future generations an inheritance.”

Conclusion

There are, of course, good reasons to leave a church. If you’ve left for good reasons, you ought to feel no shame. But staying and serving in one local church for decades seems to be the biblical norm. Let’s not underestimate the downside of leaving only to find ourselves in the future, yearning intensely for the kind of local church experience we once enjoyed. Brothers and sisters, the gospel has the power not only to bring us together but to keep us together.

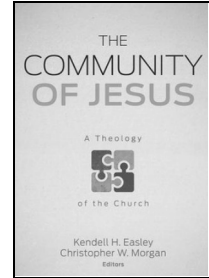
RECOMMENDED READING

“If the church is central to God’s purpose, as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives.”

JOHN STOTT

THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

Edited by KENDELL H. EASLEY and
CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN



Jeff Purswell

Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (Louisville, KY)

HARDLY A DAY PASSES when the internet does not serve up yet another testimony bemoaning the failures of the church. While the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, Christian media often gives the impression that toxic cultures, bully pastors, and politically-divided congregations just might. As pastors called to “spend and be spent” (2 Cor. 12:15) on behalf of God’s people, we must fight to maintain a biblical vision of just what the church is—its divine nature, its cosmic significance, and its principal role in the redemptive purposes of God. *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, edited by Kendell Easley and Christopher Morgan, provides just the kind of clarifying encouragement pastors and church members need, not only to refresh and deepen their understanding of the church, but to cherish it as Jesus does.

Pastors will need to look elsewhere for detailed instructions on how to *do church*; *The Community of Jesus* instead seeks to provide a theological vision of the church grounded upon biblical-theological foundations. The editors have assembled a solid team of scholars from various disciplines with the goal of providing “a

biblical, historic, systematic, missional theology of the church” (xiii). This approach lifts the reader’s eyes above so many of the issues that tend to dominate ecclesiological discussions (the sacraments, church leadership, polity), placing them in a broader, salvation-historical context that helps re-frame how we should view the church and its mission.

To accomplish this goal, the book contains one chapter on the Old Testament people of God and four chapters on the New Testament’s presentation of the church. There is one (rather ambitious) chapter on church history, two theologically oriented chapters, and a final one on the church in God’s mission. I would especially note Steve Wellum’s chapter on the church as “God’s New Covenant Community,” which helpfully traces continuities between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament church (over against dispensationalism) and important discontinuities (over against traditional covenant theology).

Given that pastors spend much of their waking lives engaged in the life and nurture of Christ’s bride, I regularly recommend that they read at least one book a year on the church. Yet not all such books are created equal. In the wake of the cultural turbulence of the past few years, it is precisely the biblical-theological grounding laid in *The Community of Jesus* that can serve as a vital safeguard against ecclesiological winds and waves that are currently lashing the church. It is remarkable how many of the current (and, for that matter, ancient) distortions of the church’s identity and mission—be it a fearful separatism, or a culturally-captive hyper-transformationalism, or a politically-charged theonomy—stem from a failure to appreciate the salvation-

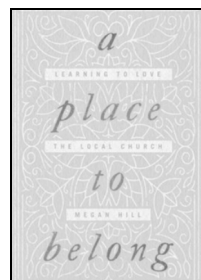
historical location of the new covenant church. In driving us back to the text of Scripture, books like *The Community of Jesus* hold great potential: to remind us of our true identity; to focus us on our true mission; to deepen our affections for the local church; and to cause us to treasure more fully the one who brought the church into being through his death and resurrection.

A PLACE TO BELONG

By MEGAN HILL

Trish Donohue

Director of Women's Ministries, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)



IN AN AGE WHEN church attendance is considered quaint at best and hateful at worst, faithful Christians continue to gather with the people of God. But sometimes offkey singing, sparsely attended prayer meetings, and odd assortments of people can cause us to wonder, “Is this really worth it?”

In *A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church*, author Megan Hill answers with a resounding “yes.” She challenges readers “to see the church as God sees the church and then to embrace the privilege of being part of it” (13). Rather than leaving us with this general goal, she takes us on a tour of the epistles, highlighting the details of our calling as the beloved people of God, the eternal fruitfulness of our simple gatherings, and the importance of being good sheep and good shepherds.

As a longstanding member of a Sovereign Grace church, I assumed this book would be a quick review of what I already knew. However, it accomplished what its subtitle promised and convinced me not simply to like, or to attend, or to serve my local church, but to love it. Why? Because my dear savior loves it with a passion so great he gave his life for it, “And what God loves,

we must love” (23). “Do you want to grow in Christlikeness?” Hill asks. “Come to church and love the people you find there” (27).

Celebrate Ordinary

When we focus too much on numerical growth or cultural influence, we miss what God is doing all around us.

When people in the church encourage one another, teach one another, serve one another, and pray for one another in dozens of small and large ways, we ought to rejoice.

This is a sign of God-given life and a mark of his blessing (77).

Hill reminds us to move our focus from what the world loves to what God loves: namely, his people united to praise his name. As unimpressive as our gatherings may seem, God delights in them. By aligning our perspective with his, we can embrace what might otherwise discourage us and celebrate the “ordinary” works of God in our “ordinary” churches.

Anticipate Glory

The church is not merely a pastor’s job or a member’s duty, it’s the purpose of God lived out on Earth. As his people unite under his rule and reign, the triune God makes himself known. The smallest earthly gathering resounds in eternity, and each local body, thriving or struggling “can rightly be called a colony of heaven” (53). The faithful mundane is blindingly glorious.

A Place to Belong cleans our lenses so we can see the church rightly: beloved, precious, glorious, God’s very own. There truly is no

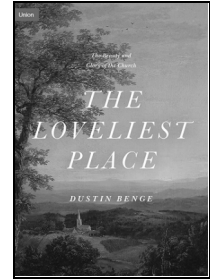
better place on earth. Reader, don't assume with a sigh that you already "get" the local church. Allow this book to refresh your vision so you can throw yourself into building God's church with a new and appropriate joy.

THE LOVELIEST PLACE

By DUSTIN BENGE

Jared Torrence

Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)



CHARLES SPURGEON AFFECTIONATELY REFERRED to the church as “The Dearest Place on Earth.” Though that statement is true, our culture can make that truth hard to believe. The turmoil, anger, distrust, and despair that has permeated the air in recent years has greatly impacted Christians, particularly in their view of the church. The distrust of institutions, normalization of a critical spirit, and rampant individualism in the culture has led Christians to drift into a “less-than-spectacular” view of the glorious, blood-bought bride of Christ.

Our ecclesiology is being affected, and whether we realize it or not, the air we breathe in this world results in a waning love for the church. A deeper love and appreciation for the church must be cultivated and sought after.

This is why I’m incredibly grateful for Dustin Bengé’s wonderful book *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church*. This book helps us appropriately recalibrate our affection for the bride of Christ. Through fourteen Scripture-saturated and theologically rich chapters, Bengé reinvigorates love for the church by helping the reader see the church in the way Christ sees the church. In

other words, in these pages we see that the church truly is the loveliest place on earth—that she is beautiful.

The tone of this book is filled with celebration and wonder. Bengé demonstrates familiar truth in fresh ways, cultivating a deeper love for the church. He helps us to see the depths of love that Christ has for the church: “To grasp Christ’s love for his church is to plumb depths that have no bottom, find a treasure with no bounds, and climb heights that have no peak” (49). The beauty of the church comes from the fact that it belongs to Christ. His beauty beautifies her, and our love for Christ necessitates a love for his bride.

Subsequent chapters highlight the specific ways that the church is beautified. The members, the pastors, the good news of the gospel, and the sacraments all contribute to the beautification of Christ’s bride. Bengé highlights the need to walk in unity in a manner worthy of the calling of Christ, and to expect persecution. He celebrates the valuable role each Person of the Godhead plays in building and sustaining the church. Bengé helps us see that every aspect of the church is used by God to beautify the church.

The Loveliest Place is not a dry, dense read. In this book, affections will be stirred. The beauty of Christ and the glory of the gospel make everything in the church extraordinary and spectacular.

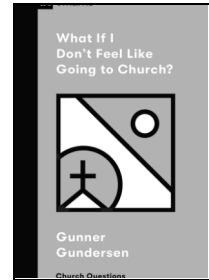
Bengé’s purpose in writing this book is to help us all have a “refreshing drink from the well of a thoroughly biblical ecclesiology to revitalize the reader for a new ministry, bold exposition, passionate worship, and wholehearted service” (183).

He wants to renew and reinvigorate Christians' joy in their local church. He wants to assist God's children to worship him in Spirit and truth— to think upon Christ's church with a warm smile. He does not pretend that the church is problem-free or sinless. The church is flawed because of those it consists of. Nevertheless, it is beautiful, and it deserves our all.

Christ regards his church through the lens of the cross, and when we share that lens, we will see the church with the same eyes as her beloved Husband.

WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE GOING TO CHURCH?

By GUNNER GUNDERSEN



Jimmy Cannon

Lead Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church (Abingdon & White Marsh, MD)

WHAT IF I DON'T feel like going to church? The superficial answer is, "Go anyway!" This likely misses the opportunity for greater insight into why one may feel unmotivated. What is going on at the heart-level that leads to feeling disinterested in being a part of the gathered church? In his book, *What if I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?*, Gunner Gundersen explores practical ways to discern reasons behind feeling unmotivated and offers biblical help on how to increase our understanding of the immense blessing it is to be together as a church family.

Gundersen's audience and goals are clear from the outset. He writes, "My goal is simple: I want to motivate Christians to meet together with consistency, joy, and purpose. I'm writing to Christians who love Jesus and want to follow him, but struggle to understand, appreciate, or make time for the church" (10). We must have a category in our mind that allows for us to see that any believer can be tempted to give in to this kind of indolence. Therefore we must watch over our own heart, but also be more alert to the struggle others might be facing.

Gundersen begins by giving practical help in discerning the deeper motive underneath the feelings. There are many reasons for not wanting to go to church. Gundersen encourages the reader to take time to discern the heart through God's Word, discerning friends, and God-given leaders. Knowing this is key to finding the way forward. "Up to this point" Gundersen writes, "we've explored our hearts and reminded ourselves to seek help. Now it's time to talk about the church" (23).

Gundersen skillfully utilizes Scripture to help elevate our understanding of how glorious the church truly is. He does this by explaining the different images used in the New Testament that highlight the "togetherness" of the church. He helpfully unpacks what it means to be part of this "covenant community." The beauty and mystery of believers coming together and being given real purpose by God is something that fills one with a sense of awe.

This place of wonder leads us to explore what it actually means to be "present" in church. We know that attendance in itself is not the goal. We can be present physically and yet absent emotionally. Gundersen spends much of this short book setting out a compelling vision for what it can and should look like for us to be "present" among God's people.

What if I Don't Feel Like Going to Church? is concise, yet packed with biblically sound and practical help when caring for someone who is feeling unmotivated to gather with God's people. Whether you are a pastor who is seeking to care for those on the church's periphery or you have a friend who seems to be adrift, this book will help.

