

PILGRIM COMMUNITY CHURCH

Christ-centered. Gospel-shaped. Together for Good.

MEMBERSHIP



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INTRODUCTION

We are thrilled that you are considering membership with Pilgrim Community Church. Committing to be part of a local church community is a most natural and necessary undertaking for all conscientious Christians. First, it is natural because the Bible always speaks of redemption in the sense of Jesus saving sinners into a new people or community (*i.e.* the church). In his letters Paul often used the imagery of the human body to speak of the church as such a community. Christ is our head and we are united to Him in His body. As such, we are members of the body and members of each other. Second, it is necessary because the Bible repeatedly requires Christians to flesh out their faith through the principle of one another-ness in the context of a local church community (*e.g.* love one another, serve one another, forgive one another, encourage one another, bear with one another, *etc.*) Church membership is necessary because we all need a place where we can love and serve others and where others can likewise love and serve us.

Church membership entails privileges as well as responsibilities. Members of Pilgrim Community Church can expect to receive Christ-centered teaching and preaching from the Bible, full participation in the Sacraments of the church, the shepherding and pastoral care of the elders, the service of the deacons, and the nurturing support of fellow Christians. In turn, members are expected to involve themselves in the life, worship, and mission of the church. Members are to love and serve the church as well as their fellow believers in every way that they are enabled by the Holy Spirit.

This class is designed to help you understand Pilgrim Community before making that commitment. Here you will learn about the history, vision, beliefs, and identity of our church and you will also have the opportunity to dialogue with our elders in the course of the lessons. At the end, if you decide to pursue membership, you will be asked to complete some short readings as well as to provide a brief summary of your faith. There is but one major requirement for joining the church, which is to demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The lessons in this class are put together in such a way as to address the questions of membership. Those questions are:

PILGRIM COMMUNITY CHURCH

Membership Vows

OUR COMMON FAITH

- ① *Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?*
-

OUR COMMON SALVATION

- ② *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?*
- ③ *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*
-

OUR COMMON LIFE

- ④ *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?*
- ⑤ *Do you promise to make diligent use of the means of grace, to share dutifully in the worship and mission of the Church and to give of your substance as the Lord may prosper you, for the advancement of His kingdom throughout the world?*
-

OUR COMMON DISCIPLINE

- ⑥ *Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?*

A GUIDE TO MEMBERSHIP

COMMUNICANT AND FORMAL MEMBERS

are baptized believers (13 and above) who regard Pilgrim Community Church as their home church and are part of the life and ministry of our community of faith. They are welcomed to partake of the Lord's Supper and they also have the right of the vote; also, Biblically qualified men may be eligible to hold office as Deacons or Elders of the church. A requirement for formal membership is the affirmation of what the Church teaches and believes about the Gospel as well as the nature and mission of the Church (this includes our view of the sacraments). In short, members are required to affirm the system of doctrine summarized in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

NONCOMMUNICANT AND INFORMAL MEMBERS

are the baptized children (12 and under) of members and are part of the Pilgrim Community Church family by birthright. However, they are not to be admitted to the Lord's table until they are able to evidence a credible profession of faith, first to their parents, and then to the elders (*i.e.* session) of the church. Upon successful examination, those who are confirmed in their faith would then be presented by the elders to the church as Communicant but as yet Informal Members. We do not wish to place a minimum age requirement for the confirmation of faith and pray that our children are able to evidence true faith and commune with us at the Lord's table in the soonest possible time. To this end, parents and elders are to work closely together to help our little ones understand the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. In order to be regarded as formal members of the church (*i.e.* to have the power of the vote), these are to undergo, at the appropriate time, the same Membership Class that all communicant and formal members undergo. The same requirements for formal membership apply to them as well.

ADHERENTS

are baptized Christians (13 and above) who, while they presently regard Pilgrim Community as their home church and wish to be part of the life and ministry of our community of faith, nevertheless, do not wish to become formal members but

stay as adhering guests only. (e.g. believers who are members in their churches in their hometowns who are now in Manila because of work or study and are consequently attending Pilgrim Community Church at present; believers who do not agree with our church's views on baptism.) They are welcomed to partake of the Lord's Supper but they do not have the right of the vote; also, while some may be Biblically qualified men, they may not hold office as Deacons or Elders of the church. As a requirement for formal membership is the affirmation of what the Church teaches and believes about the Gospel AND the nature and mission of the Church (this includes our view of the sacraments), those who are unable on account of conscience to affirm infant baptism are advised to elect to be adherents instead. Adherents are required to affirm the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, although they are allowed to express take exception from the phrase "...but infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized." in Q/A 95 of the catechism.

MEMBERSHIP PROCESS

STEP 1: ATTEND MEMBERSHIP CLASSES

Inquirers as well as potential members and adherents are all welcome to join our Membership Class. This is a place to explore what it means to be part of Pilgrim Community. Whether you are an adherent wishing to be registered with Pilgrim Community, a new believer wanting to be baptized, an informal member who has come of age and would like to now be formally part of the church, or a transferee from another church, this class is the first step toward joining our church family.

STEP 2: COMPLY WITH READING AND WRITTEN REQUIREMENTS

Those who decide to pursue formal membership or become adherents at the end of the class will be given a short list of readings as well as a form to aid in the writing of a brief summary of personal faith. If you are transferring membership from another church, you should inform your previous church of your intentions to join Pilgrim. Under normal circumstances, you should also secure a release letter from them stating that (1) you are a member in good standing and not under church discipline, and (2) that they are releasing you into Pilgrim Community's spiritual care.

STEP 3: INTERVIEW WITH ELDERS

Schedule to meet with an elder/pastor of the church. After the meeting, if you are recommended for membership, an elder will submit your name to the monthly Session meeting for approval. Please note that regular attendance at Pilgrim for the past three months (at least) is an important consideration for approval of membership.

STEP 4: MEMBERSHIP VOWS AND BAPTISM

Take your membership vows at a worship service. If you have not been baptized before, your baptism will be scheduled for the same service.

OUR COMMON FAITH

- 1 Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?

While there is but one major requirement for joining Pilgrim Community Church as a member (*i.e.* to demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ), there are nevertheless requisite truths that one has to first hold on to in order to fulfill this requirement. To borrow from the opening sentence of the ancient *Athanasian Creed*, “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” A summary of this *catholic faith* could be found in the majestic formula of the *Nicene Creed* (c. 381 AD), which we believe and affirm at Pilgrim Community:

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made;
who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried,
and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.*

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets;
and we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church;
we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
and we look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

We believe this *catholic/universal* faith as basic to what it means to be a Christian. However we also believe that these basic doctrines are not the result of human imagination but deeply rooted in God's own revelation. Therefore, with the first membership vow, we affirm the following:

- a. We believe that: (1) The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God, and (2) that the Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man. These are the answers to Q/A 2-3 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.
- b. We believe and affirm that the Bible (all sixty-six books consisting of both Old and New Testaments) is the living and holy Word of God. In His infinite goodness, God has chosen to reveal His will to us through words breathed out by Him. This is what we mean when we affirm that the Bible is inspired. Consider what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:14-16,

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

- c. Believing that the Bible is the very word of God given for our instruction, we also maintain and affirm that the Bible is inerrant (*i.e.* without error or contradictions; infallible). What this means practically is that the Bible is trustworthy in all that it says. Moreover, it is the only source of written revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. In response to the devil's temptation to turn rocks into bread, the Lord Jesus responded by saying, “It is

written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

- d. We believe that the storyline of the entire Bible basically follows the outline of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation. We believe that Jesus Christ (whose name means Savior) is the main character of all of Scriptures. In demonstration of His great love for sinners, God sent His Son Jesus as Redeemer and Savior of sinners like us. He lived the life that we could not live and died the death that we should have died because of our sins. So that by His life, death, and resurrection, all who truly repent of their sins and believe in Him might share in His resurrection life. This, in brief, is the doctrine of salvation taught in the Bible (which we will examine more closely next meeting). Salvation is by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, in the finished work of Christ *alone*, according to the Scriptures *alone*, and all for the glory of God *alone*.

OUR COMMON SALVATION

- ② *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?*

- ③ *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*

THE GOSPEL

As we have considered last week, joining a church is a good thing. However, one can pass their whole life being externally part of a church community without really understanding the Gospel. They might think they are right with God for all the wrong reasons but have never really known him. That sounds like a scary thought (and it is!) but it is a reality in many churches and it is a reality that we hope by God's grace would not be true of our members here at Pilgrim Community. For this reason, we would like now to take some time to consider what it means to believe the Gospel. In a sense, today's lesson is at the heart of what it means to be a member at our church. As we have mentioned previously, there is but one major requirement for joining the church, which is to demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But before we talk about what the Gospel is, let's first try to examine six types of people who join churches:

Moral Person—The good moral person lives under high standards for a moral life. He upholds the Ten Commandments; he believes that it is critical to live by a code of conduct. He accepts that he must be responsible in the way that he lives.

Church Person—The church person faithfully attends church and tries to be involved in church activities. He knows that God expects people to attend church and pay due tribute. Church is also the place to learn how to be a better person.

Thinking Person—The thinking person enjoys intellectual pursuit, which includes God or religion. He sees good reason for believing in God and concurs

after reflection that Jesus deserves his respect. God “makes sense” in his understanding of reality.

Sincere Person—The sincere person acknowledges that he is not outwardly as good and self-disciplined as the others, and yet he points out that what really matters is the heart. It is better to be good hearted and to mean well, than to be cold hearted and upright.

Polite Person—The polite person accompanies his spouse or children to church and goes along with them out of politeness. Church is good for people who need that kind of thing, and he is willing to be supportive.

Works Person—The works person believes that God has placed each of us on earth to do something good. What matters is putting what you believe into action. God helps those who help others, and so, get involved.

All of these traits are good traits to have. It is good to be moral, to faithfully attend church, to think carefully, to be sincere and polite, and to do good works. But all of these persons have a fatal flaw: they place their trust for salvation in themselves. The moral person trusts that God will accept his moral character. The church person trusts that God will accept his church attendance. The thinking person trusts that God is pleased with good reasoning. The sincere person trusts that God will accept his innate good heart. The polite person trusts that God is a gentleman and will accept someone who also shows courtesy. And the good works person trusts that God will accept his good works. This common trust in something about themselves makes the gospel a stumbling block. For the gospel requires a mindset that changes the very way we approach God and salvation, and that requires what is most difficult: *humility*.

Other religions and philosophies teach that God or salvation is something we reach through effort. I attain salvation through good works or moral living or fulfilling religious duties or at least by going along peaceably with what others want of me. I know God through clear reasoning or by listening to my heart. The gospel, however, says that there is nothing I can do to earn God’s acceptance. Learning the requirements expected of me and then working to accomplish them will do me no good. What is necessary then is for us to have a change in the way we approach God.

Hearing that self-effort is not the way to God makes the gospel difficult to accept because of what it implies about us. We cannot reach God by self-effort because our sinful condition makes us incapable of any effort that pleases God. Indeed, as

far as the gospel is concerned, our sinful condition has not merely made us sick spiritually, but dead. We can do as much for ourselves spiritually as the dead can do to make them come back alive.

“None is righteous, no, not one... Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin... For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:9-10, 19-20, 22b-23)

The Gospel requires that we admit that such is our condition. We are all by default dead sinners, helpless to do anything about our original condition. This is the first step toward salvation in Christ: recognizing our desperate need for rescue.

Knowing your condition is the first step in the right direction to knowing God and his salvation. The essential next step is to acknowledge your only remedy, which is the work of Jesus Christ—His death on the cross by which he saved us from the guilt of our sins. In order to be saved from your sins you must have faith in Jesus Christ.

Consider these passages from the book of Ephesians which helps put these concepts of sin, Christ’s work, and our faith in perspective:

*In [Christ] we have **redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses**, according to the riches of his grace... In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and **believed in him**, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory...*

*And you were **dead in the trespasses and sins**, in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were **dead in our trespasses**, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved...**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast...**(Ephesians 1:7,13-14; 2:1-7,9; emphases added).*

We are redeemed, *i.e.* our sins are forgiven through Christ shedding his blood on the cross for us. Upon hearing the gospel of this salvation and believing in Christ, that salvation is applied to us. Even the believing, though, comes from God's grace because we are dead in our sins and would not respond with God's Spirit at work in us.

Faith—believing in God and in Christ's work—is a scandalous means of salvation to many. Some say it is foolish. Believing that we are saved by faith places wishing or feeling over knowledge. Others say the idea is unjust. It places profession over heart or action. Why should right belief excuse wrong behavior? Shouldn't one be judged by the heart rather than the intellect? Shouldn't one be judged by action rather than profession?

Others say that salvation by faith is harsh, for it condemns honest doubt or other honest belief in other viewpoints. Why should one be condemned for not believing a set of propositions? Why condemn honest doubt? Faith by definition concedes lack of conclusive proof; why then condemn the doubter? Why condemn other "faiths"?

SAVING FAITH

Let's think this through: *What is saving faith?* It has three components: **believing**, **obeying**, and **trusting**.

First, it is believing. As Paul and Silas told the jailer, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus...*" (Acts 16:30,31). What does that mean? Believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that he has done the work that saves us from our sins. Paul summed it up this way in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

"Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..."

What you believe matters, and it is this insistence that we believe rightly that offends people. It seems wrong to base salvation on beliefs and not on right living or "good hearts." How can we link a saving relationship with God to a belief

system? God does because the belief system is revealed by God and is about God himself. And this is why believing is so important to him. Let's look at this further.

Believing is about whom you believe. To believe the gospel is to believe God. To reject the gospel is to reject God. The unbeliever says, "I'm not rejecting God; I just need more evidence that what the Bible claims about God is true." But the Bible teaches otherwise. It claims that people do not believe because they refuse to. The famous verse John 3:16 is part of a fuller discourse on this subject, see John 3:16-19.

We are not objective about the gospel. This is not hard to understand. It is extremely difficult to form an objective opinion about a matter that will upset everything in your life, which is what the gospel does. And this is God's point. The truth of the matter is that we don't want to believe in his gospel. It is too costly and too humbling, whatever we may say otherwise.

Believing the gospel also reveals what we believe about God. These ideas of the gospel are, after all, about God—who he is, what he says about us, what he has done for us, and what he requires of us. To reject them is to reject him. Again, he takes it personally, just as we would. Take, for example, a man, courting a woman. He says to her, "It's not important for me to know you as you are or even as you want to be known; I have a particular image of you and that is what's important to me. As long as I show you love that should be enough for you." Will the woman be enraptured? No, she will be insulted that the man is merely using her to satisfy his own fantasy. He can do all the good works for her—give her gifts, be romantic—but the bottom line is that those things are meaningless if he is not interested in who she really is.

Take another example. A man takes his fiancé to see a beautiful piece of property and says to her, "I am going to build for you here your dream home." He pulls out the drawings, shows how he has financed it and the schedule for the work." She replies, "Dear, you are just dreaming, but I love you anyhow." Will he be happy that she expressed her love? No, he will be offended that she did not believe him, or rather, believe in him.

That is what we say to God when we do not believe. "God, your evidence is not enough. The Bible is not enough. You are not doing a good enough job to satisfy me. I would like to believe, but you've got to do a better job."

Faith also involves obeying. It is one thing to say we believe; it is another to act on belief. A person shows what he believes by how he lives. The objection “I should be judged by my actions, not my beliefs” presupposes that the two can be separated. Profession of beliefs and actions can be separated, but not true belief and actions.

In Isaiah 29:13, God complains: *“These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.”*

We understand God’s position. His people profess faith in him, but their actions prove otherwise. The financial advisor will say that if you want to know what a person’s real priorities are, look at his check book. The marriage counselor will say that if you want to know how much a husband loves his wife, observe how much time he spends with her.

Finally, faith includes trusting. Trusting is believing, but it brings out an aspect of belief that speaks to a relationship, specifically about feeling. To believe that God is our Creator is to trust him to do what he promises. To believe that God has sent his Son to save us from our sins is to trust him to save us. To believe God is to trust him to know truth that we cannot know, to know reality that we cannot see, and then to act upon that trust with confidence he will carry out his will.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Do you think religion should be a matter of the heart? Belief is a matter of the heart. Your heart will take you where it places its trust. Consider the scene at a fire. A young child is in a second story window with fire shooting up from the first floor. A fireman is on the ground coaxing the child to jump out of the window, over the flames, into his arms. It goes against his reason. He is safe now where there are no flames, and he is being asked to jump into danger. But something in the fireman’s voice, and perhaps his looks, gives him enough confidence to trust this man, and he jumps against the evidence.

To believe God, to obey him, to trust him, that is what saving faith is about. It is a personal matter that reveals the heart and produces action. Why is faith essential? Because it glorifies and honors God fully. Faith gives all the credit to God as he should have. Skeptics ask, What does it matter to God if he gets the credit or not. If God is satisfied in himself, what does he care what we think, or

why should he hold against us what we are too small or dysfunctional to believe properly? How big of a deal can glorifying God be?

It is what we were made for. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever,” as the first answer in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* explains. The first chapter in Ephesians harps on this theme: “*God predestined us in love to be his sons... to the praise of the glory of his grace... We... have been predestined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory... the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*” (vv. 5, 6, 12, 13). Glorifying God is what life is about; it is the highest good and the highest joy.

Faith also best demonstrates the riches of God’s grace. Let’s read again from Ephesians 2:1-9:

“How should we respond to such an act of God? ‘Thanks, God. Let me pay you for this.’ No! The great God of the universe has given us a gift, and not just any gift—the sacrifice of his only Son to remove the guilt of our condemning sins. We have offended the holy God and he has not merely spared us, he has lifted us up with Christ. We are seated with him now by faith in glory, and someday we shall dwell in glory. And all by his grace to show his incomparable riches to us! How could we even consider making an offer?”

There will be works from us, to be sure. As Paul goes on to say: “*For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” (v. 10). Our works, though, will not be payment for, but rather testimony to the riches of God. Nothing but faith can be the appropriate response that glorifies God. To know God, you must regard faith as essential and personal. You must apprehend the helplessness of your condition, and put your trust fully in the power of God.

See how the gospel’s salvation is the easiest and hardest offer to take? All you have to do is believe, the easiest thing to do. But to believe, you must fully humble yourself, the hardest thing to do. And yet, with it comes the greatest reward—the joy of your salvation and peace with God.

OUR COMMON LIFE

- ④ *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?*

- ⑤ *Do you promise to make diligent use of the means of grace, to share dutifully in the worship and mission of the Church and to give of your substance as the Lord may prosper you, for the advancement of His kingdom throughout the world?*

PILGRIM COMMUNITY

There is a sense in which we are all pilgrims in life questing for our forever home. We are ever journeying, ever seeking—ever searching for that place of true peace and rest.

In the last century, German philosopher Martin Heidegger coined a term to describe this existential crisis that he felt was our shared human experience. ‘Thrownness’ [Geworfenheit] is what he called it—we are each thrown into this world as ‘Being-toward-Death.’ This present reality is not where we came from, and this, too, is not where we are meant to dwell in the end. Whatever we may have now is temporary. It is almost as if Heidegger was borrowing a page right out of the Bible: “*For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*” (Hebrews 13:14)

While we journey together as a church community, we embrace our pilgrim identity to remind ourselves that the journey of faith is ultimately meant to bring weary pilgrims like us to the ultimate Pilgrim, Jesus Christ. He has journeyed from Heaven down to Earth and deep into our ‘thrownness’, not just to show us the way but to take us into Himself and to give us the true peace and rest that our hearts so long to have. At the deepest level of our pilgrim hearts, we echo the prayer that St. Augustine confessed before God, “Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.” (*Confessions* 1.1.1)

OUR CHURCH DNA

If you've been with our church for any length of time, you would have no doubt become acquainted with three things that we identify with as a church community. We endeavor to be a community that is: *Christ-centered, Gospel-shaped, and Together for Good.*

Christ-centered

What sets Biblical Christianity apart from all other religions and life philosophies is that at the heart of our religion is not a moral or ethical code. The Christian mission is not primarily concerned with spreading a prescribed code of conduct for the betterment and continued survival of the human race. Rather, at the heart of the Christian faith is a person: the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the message that we proclaim and it is to Him—the true center—that we call all sorts of off-center people to. In all that we are and in all that we do, we yield to the central supremacy of Jesus Christ the Lord.

Gospel-shaped

Greatness, truth, and beauty affect us in profound ways. We never walk away the same. In a sense, we never really walk away—the experience, or the music, or the art—they stay with us, changing us. It is no wonder that the Gospel—the Christian shorthand for the beautiful and glorious truth of who Jesus Christ is, and what He has done to save His people—has this transforming effect on those who truly come to believe. As Christians we seek to be shaped by the Gospel in every area of our private and public lives—in thoughts, in deeds, in affections, and in speech. The good news, the Gospel, makes us good news people in this bad news world.

Together for Good

The Gospel brings sinners like us into union with Christ and communion with God and His people. When Christ saves us, He does not leave us to remain in our former human affiliations but rather He saves us into a community that transcends all other human ties and relationships we may previously have connection with. We are saved into a community of sinners and pilgrims who have likewise been saved by grace. As such we become part of a family of brothers and sisters whom we otherwise would not have had any relation to. As a community, we are called to love and serve people with the gospel both within and outside of our fellowship. Inwardly, we are called to love, serve, and do good to one another as we together seek to be shaped by the Gospel. Outwardly, we are called to love, serve and to do good to others by calling the lost to faith and by

taking a stand for justice, mercy, and truth—doing good to all men as we have opportunity to do so.

These three are at the core of who we are and together they are what we consider our DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), or the basic *genetic code* of who we are as a church. What this means is that, for us, these three ought to underpin all that we are and all that we do. More fully, these three actually reflect our church's vision—Pilgrim Community Church exists to cultivate Christ-centered communities where the Gospel shapes lives and missions together, for the good of the City, the Nation, and the World.

In the previous lesson, we talked about our sinfulness and our desperate need for the Gospel. The good news is that—for us and for our salvation—Christ became incarnate and lived the perfect life, died the perfect death, and rose again from the dead. When we truly repent and believe in Christ, we are united to Him by faith and delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (*cf.* Colossians 1:13-14) Now that we are *in Christ* (a phrase that occurs roughly 80 times in the New Testament = very important!), this new reality ought to be marked by a new normality. Following Paul's thought in Ephesians 2, we are saved by grace through faith *for good works*. Obedience, doing God's will, doing work that is good—this is the new normal of the Christian life. And this takes on two expressions: private (as individual Christians in our respective vocations) and corporate (as a collective body of Christians known as a local church).

LIVES AND MISSION SHAPED BY THE GOSPEL

Question 4 of our membership vows asks: *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?* And as Christians saved by grace alone, our answer to this must be in the affirmative. As redeemed sinners, we recognize that we are completely reliant on the grace of the Holy Spirit to sanctify us and to conform us into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). We often hear it said that our justification is by faith, and this is well and good, but equally important for us to understand is that our sanctification, too, is by faith. It is as we continue to trust and believe in Christ and His finished work that the Gospel begins to transform and to shape us. In short, it is only as we daily call to mind our justification that our sanctification progresses by the grace of Christ. Consider what Paul says in Romans 12:1-2, *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern*

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Our minds need to be renewed in view of the mercies of God (*i.e.* the Gospel), in order that we might be transformed from one degree or glory to another.

What does this look like individually? The Gospel shapes our thoughts, actions, deeds, and service. How? By the Holy Spirit through the Word. Psalm 1 shows us the way of the wise, delighting in the law and meditating upon it day and night. Because law-observance for the Christian is a matter of proper function and proof of life, it is something that is guided and normed by the Word of God. We need to read and study the Bible and to cultivate our relationship with God through the discipline of prayer and meditation.

What does this look like corporately? As was mentioned in our first meeting, the Bible repeatedly requires Christians to flesh out their faith through the principle of *one anotherness* in the context of a local church community. In a church community, people who otherwise would not have had anything to do with one another are brought together and united to Christ. This is messy business but it is necessary for our sanctification. What this means is that we are accountable to one another. As members of the church, we are devoted to the good of our brothers and sisters and we seek by God’s grace to love and serve one another both materially and spiritually. This was the clear example of the early church and this is what we ought to strive for as a community that’s together for good.

BENEFITS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CHURCH MEMBER

In a very real sense, the benefits and responsibilities of a church member is really no different from those of being a Christian united to Christ. Question 5 of our membership vows asks: *Do you promise to make diligent use of the means of grace, to share dutifully in the worship and mission of the Church and to give of your substance as the Lord may prosper you, for the advancement of His kingdom throughout the world?* Although stated in terms of responsibility, making diligent use of the means of grace (preaching, sacraments, and prayer) is actually one of the chief benefits of becoming a member. In addition to this is the spiritual oversight and care of the pastors as well as the ministry of the deacons, and of fellow brothers and sisters. A member of Pilgrim Community is an individual who enjoys the privilege of being part of a community of faith that is committed to journeying with him/her and growing him/her in knowledge (head), character (heart), and service (hand).

In addition to the benefits, as a member of the church, one is responsible to share dutifully in the worship and mission of the Church (we are all God’s gift to the

church and the role of your elders is to help you unpack your gifts for the service of the wider church body, *cf.* Ephesians 4) and to give of one's substance to support the church financially. At Pilgrim Community, we recognize that all of life is about Jesus. This recognition includes the way we use our money. We believe that people should not feel pressured or forced to support a church financially but instead urge people to give as an outworking of the good news about Jesus. From 2 Corinthians 8 for example, we see that Jesus, though he was rich, became poor that we might become rich. This is not a promise of financial wealth but a promise of richness of relationship with God through Jesus' death for our sins. The good news is that God is generous to us in giving his own son, Jesus. As a result, we want to share this good news and be generous to others as well. At Pilgrim Community, this means giving to support the work of the church, its leaders, and the community. The most helpful way our members can share in covering these costs is by giving regularly.

Each member is urged to take what Pastor Kevin DeYoung calls a "Plus One" approach to Church: "In addition to the Sunday morning worship service, pick one thing in the life of your congregation and be very committed to it."

TOGETHER FOR GOOD

Together expresses our one-another relationship as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. '*For good*' means 1. we are here to do good works (Ephesians 2:10), 2. we are here for the long haul. (Jeremiah 29). We want to seek the good of Katipunan, we don't just want to proclaim justification we want to seek and fight for justice.

We are together in the sense that we are an organized organism. We follow a trellis and the vine paradigm to ministry. We want to grow the vine and only have the right amount of trellises to facilitate this. This also means that we focus on persons not programs. We want to love and serve one another because this is the mark of the Christian Church according to Jesus (John 13:35). Because our primary concern is the Vine:

We maintain a missional posture. We are always telling people the good news and encouraging believers to preach the gospel to themselves. The gospel is not just what gets us saved (justification) it is what keeps us saved (sanctification) until that day when our salvation is complete (glorification). Everything we do, we want to be mindful of outsiders, not allowing them to feel like they are any more on the outside than necessary—no Christianese tribal language, everything is explained and done in a contextually sensitive way. We want to know the fears

and dreams of our community so we can show them how Jesus and the gospel addresses these.

We emphasize church-planting from day one. We are convinced that because the local church is the hope of the world, we need more of them in the world. In order to have a voice we need critical mass. Consider the Muslims in Greenhills and in Metro Manila. They are winning the numbers game through birth and transplanting.

Justice+Mercy+Shalom are among our top concerns as a community. Our God is passionate about justice—we see this on the Cross. He is also passionate about Mercy—we also see this on the Cross. And He is a God of *Shalom*. We are agents of His Justice, Mercy, and Shalom. When Jesus walked the earth, He inaugurated His kingdom. The old has gone, the new things are come. Although we recognize that we will never “Christianize” the world, or renew the fallen world enough to turn things around (this is the work of Christ at His return), we nevertheless seek to do good because this is our design. We were made to do good for God’s glory. And as a city within our city, an alternate community in our communities, we preach the kingdom that Jesus had come to establish. “Even if I knew that tomorrow [or five days from now] the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” (Martin Luther)

Our trajectory is City>Nation>World. The Bible story begins in a garden but ends in a city. We recognize the strategic importance of cities in God’s plan of redemption. There is a simple argument for prioritizing cities (*i.e.* centers of human flourishing and cultural formation), ‘*as the city goes, so goes the nation.*’ As New York City goes, so go the rest of the Global Cities. As Manila goes, so go the Philippines. More than fifty percent of the world’s population live in cities and the numbers are growing. As such for the simple reason that cities contain more image-bearers than out in the country, we argue that cities (being underserved ministry fields as they are) need more gospel work.

OUR COMMON DISCIPLINE

- ⑥ *Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?*

THE THIRD MARK

Among many of the important recoveries of the Protestant Reformation is the rediscovery of the marks of the true church. The reformers, realizing the need to distinguish the true gospel community of Jesus Christ from other sects that would indiscriminately apply the designation *Church* to themselves, searched the scriptures diligently to ascertain for themselves the marks or characteristics of the true church of Jesus Christ. The reformers rightly recognized that the true church of Jesus Christ must neither be defined by the number of its members and the rate of its quantitative growth; nor by its existing ministries and committees. Rather the true church of Jesus Christ must be identified by three very important marks (*cf.* Article 29, The Belgic Confession):

1. *The preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel,*
2. *the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ,*
3. *and the faithful exercise of church discipline according to the Word of God.*

DISCIPLINE AND DISCIPLESHIP

I find it interesting that while biblical church discipline may be at a decline in many congregations today, yet there seems to be a renewed interest in doing discipleship ministries. Increasingly, the need to care for and to grow our people in a more focused and intimate setting as a supplement to the Lord's day preaching is seen to be the better way to *do church*. Unhappily however, it seems that church discipline is seldom the subject of these discipleship initiatives. Even "accountability" groups often tend towards a more *group therapy* bent, where sin is often not dealt with and Biblical discipline is not properly exercised.

I am convinced that the prevailing pessimism towards church discipline is borne out of a misunderstanding of what biblical church discipline is all about. People

tend to have a negative notion of what discipline is, equating all discipline with punishment, penalty, and censure. While discipline may indeed be negative at times, yet not all discipline is and should be seen as negative. One connection that I feel is often missed in the discussion of discipline is the fact that, etymologically, *discipline* derives from the word *disciple*. What this tells us is that discipline and discipleship should actually be seen together. When our Lord Jesus Christ gave us the great commission, He affirmed this important connection by saying: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20, emphasis mine.) Here Jesus charges us to make disciples not only by baptizing them into the Name of the Triune God but also by teaching them to **observe** everything that He has commanded. Discipleship carries with it the responsibility of teaching our people to observe or obey the words of Christ—which essentially is a matter of discipline as well (especially where the Lord it is disobeyed!)

A PICTURE OF DISCIPLINE IN DISCIPLESHIP

Matthew 18:15-20 is commonly recognized as the portion of scripture where our Lord Jesus Christ was teaching about church discipline. At Pilgrim Community, we are committed to following the steps outlined here by our Lord in the carrying out of church discipline for the purity of the Church and for the restoration of our erring brothers and sisters. What follows is the four-step process of Biblical church discipline.

Step One

In verse 15 Jesus says, “*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*” What this means is that if a brother commits a sin that offends us, then we ought to approach our brother privately, and in the spirit of humility, gentleness, and love to make known to them their sin. Some see this passage as exclusively applicable to scandalous sins such as drunkenness, promiscuity, adultery, or other *serious* sins only. It is interesting however that our Lord does not continue His statement with a long list of sins that merit this kind of confrontation. Some may simply prefer that our Lord enumerate to us what kinds of sins deserve Step One but our Lord does not seem to see the need for this. So what kind of sin should we seek to guard against anyway?

I believe that as Christians we ought to flee from all kinds of sin. We should not choose between big or small sins. The point is that we ought to correct all wrongdoings and we need to inform our brothers and sisters in the faith of whenever they say or do something that hurts us.

In the context of a small group, this may happen often as we may inadvertently hurt our brothers and sisters by sinning against them in a certain way. Usually this is in the form of a hurtful or careless word or comment. Within a small group setting, it would be easier to reconcile with a brother or sister because then we would be able to talk to the offending brother or sister immediately to express our hurt and to initiate reconciliation. However, Step One is often not that simple. The idea of confronting a sinning brother or sister is borne out of the need to maintain the unity and purity of the body of Christ. Of course when our brother sins against us, that is a threat to unity and therefore we ought to seek reconciliation as soon as possible. However, it is the case that sometimes the sin that is of concern is not one that is committed against us or against anyone else in our small group. In cases such as these, the point of doing Step One is to maintain the purity of the body of Christ and to encourage our sinning brother or sister to repent and to seek forgiveness from the Lord.

In such cases, if we are aware of a specific sin that our brother or sister has done, then let us first spend some time in prayer to the Lord beseeching Him to be merciful to us and to grant us a heart of gentleness and humility. May we not forget that we too are mere sinners saved by grace. Let us also examine ourselves to see if we too have any sins that we need to repent of. (*cf.* Luke 6:41-42) Then, being convinced in our own hearts that we have the Lord's bidding to speak to our brother, let us seek him out to speak the truth to him in all love and concern for his repentance. This should be done in private. If our brother confesses to the sin and repents, then the matter should be considered settled. If the brother who confesses also confesses that the sin in question is one that is a constant struggle for him, then the confronting brother should then offer to hold the repenting brother accountable by regularly checking up on him and spending time with him in prayer. The small group is a wonderful way to follow up on certain corrected sins in a more encouraging environment as the group may take some time to talk about certain sins and how to deal with them biblically without mentioning specific names.

Step Two

If the sinning brother refuses to listen private rebuke, then Step Two may be pursued. Jesus tells us in verses 16, "But if he does not listen, take one or two

others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Here in Step Two, the confronting brother ought now to take with him one or two other Christians to again confront the sinning brother in love. The idea of taking two or three witnesses in Step Two is to ensure that fairness and justice is maintained. The accompanying witnesses would serve to confirm whether the sinning brother was indeed rebuked biblically and whether he responds positively or negatively. This is important especially if the first confronting brother is the one sinned against. How easy it would be for him to claim that the sinning brother is obstinate and would not repent simply because he himself harbored ill feelings toward the brother on account of the offense he sustained. The one or two witnesses would serve to guard against such biases and should therefore not take sides or gang up against the sinning brother. The protection is not so much for the confronting brother as it is for the sinning brother as well. The witnesses need to confirm whether there is a true heart of repentance or whether the sinning brother is indifferent or hostile. If the brother repents and seeks forgiveness, then the matter is settled and no other people need to know about this incident unless the repenting brother wishes to address a larger congregation in order to confess his sin and to implore the church to pray for him. In which case, the elders should be informed. If the brother who confesses also confesses that the sin in question is one that is a constant struggle for him, then the confronting brothers should take steps to keep the struggling brother accountable.

Step Three

The third step is to the ‘tell it to the church’ and should only be pursued if after repeated entreating by the one plus two or three, the sinning brother still is unresponsive. If the sinning brother obstinately refuses to listen and respond to the confrontation of two or three fellow Christians after a reasonable period of time, the concerned brothers (the witnesses) should then tell it to the church. In verse 17a, Jesus says, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”

The way that this should be done must be in an orderly fashion. Just because Step Three means to tell it to the church does not mean that the two or three witnesses could just go around at church spreading the news about the sinning brother. The matter must first be brought to the knowledge of the shepherds of the church. The witnesses are to approach an elder of the church to schedule an emergency meeting with the church session.

At the meeting, the witnesses would be permitted to present their case before the elders, paying attention to every detail followed in steps one and two. Unless the

session is convinced that the alleged sinning brother has truly sinned or is continuing in sin and therefore refusing to repent even after having been appropriately confronted for a reasonable period of time, then Step Three is not carried out. The whole session must agree and be of one mind before further action may be sought. It is important that the session be unanimous in their decision as Step Three is a matter that would involve the whole congregation including possibly the sinning brother's close friends and family members. If they are less than sure of actual sin, then the elders must decide to ascertain the truth of things first. If the session is convinced of the matter and recognizes that sin has indeed been committed that threatens the purity and unity of Christ's church, then the session should send a letter to the individual warning and explaining to him that Step Three of church discipline will be taken if the session does not receive word of repentance by a certain date. Personally delivering the letter and visiting with the individual should be prioritized. When the set date has passed and there is yet no response from the offending brother, then the session should decide to bring the matter to the attention of the whole church.

On the set Lord's day, the elders are to make the individual's sin and refusal to repent public during a Communion service. The elders are to explain the case to the congregation and emphasize to them that the intent of Church discipline is not punitive but restorative. The congregation is to actively and aggressively pursue the offending individual and to plead with him to repent before Step Four is sought by the church to protect the purity of the fellowship (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 5:6-7), to warn the Church of the weightiness of sin (1 Timothy 5:20), and to testify to the watching world that righteousness and holiness are non-negotiable within the church of Jesus Christ.

In carrying out Step Three, the congregation is to remember that the offending brother, though in sin, is still a brother nonetheless and therefore they must lovingly beseech the offender to confess his sin and to repent of it. The members of the congregation, and most especially his close friends and family members and to seek opportunities to call him back and to make him aware of his sin. If the brother listens to the church and repents then he is to be publicly forgiven and restored. This is to be initiated by the elders of the church. How long should the church continue to pursue the sinning brother? This is a question hard to answer and must be determined on a case-to-case basis. The shepherds of the church must continue to send correspondences to the sinning brother while also seeking ways to meet with him personally. Gospel-shaped love should guide the elders as well as the congregation in their efforts to seek out the lost sheep.

Step Four

Sometimes, even after being sought out by the church and encouraged to repent and to desist of his sin, a sinning brother would still be unresponsive and refuse the counsel of his church. In such instances, the final step of church discipline should be administered to vindicate the holiness and purity of the Church of Jesus Christ. A professing Christian who still refuses to repent of his sin proves himself to be a blatant walking contradiction. Whereas the entirety of Christian life is to be characterized by an attitude of repentance and humility, any person who claims to be part of the gospel community of Jesus Christ but boldly persists in sin shows himself to be otherwise. In such instances, the elders must carry out Step Four.

In verse 17b, our Lord Jesus says, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In the context of the church, we ought not to have communion/fellowship with non-believers because these people have not confessed Jesus Christ and repented of their sin. The unrepentant offender concerned is then like the gentiles and the tax collectors in his refusal to repent of his sin and to maintain fellowship with his church. It is not that the church refuses to accept the brother anymore in Step Four but rather that the offending brother, by his obstinacy, has first rejected the fellowship of his church and Lord and has put shame upon the name of Jesus Christ. This ought never to be tolerated and thus the church should vindicate the name of our Lord by excluding this sinner from our fellowship.

The elders are to initiate this by informing the church that the offending brother has, after much entreating and encouragement, refused to repent of his sin and to seek restoration with the church. From that time on then, the church is to treat the offender as one treats an unbeliever. He is to be excommunicated from the fellowship of believers. It must be stressed that the intent even of excommunication is not punitive but restorative. By excluding the individual from the fellowship, it is not meant that he or she would no longer be admitted to the church but rather that he or she is to be treated as an unbeliever. Under normal circumstances he is not to be barred from attending our worship and hearing the word preached perchance the Holy Spirit works through the word in drawing back the backslider to Himself. Other than the hearing of the word preached however, the individual is to be excluded from all spiritual exercises of the church. He is to be barred from the Lord’s table and individual members are also to refrain from continuing to associate with the individual casually over coffee or a meal. The reason for this is that the church is not to have approving fellowship with this person until he repents. The goal of this step is to call back the wandering sinner

to the fold of Christ. If after all efforts, he still does not return, then the church is to leave him be. Until he repents, this person is to be regarded as one who has apostatized and proved to never have truly professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A Step in the Right Direction

If the offending brother, after having been excommunicated, finally returns to the church to confess his sin, then a fifth step is to be taken. After being in sin for so long and then finally returning to the church, the man must first be tested with regards to true faith. The elders are to welcome him back but he is to be placed on probation to ensure that after a process of counseling and dialogue, the individual would be ready for full restoration as a member in the church.

While on probation, the individual is still to be barred from the Lord's table but no longer to be excluded from other spiritual exercises. The members of the congregation are informed of the individual's confession and encouraged to aid him in his spiritual growth. Meanwhile, the elders are to schedule regular counseling with this member to ensure that he has truly forsaken his sin and is truly repentant. After a probationary period of monitoring, the session should decide to restore the brother fully during a communion service. It is important that before this final restoration is enacted that the repentant brother be reinstated in a loving small group to continue in discipleship and nurture.

The matter of discipline and discipleship is one that must be carried out by all true and faithful gospel communities. Though it may seem like a daunting task yet it must be exercised to ensure the purity of Christ's church and to enable the members to grow in their faith as a body. When practiced faithfully, Steps Three and Four would normally not be reached as a sufficiently gospel-centered congregation would be characterized by repentance and calling all peoples to repentance and subjection to the rule of Jesus Christ.

JOINING THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Dr. B. Hoyt Evans

In his book, *The Creed of Presbyterianism*, Dr. Egbert W. Smith writes of the Presbyterian church: “Her door of entrance is as wide as the gates of heaven.” In a large sense, this statement is very true. The requirements for membership in the Presbyterian church are basic and biblical.

Actually, people may become members of the Presbyterian church in three different ways:

1. They may be received by the session (the elders) of a particular Presbyterian church on the basis of their transfer by letter from another evangelical church. (An evangelical church is one that requires a profession of faith in the historic Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for membership.) Members who are received from other churches are not baptized and are not required to make another public profession of faith.
2. They may unite with a Presbyterian church by making a restatement or reaffirmation of their faith before the session. Sometimes for reasons of time or circumstance, it is impossible for a person to secure a certificate of membership in order that he may move his membership to a Presbyterian church. Some evangelical churches will not grant certificates of transfer allowing their members to unite with churches of other denominations. In such situations, the person who desires to join the Presbyterian church is asked to re-affirm his faith before the session by answering the same questions asked of those who unite with the church on profession of faith. Such persons, however, are not rebaptized or required to make another profession of faith.
3. A new Christian, or a child of the Covenant, unites with a Presbyterian church by making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Those who become members of the church in this way appear before the session and answer satisfactorily five fundamental questions prescribed by the Book of Church Order. If they give evidence of sincerity and earnestness in their faith in Christ, the session votes to admit them to the ordinances of the church and to church membership. They ordinarily then appear before the congregation to repeat their public profession of faith in Christ, usually by answering again the five questions from the Book of Church Order. At that time they also receive Christian baptism, if they have not already been baptized in infancy.

In whichever of these three ways a person becomes a member of a Presbyterian church, it is assumed that he understands and gives agreement to the five questions in the Book of Church Order. These are the basic vows of church membership, describing what Presbyterians believe to be necessary in order for a person to be a Christian. The questions do not constitute an examination of intelligence or learning; they are a description of Christian experience as the Presbyterian church understands it.

Sin And Its Consequences

The first questions asked of those who seek to become members of a Presbyterian church is: “Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope save in his sovereign mercy?” This question points to the fact of sin and what sin does in the lives of people. For a person to become a member of the church, he should know what sin is, that he himself is a sinner, and that sin leads to spiritual death. No one who thinks himself “good” is approaching religious experience prepared to understand or accept Jesus Christ as Savior in full, Christian sense.

What is sin? It is “self” going against the will and the way of God. God made known His will and His way in His Commandments. When we violate the laws of God we are guilty of sin. “Whosoever committed sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4).

There are two ways of breaking the law: (1) by failing to do what the law requires, and (2) by doing what the law forbids. A man who fails to pay his taxes breaks the law by failing to do what it requires. A man who drives fifty miles an hour in a thirty-mile speed zone breaks the law by doing what it forbids. Men violate God’s law in the same ways. Paul wrote, “For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Romans 7:19).

Whosoever else may be harmed by it, sin is basically an offense against God. When David had committed a grievous evil against Uriah and his wife, Bathsheba, he prayed to God, “Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight” (Psalm 51:4). Sin is so offensive to God that He cannot look on it: “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Habakkuk 1:13).

Who does sin affect? It touches and damages the life of every person. All who ever lived have sinned except one, and that is Christ himself. The Bible states very

clearly that all are sinners and that all have sinned. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8; see also Ecclesiastes 7:20 and Romans 3:23). Not only does the Bible tell us we are sinners, but when we are honest with ourselves, our consciences tell us the same thing.

Where does sin lead? It always leads to death. Death came to our first parents, because of their sin. All of their descendants have been sinners and have deserved death because of their sins. “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Romans 5:12; see also Romans 6:23 and Ezekiel 18:4). Spiritual death means being separated from God forever (Isaiah 59:2).

In our own strength there is nothing we can do to overcome the evil effects of sin in our lives. We know what we ought to do, but we find ourselves unable to do it. Paul said, “For I know that in me [that is in my flesh] dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not” (Romans 7:18).

If there is any help for us as sinners, it must come from someone else. Other people cannot help, because they are sinners too. Our help comes only from the Lord. There is nothing we can do about sin, but he has already done all that is necessary. We deserve death, but God takes away our sin and gives us eternal life in its place. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Who Jesus Is And What He Does

The second question asked of those who would join a Presbyterian church is: “Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for your salvation as he is offered in the gospel?” In order for a person to say “yes” to this question, he must know who Jesus is and what he does.

When the Bible refers to Jesus as the Son of God, it clearly means that he is equal with God, that he is God. He said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). Again he said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). The Bible ascribes to the Lord Jesus qualities, honors, and works that can belong to God alone. The clear estimate of the Scriptures is that Jesus Christ is God.

The Lord Jesus is also human. The Bible represents him as a human being who was born of a woman, who lived a truly human life, and who died a real death.

The Scriptures leave no doubt as to the reality of his humanity. As to his nature, our Lord is both God and Man.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (see Luke 19:10 and Mark 10:45). He could save others because he had no sin of his own for which to answer (see 1 Peter 2:22). He died in the place of sinners to answer for their sins (Romans 5:6,8). He, the Son of God, took the punishment of those who were guilty in order that the guilty might share the reward of the innocent (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Lord Jesus died our death that we might live his life.

When we say the Jesus Christ saves people, we mean that he delivers them from the death and punishment they were to receive because of their sin. Instead of death and punishment, he gives them life and joy. There is a great difference between being saved and being lost (see John 3:36). Those who are saved by Christ have the hope of the resurrection and the hope of heaven (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17 and John 14:2,3). Those who have not found him have not this hope.

When mealtime comes around, a healthy boy will know that he is hungry. He also knows that his mother loves him, and that she has prepared food for him and the rest of the family. He believes these things, but his belief must go one step more before his hunger can be satisfied and his body can be nourished. He must actually sit down and eat. Believing in Christ for salvation is very much like this. The sinner may believe that he is a lost sinner and that Christ can save him, but before he can be saved, he must accept Christ's salvation (see Romans 10:9 and John 1:12).

It is so easy to be lost. All that is necessary is to neglect or refuse to accept Christ as Savior (see John 3:18). It is also easy to enter the door leading to salvation. All one must do is to receive deliberately God's free gift of life (See Ephesians 2:8-9).

We remember always one important fact which must never be overlooked: There is only one way to be saved, for there is none other Name given us but that of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 4:12 and John 14:6).

How A Christian Should Live

The third question asked by those who unite with a Presbyterian church is this: "Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will live as a follower of Christ?" This question indicates that being a Christian makes a difference in the way a person lives. Before a person can

faithfully make the promise that the question requires, he must know what the Christian life is and how he can go about living it.

The book of 1 John calls on Christians to “walk in the light” and “walk in love.” Walking in the light means knowing and following the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible (see Psalm 119:111,130). Walking in love means living a life of love toward God and others. Jesus said that love of God and love of our neighbors is the fulfillment of the law (Matthew 22:36-40).

Now this is not to suggest that we are saved because of the way we live! We are saved by believing in what Christ did for our salvation and receiving Him (Ephesians 2:8-9). But we certainly will live in a different and better way because we are saved. . . because we are Christians.

A Christian is a changed person, and he ought to live a changed life (2 Corinthians 5:17). The same Christ who saves from sin will, by his Spirit, help believers live the kind of lives they ought to live: “As ye therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him” (Colossians 2:6). We receive Christ by faith. We must live the Christian life in the same way--faith. This was Paul’s secret of Christian living: “I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me” (Philippians 4:13).

The Church And Its Work

The fourth question asked prospective Presbyterian church members is: “Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?” Before anyone can honestly and intelligently say “yes” to this question, he must know something about the church and its work.

The Bible describes the church as “the body of Christ.” Christ is the Head of the body, and those who believe in him as Lord and Savior are the members of the body. The work of the church is to worship God, to teach and preach the Bible, and to provide fellowship for its members. The church does its work through its teachers, preachers and missionaries; through its services and sacraments; through its organizations and activities; through its schools and colleges; through its boards and agencies; and through its literature.

How can an individual church member support the worship and work of the whole church? One of the most important ways is by attending its services faithfully (Hebrews 10:25). He can share in the work of the church by doing willingly whatever he is asked to do (Colossians 3:23). Church members support

the work of the church by their gifts. We believe that every Christian ought to tithe, to give a tenth of his income to the work of the Lord (Malachi 3:10). But the most important way a church can support his church is to pray for it. This is something which every member can do (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

The fifth question persons are asked when they become members of a Presbyterian church is this: "Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?" In order to answer this question honestly, a person must know several things about the government of the church.

Christ is the Head of the Church. Members of the church look to him alone as the supreme authority. The task of the church, then, is to teach, explain, and enforce the law of Christ as we find it in the Scriptures. The Presbyterian church has a constitution, a statement of what we believe the Bible teaches. This constitution has two main parts. The first part is doctrinal: the teaching of the Bible about what we are to believe and how we are to live. This doctrinal part, sometimes called the Confession of Faith, is actually divided into three parts: the Confession of Faith proper, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. But the constitution also has a section on government, expressing what we believe the Bible teaches about how the church should be governed. The divisions of this Book of Church Order are: the Form of Government, Rules of Discipline, and the Directory of Worship.

What does it mean when the Presbyterian church member promises to submit to the government and discipline of the church and to study its purity and peace? It means that he should know and obey the constitution of the church, and that he should honor the officers of the church as they teach and enforce the constitution.

Into this fellowship, perhaps the Lord Jesus has called you who read these pages. If so, may he, the great and only Head of the Church lead you into ever fuller experiences of his grace and ever increasing usefulness in his kingdom, and to him be the glory.

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

Q. 1. *What is the chief end of man?*

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Q. 2. *What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Q. 3. *What do the Scriptures principally teach?*

A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Q. 4. *What is God?*

A. God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

Q. 5. *Are there more Gods than one?*

A. There is but one only, the living and true God.

Q. 6. *How many persons are there in the godhead?*

A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

Q. 7. *What are the decrees of God?*

A. The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Q. 8. *How doth God execute his decrees?*

A. God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.

Q. 9. *What is the work of creation?*

A. The work of creation is God's making all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.

Q. 10. *How did God create man?*

A. God created man male and female, after his own

image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.

Q. 11. *What are God's works of providence?*

A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

Q. 12. *What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?*

A. When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

Q. 13. *Did our first parents continue in the estate wherein they were created?*

A. Our first parents, being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the estate wherein they were created, by sinning against God.

Q. 14. *What is sin?*

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

Q. 15. *What was the sin whereby our first parents fell from the estate wherein they were created?*

A. The sin whereby our first parents fell from the estate wherein they were created was their eating the forbidden fruit.

Q. 16. *Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression?*

A. The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression.

Q. 17. *Into what estate did the fall bring mankind?*

A. The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.

Q. 18. *Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?*

A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin;

together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.

Q. 19. *What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?*

A. All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

Q. 20. *Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?*

A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a redeemer.

Q. 21. *Who is the redeemer of God's elect?*

A. The only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.

Q. 22. *How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man?*

A. Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.

Q. 23. *What offices doth Christ execute as our redeemer?*

A. Christ, as our redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.

Q. 24. *How doth Christ execute the office of a prophet?*

A. Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.

Q. 25. *How doth Christ execute the office of a priest?*

A. Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.

Q. 26. *How doth Christ execute the office of a king?*

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

Q. 27. *Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist?*

A. Christ's humiliation consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.

Q. 28. *Wherein consisteth Christ's exaltation?*

A. Christ's exaltation consisteth in his rising again from the dead on the third day, in ascending up into heaven, in sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and in coming to judge the world at the last day.

Q. 29. *How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ?*

A. We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by his Holy Spirit.

Q. 30. *How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?*

A. The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.

Q. 31. *What is effectual calling?*

A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

Q. 32. *What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?*

A. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.

Q. 33. *What is justification?*

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Q. 34. *What is adoption?*

A. Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby

we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God.

Q. 35. *What is sanctification?*

A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

Q. 36. *What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification?*

A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification, are, assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

Q. 37. *What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?*

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Q. 38. *What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?*

A. At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

Q. 39. *What is the duty which God requireth of man?*

A. The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will.

Q. 40. *What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of his obedience?*

A. The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience was the moral law.

Q. 41. *Where is the moral law summarily comprehended?*

A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments.

Q. 42. *What is the sum of the ten commandments?*

A. The sum of the ten commandments is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves.

Q. 43. *What is the preface to the ten commandments?*

A. The preface to the ten commandments is in these words, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Q. 44. *What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?*

A. The preface to the ten commandments teacheth us that because God is the Lord, and our God, and redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.

Q. 45. *Which is the first commandment?*

A. The first commandment is, Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Q. 46. *What is required in the first commandment?*

A. The first commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly.

Q. 47. *What is forbidden in the first commandment?*

A. The first commandment forbiddeth the denying, or not worshiping and glorifying the true God as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to him alone.

Q. 48. *What are we specially taught by these words before me in the first commandment?*

A. These words before me in the first commandment teach us that God, who seeth all things, taketh notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other god.

Q. 49. *Which is the second commandment?*

A. The second commandment is, Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Q. 50. *What is required in the second commandment?*

A. The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all

such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his word.

Q. 51. *What is forbidden in the second commandment?*

A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word.

Q. 52. *What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?*

A. The reasons annexed to the second commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, his propriety in us, and the zeal he hath to his own worship.

Q. 53. *Which is the third commandment?*

A. The third commandment is, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Q. 54. *What is required in the third commandment?*

A. The third commandment requireth the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works.

Q. 55. *What is forbidden in the third commandment?*

A. The third commandment forbiddeth all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God maketh himself known.

Q. 56. *What is the reason annexed to the third commandment?*

A. The reason annexed to the third commandment is that however the breakers of this commandment may escape punishment from men, yet the Lord our God will not suffer them to escape his righteous judgment.

Q. 57. *Which is the fourth commandment?*

A. The fourth commandment is, Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Q. 58. *What is required in the fourth commandment?*

A. The fourth commandment requireth the keeping holy to God such set times as he hath appointed in his word; expressly one whole day in seven, to be a holy sabbath to himself.

Q. 59. *Which day of the seven hath God appointed to be the weekly sabbath?*

A. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian sabbath.

Q. 60. *How is the sabbath to be sanctified?*

A. The sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.

Q. 61. *What is forbidden in the fourth commandment?*

A. The fourth commandment forbiddeth the omission or careless performance of the duties required, and the profaning the day by idleness, or doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words or works, about our worldly employments or recreations.

Q. 62. *What are the reasons annexed to the fourth commandment?*

A. The reasons annexed to the fourth commandment are, God's allowing us six days of the week for our own employments, his challenging a special propriety in the seventh, his own example, and his blessing the sabbath day.

Q. 63. *Which is the fifth commandment?*

A. The fifth commandment is, Honor thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

Q. 64. *What is required in the fifth commandment?*

A. The fifth commandment requireth the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors or equals.

Q. 65. *What is forbidden in the fifth commandment?*

A. The fifth commandment forbiddeth the neglecting of, or doing anything against, the honor and duty which belongeth to every one in their several places and relations.

Q. 66. *What is the reason annexed to the fifth commandment?*

A. The reason annexed to the fifth commandment is a promise of long life and prosperity (as far as it shall serve for God's glory and their own good) to all such as keep this commandment.

Q. 67. *Which is the sixth commandment?*

A. The sixth commandment is, Thou shalt not kill.

Q. 68. *What is required in the sixth commandment?*

A. The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.

Q. 69. *What is forbidden in the sixth commandment?*

A. The sixth commandment forbiddeth the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto.

Q. 70. *Which is the seventh commandment?*

A. The seventh commandment is, Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Q. 71. *What is required in the seventh commandment?*

A. The seventh commandment requireth the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech and behavior.

Q. 72. *What is forbidden in the seventh commandment?*

A. The seventh commandment forbiddeth all unchaste thoughts, words and actions.

Q. 73. *Which is the eighth commandment?*

A. The eighth commandment is, Thou shalt not steal.

Q. 74. *What is required in the eighth commandment?*

A. The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

Q. 75. *What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?*

A. The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever

doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor's wealth or outward estate.

Q. 76. *Which is the ninth commandment?*

A. The ninth commandment is, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Q. 77. *What is required in the ninth commandment?*

A. The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor's good name, especially in witness-bearing.

Q. 78. *What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?*

A. The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbor's good name.

Q. 79. *Which is the tenth commandment?*

A. The tenth commandment is, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.

Q. 80. *What is required in the tenth commandment?*

A. The tenth commandment requireth full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor, and all that is his.

Q. 81. *What is forbidden in the tenth commandment?*

A. The tenth commandment forbiddeth all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his.

Q. 82. *Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?*

A. No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word and deed.

Q. 83. *Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?*

A. Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

Q. 84. *What doth every sin deserve?*

A. Every sin deserveth God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.

Q. 85. *What doth God require of us that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?*

A. To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.

Q. 86. *What is faith in Jesus Christ?*

A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

Q. 87. *What is repentance unto life?*

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Q. 88. *What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?*

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Q. 89. *How is the word made effectual to salvation?*

A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Q. 90. *How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?*

A. That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

Q. 91. *How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?*

A. The sacraments become effectual means of

salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

Q. 92. *What is a sacrament?*

A. A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.

Q. 93. *Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?*

A. The sacraments of the New Testament are baptism and the Lord's supper.

Q. 94. *What is baptism?*

A. Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's.

Q. 95. *To whom is baptism to be administered?*

A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized.

Q. 96. *What is the Lord's supper?*

A. The Lord's supper is a sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to Christ's appointment, his death is showed forth; and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

Q. 97. *What is required to the worthy receiving of the Lord's supper?*

A. It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience; lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.

Q. 98. *What is prayer?*

A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God,

for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

Q. 99. *What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?*

A. The whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's prayer.

Q. 100. *What doth the preface of the Lord's prayer teach us?*

A. The preface of the Lord's prayer, which is, Our Father which art in heaven, teacheth us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father able and ready to help us; and that we should pray with and for others.

Q. 101. *What do we pray for in the first petition?*

A. In the first petition, which is, Hallowed be thy name, we pray that God would enable us and others to glorify him in all that whereby he maketh himself known; and that he would dispose all things to his own glory.

Q. 102. *What do we pray for in the second petition?*

A. In the second petition, which is, Thy kingdom come, we pray that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

Q. 103. *What do we pray for in the third petition?*

A. In the third petition, which is, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven, we pray that God, by his grace, would make us able and willing to know, obey and submit to his will in all things, as the angels do in heaven.

Q. 104. *What do we pray for in the fourth petition?*

A. In the fourth petition, which is, Give us this day our daily bread, we pray that of God's free gift we may receive a competent portion of the good things of this life, and enjoy his blessing with them.

Q. 105. *What do we pray for in the fifth petition?*

A. In the fifth petition, which is, And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, we pray that God,

for Christ's sake, would freely pardon all our sins; which we are the rather encouraged to ask, because by his grace we are enabled from the heart to forgive others.

Q. 106. *What do we pray for in the sixth petition?*

A. In the sixth petition, which is, And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, we pray that God would either keep us from being tempted to sin, or support and deliver us when we are tempted.

Q. 107. *What doth the conclusion of the Lord's prayer teach us?*

A. The conclusion of the Lord's prayer, which is, For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen, teacheth us to take our encouragement in prayer from God only, and in our prayers to praise him, ascribing kingdom, power and glory to him. And in testimony of our desire, and assurance to be heard, we say, Amen.

A BRIEF AND UNTECHNICAL STATEMENT OF THE REFORMED FAITH

B. B. Warfield

1. *I BELIEVE* that my one aim in life and death should be to glorify God and enjoy him forever; and that God teaches me how to glorify and enjoy him in his holy Word, that is, the Bible, which he has given by the infallible inspiration of his Holy Spirit in order that I may certainly know what I am to believe concerning him and what duty he requires of me.
2. *I BELIEVE* that God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and incomparable in all that he is; one God but three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, my Creator, my Redeemer, and my Sanctifier; in whose power and wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and truth I may safely put my trust.
3. *I BELIEVE* that the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, are the work of God's hands; and that all that he has made he directs and governs in all their actions; so that they fulfill the end for which they were created, and I who trust in him shall not be put to shame but may rest securely in the protection of his almighty love.
4. *I BELIEVE* that God created man after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and entered into a covenant of life with him upon the sole condition of the obedience that was his due: so that it was by willfully sinning against God that man fell into the sin and misery in which I have been born.
5. *I BELIEVE*, that, being fallen in Adam, my first father, I am by nature a child of wrath, under the condemnation of God and corrupted in body and soul, prone to evil, and liable to eternal death; from which dreadful state I cannot be delivered save through the unmerited grace of God my Savior.
6. *I BELIEVE* that God has not left the world to perish in its sin, but out of the great love wherewith he has loved it, has from all eternity graciously chosen unto himself a multitude which no man can number, to deliver them out of their sin and misery, and of them to build up again in the world his kingdom of righteousness: in which kingdom I may be assured I have my part, if I hold fast to Christ the Lord.

7. *I BELIEVE* that God has redeemed his people unto himself through Jesus Christ our Lord; who, though he was and ever continues to be the eternal Son of God, yet was born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them that are under the law: I believe that he bore the penalty due to my sins in his own body on the tree, and fulfilled in his own person the obedience I owe to the righteousness of God, and now presents me to his Father as his purchased possession, to the praise of the glory of his grace forever: wherefore renouncing all merit of my own, I put all my trust only in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ my redeemer.
8. *I BELIEVE* that Jesus Christ my redeemer, who died for my offences was raised again for my justification, and ascended into the heavens, where he sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty, continually making intercession for his people, and governing the whole world as head over all things for his Church: so that I need fear no evil and may surely know that nothing can snatch me out of his hands and nothing can separate me from his love.
9. *I BELIEVE* that the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ is effectually applied to all his people by the Holy Spirit, who works faith in me and thereby unites me to Christ, renews me in the whole man after the image of God, and enables me more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness; until, this gracious work having been completed in me, I shall be received into glory: in which great hope abiding, I must ever strive to perfect holiness in the fear of God.
10. *I BELIEVE* that God requires of me, under the gospel, first of all, that, out of a true sense of my sin and misery and apprehension of his mercy in Christ, I should turn with grief and hatred away from sin and receive and rest upon Jesus Christ alone for salvation; that, so being united to him, I may receive pardon for my sins and be accepted as righteous in God's sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to me and received by faith alone: and thus and thus only do I believe I may be received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.
11. *I BELIEVE* that, having been pardoned and accepted for Christ's sake, it is further required of me that I walk in the Spirit whom he has purchased for me, and by whom love is shed abroad in my heart; fulfilling the obedience I owe to Christ my King; faithfully performing all the duties laid upon me by the holy law of God my heavenly Father; and ever reflecting in my life and conduct, the perfect example that has been set me by Christ Jesus my Leader,

who has died for me and granted to me his Holy Spirit just that I may do the good works which God has afore prepared that I should walk in them.

12. *I BELIEVE* that God has established his Church in the world and endowed it with the ministry of the Word and the holy ordinances of Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Prayer; in order that through these as means, the riches of his grace in the gospel may be made known to the world, and, by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them, the benefits of redemption may be communicated to his people: wherefore also it is required of me that I attend on these means of grace with diligence, preparation, and prayer, so that through them I may be instructed and strengthened in faith, and in holiness of life and in love; and that I use my best endeavors to carry this gospel and convey these means of grace to the whole world.
13. *I BELIEVE* that as Jesus Christ has once come in grace, so also is he to come a second time in glory, to judge the world in righteousness and assign to each his eternal award: and I believe that if I die in Christ, my soul shall be at death made perfect in holiness and go home to the Lord; and when he shall return in his majesty I shall be raised in glory and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity: encouraged by which blessed hope it is required of me willingly to take my part in suffering hardship here as a good soldier of Christ Jesus, being assured that if I die with him I shall also live with him, if I endure, I shall also reign with him.

*And to Him, my Redeemer, with the Father, and the Holy Spirit,
Three Persons, one God,
be glory forever,
world without end,
Amen, and Amen.*

INFANT BAPTISM: HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED

Dennis E. Johnson

In 1994 one of our daughters, while away from home attending college, asked me to explain the rationale I saw in God's Word for baptizing the infant children of believers. Since I was a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church when she and her siblings were born, they had all been baptized as infants; but now she was interacting with Christian brothers and sisters from other traditions through campus Christian ministry and other friendships, and many of them believed that the baptism of infants was not Christian baptism as it is established by Christ in the New Testament. In a slightly revised form, this article is what I wrote to her.

Here at last is my long-overdue letter to explain why I believe it's consistent with the Bible to baptize the infants and children of believers. I want to let you know what biblical evidence changed my mind from holding a "believers' baptism" position to the conviction that *both* those who are converted as adults *and* the infants and children of believers should be baptized.

You know, of course, that I don't consider this issue one on which our trust-relationship with Jesus depends. Nor should differences on this issue disrupt our fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ who see things differently. On the other hand, since we all want to show our gratitude for God's grace by living our lives to please him, and since we learn what pleases him in his Word, we all want to get as clear a picture as we can of what the Word teaches.

The difference of views on infant baptism unfortunately does affect Christians' ability to demonstrate in practice our unity as the Body of Christ. "Infant baptizers" can and do recognize the baptism received by "believer baptizers" as genuine Christian baptism (although we may think that it's administered later than it should be in the case of children of Christian parents). But "believer baptizers" cannot acknowledge that believers who were baptized as infants have been baptized at all. So if "believer baptizers" are right – if people who have received infant baptism have not received biblical baptism at all – then there have been hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Christian believers who have never obeyed the Lord's command to be baptized in his Name, believers such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, J. Gresham Machen, J. I. Packer, John Stott, R. C. Sproul, etc. On the other hand, if "infant baptizers" are right, then it's sad that the convictions of "believer baptizers"

prevent them from recognizing the baptism of so many other members of the Body of Christ. So, our difference of understanding on this issue does hinder our putting into practice the unity of the church.

Although this question is not a matter of salvation, it is certainly worth our investing time and thought and study to see whether we can come to unity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I Changed My Mind

First, a little autobiography (I may have told you this before): It was a major change of mind for me to come to accept infant baptism. I was baptized as an infant in First Covenant Church of Los Angeles, but by the time I was an early adolescent we had a different pastor (in the same congregation!), and our new pastor didn't believe that infant baptism was valid. My parents had not really studied this question or taught me whether there was a biblical basis for infant baptism, so I had no reason to question what my pastor said when he taught that my baptism as an infant wasn't genuine Christian baptism. Therefore, after a time of instruction in Bible doctrine (in effect, a catechism class), I publicly confessed my faith in Christ and "joined the church," being baptized by immersion on the basis of my personal profession of faith.² (This means that, whichever view of baptism is right, I personally am covered!) I went through high school and Westmont College assuming that only people old enough to believe and testify to their faith should be baptized.

This was my view even as I started my seminary studies at Westminster, although I was puzzled that my seminary professors, who understood the Bible so much better than I in so many areas, seemed to have *missed the obvious point* that in the New Testament people are called to believe, and then they are baptized. I suppose I concluded that they believed in infant baptism because that was what they were *accustomed* to. (That explanation, however, didn't fit everyone: Dr. Strimple had remained a Baptist throughout college and his studies at Westminster, and had taught at a Baptist Bible college in Canada for many years before he became convinced that infant baptism was biblical.) "I'm accustomed to this" is not a good reason for believing or doing something as a Christian, but sometimes what we're used to does influence our faith and our conduct. In any case, at Westminster I had to face the possibility that *I was the one* operating on the basis of what I was accustomed to, dismissing infant baptism because of assumptions I had picked up as a teenager and had reinforced through college. In particular, Westminster forced me to examine my assumptions about how to search the Bible for the answer to a theological question like this.³

How Should We Expect the Bible to Answer the Infant Baptism Question?

I had to face the question, “Should the babies of Christians be baptized?” I was expecting the Bible to answer the question with an explicit statement in one or more verses. I read verses like Acts 2:38 (“Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”) or Acts 16:31-34 (“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household... Immediately he and all his family were baptized ... he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family.”). The order of things seemed so clear: first repentance/belief, then baptism. What could be plainer and simpler?

Everybody Agrees that Adult Converts from Judaism and Paganism Must Be Baptized

But then someone pointed out something to me: throughout the Book of Acts we read about the conversion of people who were not Christians or the children of Christians. These people, both Jews and Gentiles alike, had not grown up as the children of (New Covenant) Christians. The preaching and examples of conversions in Acts all have to do with *missionary* situations in which the Gospel is entering the lives of individuals and families and communities for the first time. Everyone, “believer baptist” and “infant baptist” alike, agrees that *in circumstances like these*, when people have not grown up in Christian families and the “covenant community” of the church, those converted as adults need to receive baptism *when they confess their faith* in Jesus.

But Acts Is Silent About Children Born to Christian Parents

Acts never *explicitly* describes a situation that would make crystal clear how the apostles handled the situation of children born to Christian parents. (Obviously, if Acts had spoken directly and clearly on this point, the discussion between “believer baptist” and “infant baptist” would have been settled long ago.) In particular:

1. Acts never tells us about an adolescent or young adult who had been raised from infancy by parents who believed in Jesus, and who then received baptism *only after he or she personally expressed his/her faith* in Christ.⁴
2. Although Acts records the baptism of *whole households*, it never explicitly states whether or not there were infants or young children in any of these homes, or

whether infants in the household were *excluded* from receiving baptism because they were too young to express personal faith in Christ.

3. Acts and the rest of the New Testament *never record any statement* by the Jesus or the Apostles *that the infants of believers are now to be treated differently in the New Covenant* from the way that the infants of Israelite believers were treated in the Old: namely, the New Testament never states that whereas Israelite children were treated as part of the covenant community, the children of Christians are to be treated as *outside the covenant community* that is under Christ's Lordship. The other changes that occurred with the coming of Christ are clearly indicated in the New Testament: *circumcision* is not to be required of Gentiles (Gal.), but both Jews and Gentiles who come to faith must be *baptized* (Acts). Animal sacrifices are done away with because of Jesus' final sacrifice (Heb. 10). The *kosher dietary laws* no longer apply because Jesus cleanses people from all nationalities (Mark 7; Acts 10-11). The *temple* in Jerusalem is replaced by a "living temple" made up of people (1 Pet. 2). But the New Testament never hints that the relationship of believers' children to the church community has changed. The New Testament *never suggests* that, although before Jesus' coming Israelite children were "inside" the covenant community and received the covenant sign of circumcision (the boys, that is), since Jesus' coming the children of believers are "outside" the community and therefore excluded from the covenant sign of baptism.

We'll come back to this topic of the way the New Testament views the children of believers, but for now I simply wanted to show you how I came to recognize that there is *no New Testament text that answers pointblank the question*, "Should believers have their children baptized?"

Starting from Broader Themes Where the Bible Speaks Clearly

So then, where do we go from here? We approach this question, like other even more important questions (the Trinity, the mystery of the Person of Jesus as both fully God and fully man): we approach it from the perspective of broader, bigger *questions that the Bible does answer clearly* for us. Then, since God's Word is consistent from beginning to end, we carefully draw conclusions from what we *know* the Bible teaches.

This is more complicated than simply pointing to a verse or two, but it's also safer than drawing our own conclusions from what a particular verse says or does not say. Suppose every Christian concluded that Jesus' words in Mark 10:21 are addressed literally to us all: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor ... Then come,

follow me.” We all need to beware of being “owned” by our possessions, but if we all sold everything, could we also obey 1 Timothy 5:8 (“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”)? Would there be anyone in the church for Timothy to instruct to use his or her wealth in doing good (1 Tim. 6:17-19)? We recognize that we have to understand Mark 10:21 in the context of Jesus’ conversation with the rich young man, and in the context of the teaching of other passages of the Bible. We need to do the same with infant baptism.

Circumcision Was Administered to Infant Israelite Boys

One clear place to start is with the fact that circumcision was administered to infant Israelite boys at the age of 8 days (Gen. 17:9-14). This sign of God’s covenant was given to Abraham long before the Law was given to Moses in Mt. Sinai. Apparently, all of those circumcised that day in response to God’s command were older than infancy: Abraham was 99 and Ishmael was 13; other males (including servants) were no doubt of various ages (Gen. 17:23-27). But *their age*, and thus their mental/spiritual ability to respond to God’s promise in faith, *was irrelevant*. All were circumcised because *Abraham* believed God.

Circumcision Was a Sign of Salvation Blessings that Are Received by Faith

God calls circumcision a “sign” of his covenant, so we can ask what circumcision “signified,” what it “pointed to” in terms of the relationship of Abraham and his family to the Lord.

A Sign of Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit) : Later in the Old Testament God made it clear that external circumcision of the flesh was a sign or symbol of a spiritual cleansing that God calls “circumcision” of the heart: “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (Deut. 10:16). Moses prophesies that the Israelites will disobey God and receive the judgments they deserved (especially the Babylonian Exile). But after this God will regather them to the land (return under Ezra and Nehemiah), and “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Deut. 30:6). I believe God is referring to this promise when he says through Ezekiel: “I will gather you from all the countries... I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove the heart of stone and

give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees” (Ezek. 36:24-27).

But Outward Circumcision Did Not Guarantee Circumcision of Heart: Now, receiving *external* circumcision did not guarantee that an Israelite boy had received spiritual circumcision, or would later receive spiritual circumcision. “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh – Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab – and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even *the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart*’” (Jer. 9:25-26). How shocking for an Israelite to hear these words, to be grouped among the uncircumcised, unclean Gentiles! But only if they never understood that circumcision was a sign pointing to their hearts’ need for cleansing by the gracious Spirit of God!

A Sign of the Righteousness We Receive by Faith: In the light of God’s teaching in the Old Testament, we can understand Paul’s comments on circumcision in Romans. First Paul points out that the “circumcision” that counts is “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit,” and that without this spiritual cleansing the external surgery brings no blessing or favor from God (Rom. 2:25-29, esp. vv. 28-29). Then he comments on God’s first command to Abraham to circumcise his household: “[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). So Paul says that Abraham is not only the spiritual father of uncircumcised Gentile believers (4:11b), but also of “the circumcised who *not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith* that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (4:12). Circumcision symbolized the righteousness that believers (like Abraham) receive by faith, just as it symbolized cleansing and renewal of heart by the Holy Spirit. Yet God commanded that it be administered to Israelite baby boys at 8 days old, *before anyone could tell whether God had changed or would change their hearts* by his Spirit, whether he would enable them to trust his promises!

A Sign of Union with Christ in His Sacrificial Death: Since the blessings of the New Birth and righteousness by faith came to Abraham and other Israelites (B.C.) and come to us (A.D.) only as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice, we could even say that circumcision symbolized union with Christ in his death – his being “cut off from his people” for us (Gen. 17:14; see Isa. 53:8), even though he didn’t deserve the curse, since he was circumcised both in flesh (Luke 2:21) and in heart. In fact, Paul pretty much says just this in Colossians 2:11-12: “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” Christ was cut off for us, put to death for us; his death for our sins is counted by God as our own death. Circumcision symbolizes this reality of Christ suffering as our

substitute, and so does baptism.

Circumcision Was Applied Before Anyone Could Know Whether a Baby Had Received or Would Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolizes

Before we move on to consider what baptism symbolizes, we need to reflect on the fact that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the blessings that come to believers (like Abraham) by faith in Christ: cleansing and transformation of heart, forgiveness of sins, right standing before God, all through the sacrifice of Jesus. This symbol was applied to adult Gentile converts when they abandoned their idolatry and confessed faith in the God of Israel; but it was applied to the children (well, just the sons) of Israel 8 days after they were born – before Mom or Dad or priest or rabbi could tell whether that baby would later receive, through his faith, the *reality* symbolized in circumcision.

Baptism Symbolizes Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit), the Righteousness of Faith, and Union with Christ in his Death

Water baptism symbolizes the same spiritual blessings that circumcision symbolized: renewal and transformation of our hearts (Tit. 3:5; Eph. 5:23; etc.) by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), who brings us into a community of faith, a Body (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism speaks of being such things as united to Christ, clothed with Christ, right with God by faith, Abraham's seed, and heirs of God's promises (Gal. 3:26-29). It speaks of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, so that his death for us is counted as *our* death before the justice of God (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:11-12).

Water Baptism Doesn't Guarantee that the Person Receiving It Has Received or Will Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolizes – Even When Adults Are Baptized after Confessing Faith!

Just as the eternal act of circumcision could not *guarantee* that the recipient would prove to be a recipient of the spiritual reality it symbolized, so also the external act of water baptism does not guarantee that its recipient will prove to have received the spiritual reality it symbolizes. Simon of Samaria was baptized, but his later attitude toward the Holy Spirit showed that he was still “captive to sin” (Acts 8:12-13,20-23). Peter emphasizes that the flood waters that “saved” Noah and his family were pointing ahead to *baptism* – not merely the “removal of dirt from the

body” (external water baptism) but the inner spiritual reality it symbolizes: the pledge of a good conscience toward God (1 Pet. 3:21). Sadly, some churches have practiced infant baptism (and others have practiced adult “believer baptism”) under the misunderstanding that the external ceremony *automatically produces* the New Birth it symbolizes, or *guarantees* that the New Birth is bound to follow eventually because of the outward ceremony. But the Bible shows that the purpose of the sacraments (circumcision, Passover and other animal sacrifices in the Old Testament; baptism and the Lord Supper in the New) is to show us our need for the *spiritual* blessings and to call us (as the Bible and preaching do) to receive these blessings by trusting in Christ himself.

Why Apply Circumcision/Baptism to Infants Before We “Know” Whether They Will Become Believers?

When I was a Baptist, my biggest problem with infant baptism was that baptism symbolized the spiritual benefits of union with Christ, which are received only by faith; and parents and pastors *couldn't know* whether or not an infant had or would have this saving faith. But then I began to see that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the same blessings of union with Christ, which Old Testament believers received by faith and which unbelievers in Israel did not receive. So we face the same question for both the Old Testament sign and the New Testament sign: “Why apply a symbol before we know whether or not the reality is there?” I see three main reasons:

(1) *To emphasize God's gracious initiative to us in our helplessness:* Circumcision and baptism are not events in which the recipient acts, but in which someone else acts (in God's name) on or for us. This is true, of course, when an adult is converted and comes for baptism: she doesn't baptize herself, but a pastor applies the water of baptism to her. The Apostles' instruction to adults is not “baptize yourselves” (reflexive) but “be baptized” (passive: receive baptism from someone else). But it's even more obvious, when infants are baptized, that baptism is “announcing” to us that God graciously gives a change of heart that we in our spiritual death could never produce in ourselves.

(2) *To emphasize the mysterious role of the family in the communication of God's covenant grace through the generations:* This role really is mysterious. On the one hand, the Bible is so clear that being born into a believing family is *no guarantee* of salvation: every individual is accountable to respond to the gospel in faith, or to endure the consequences of rebellion. (And, by the same token, to be born into an unbelieving

family doesn't condemn a person to a life of unbelief, rebellion, and condemnation. God's grace welcomes Gentiles [Pagans] and turns them to Jesus [Acts 14:27]).

I was reading Ezekiel 18 in my devotions earlier this week, and was struck by how powerfully God makes the point that "family tree" doesn't guarantee an individual's salvation or his condemnation. On the other hand, God has set up the family as the context in which his Word is to be taught and lived before children as they grow up. In contrast to our American emphasis on individualism and democracy, God clearly viewed Abraham as the head of his household, with the authority to command even his servants to undergo the painful procedure of circumcision! "I have chosen [Abraham], so that *he will direct his children and his household after him* to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19).

Apparently many ancient Israelites tended to look at themselves *only* from the standpoint of their *family connection*: those in the right family (Abraham's) were in (no matter what), and everyone else was out. In twentieth-century America we tend to look at ourselves *only* from the standpoint of our *personal individualism*: we think we stand as isolated individuals before God, and our parents' relationship to the Lord presumably has no influence on the benefits we have received from him or the responsibilities we bear toward him.

But God seems to view us *both* as members of a family, influenced (for good or ill) by our family context and identity, *and* as individuals, bearing responsibility for our own response to his Word of grace. This is God's perspective not only in the Old Testament when virtually all the covenant people were of one physical family (Abraham's – although Gentiles such as Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and Naaman were also included); but also in the New Testament, as the Gospel goes out to all the families of the earth (Acts 3:25). This is what I find striking about the baptism of Lydia *and her household* (Acts 16:14-15) and of the jailer *and his household* (Acts 16:31-34). There's no way to tell for sure whether or not there were babies or children in those households, so both sides in the infant baptism dialogue read these texts in light of their own presuppositions. But what we can agree on is that in these texts the Holy Spirit speaks of the persons involved *not as disconnected individuals but as "households,"* as families (or perhaps even families with resident servants). Doesn't this suggest that in the New Testament God *does not discard the family* as a means for extending his gracious covenant-kingdom, but rather he spreads his grace to and through *more* families, to households not previously reached with his salvation?

Infant circumcision and infant baptism in themselves emphasize the balance: they are administered to infants *not* because we presume to know or predict the infant's spiritual state, but because the child is in the home of and under the authority of

Christian parents (hence the sign belongs not only to “birth-children” but also to adopted children). Yet, the fact that circumcision and baptism are administered to infants *at all* is a testimony to the fact that *birth into a particular family is no guarantee* of ultimate spiritual blessing, rather that *something more is needed*, something that only God can do for us through the shedding of Christ’s blood and through his resurrection, applied through the regenerating power of the Spirit, in order for us to become children of God.

(3) *To emphasize the life-or-death consequences of our response to the Gospel of Christ:* Earlier I showed the spiritual *blessings* that both circumcision and baptism symbolize, but that is not the whole story. Both circumcision and baptism are double-edged. They have a *solemn side* as well, because each in its own way “pictures” the *judgment* that our sin deserves, the judgment that will be received some day by those who do not trust Christ. Circumcision, which of course involved shedding of blood, symbolized the penalty of breaking God’s covenant, of being “cut off” from God’s presence and God’s people (Gen. 17:14). Baptism symbolizes not only cleansing, forgiveness, and the Spirit’s transforming presence, but also judgment and death. The floodwaters that “saved” Noah were also God’s instrument of judgment on those who refused to heed Noah’s preaching (1 Pet. 3:19-21). Jesus spoke of his own death as a “baptism,” a painful ordeal (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). So it’s not surprising that Paul views both circumcision and baptism as symbols pointing to Christ’s *death* (Col. 2:11-12). By symbolizing the deadly consequences of being unfaithful to God’s covenant – the shedding of blood, being cut off, being overwhelmed by floodwaters – circumcision and baptism reinforce the message of the Word as we read it and hear it preached: the *only place of safety* for guilty rebels like us is *close to Jesus*, trusting in Jesus, who bore sin’s guilt and penalty for those who believe in him. So I see circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New as ongoing testimonies to children raised in Christian homes that there are severe, eternal consequences if they turn away from the grace offered in the Gospel. But of course, these warnings are intended by the Lord to work along with the wonderful promises of his grace to encourage us to stick close to Jesus in living, intimate faith and love.

Circumcision and Baptism Mark the Boundaries of the Community that Is Under Christ’s Lordship

Now, that facts that circumcision and baptism both symbolize spiritual blessings that are received by faith in Christ and that circumcision was administered to infants before they could give evidence of faith don’t *prove* that now, in the New Testament, baptism should be administered to covenant children before they personally give

evidence of their faith. It suggests to me, however, that the fact that an infant cannot express faith doesn't exclude her from receiving the sign that points to blessings that are received by faith.

If circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New do not *absolutely guarantee* that the person receiving the sign has received or will receive the spiritual reality, *what is the purpose* of these covenant signs? They *mark the boundaries of the community* that acknowledges Christ's covenant Lordship and authority, the church. Since we can't infallibly read others' hearts, the church *as we see it* on a day-to-day basis may not correspond exactly to God's perfect knowledge of his chosen ones (2 Tim. 2:17-19). Even when an adult convert is baptized, we do it not because we have supernatural knowledge that he is born again, but because he confesses to believe in Jesus, seems to understand what that means, and his life is beginning to bear fruit consistent with his confession of faith. Sometimes, however, church leaders are mistaken or misled, and a person who once seemed to be a believer will turn away from the life of faith he had seemed to start (remember Simon of Samaria). So as an elder I have to admit my limitations: I can't read hearts to know *for certain* who is "born again" from the Spirit; all that I can do is evaluate whether people acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus both in their words and in the general direction of their behavior.

In the New Testament, Are Believers' Children "Inside" This Community or "Outside"?

I'm leading up to this important question: In the New Testament, if parents confess Jesus as Lord, are their children *inside* this community, the church, or are they *outside*? Clearly in the Old Testament the children were included in the community of God's covenant, receiving the mark of the covenant (circumcision), participating in the feasts of the covenant (for example, Passover, Exod. 12:25-27), being taught the Law as the guide for their grateful response to God's redemptive grace (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25). But what about the New Testament? When Christ comes, is there a change in the composition of the community of God's covenant?

The Trend in the New Testament Is to Include People Who Used to Be "Outside." There are changes in the composition of the covenant people as we move from Old Testament to New, but they are not in the direction of *excluding* a category of people because of their age or mental immaturity. The most obvious change is that *Gentiles*, people from other physical families than Abraham's, are welcomed in droves. As we see in Matthew's mention of Rahab, Ruth, and others in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1), even in the Old Testament God did welcome a handful of Gentiles into his

community; but with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of the Spirit which he poured out on the church, the floodgates of grace are thrown wide open to Samaritans, Greek, Romans – even to Swedes and Scotch-Irish! Secondly, the sign of the New Covenant, baptism, is one that can be and is applied to *females* as well as males (Acts 8:12), in contrast to Old Covenant circumcision, which was only for males. Although the New Testament still speaks of a distinction in *role* between men and women in the family and the church, baptism makes clear what was implied in Genesis 1:26-28: in terms of creation in God's image, and now new creation in the image of Christ, and in terms of personal value and worth to God, women and men are equal (Gal. 3:28). Hence women worship with men in Christian congregations, not in a separate courtyard as in the Jerusalem temple or behind a screen as in some Jewish synagogues. So now, with Gentiles welcomed in and women more fully included by receiving the covenant sign along with males, does God now take a very different stance toward the children of believers, excluding them from his covenant people as he is welcoming in other groups?

*Peter at Pentecost: The Promise to Jewish Converts, their **Children**, and Gentiles "Far Off":* "Probably the most direct answer to our question comes from Peter's lips on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the climactic turning point of the transition between Old Testament and New because on Pentecost the crucified, risen, ascended, enthroned Lord Jesus baptized the church with the Holy Spirit – as John the Baptist had prophesied (Acts 1:5). Peter's audience was composed of Jews and of Gentile converts to Judaism from throughout the Roman world, and some of them (despite their heritage as covenant people) had committed treason against God's Messiah Jesus. When they realized what they had done, Peter told them to repent and receive baptism in Jesus' name (Acts 2:38). Then he added: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). "All who are far off" are the pagan Gentiles.⁵ This is consistent with the expansion of the reach of God's gracious covenant that I mentioned above. But now notice this: the *children* of these people who are at the point of repentance, faith, and baptism *are not bypassed* as Christ's promise goes out to the pagans. The promise of forgiveness and renewal by the Spirit is spoken specifically to the children of Peter's listeners. As these children grow and understand the promise and the Promise Maker, they of course bear the responsibility to respond in personal trust (just as Peter's Pentecost audience do and the Gentiles "far off" will). But the point is: in expanding his community of grace to the Gentiles, God will not expel the children.

*Jesus: The Kingdom Belongs to Little, "Useless" **Children**:* This continuing inclusion of children in Christ's community is what we would expect when we reflect on the way Jesus rebuked his disciples' adult arrogance in trying to shield him from

“insignificant” (in their minds) children (Luke 18:15-17). In fact, I’m convinced that it was precisely children’s “insignificance” and “uselessness” that Jesus had in mind when he said, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” When some people hear these words, they think romantically of the “innocence” or “simple trust” that they suppose children have. But Jesus knew children better than that. His point was that unless you come to the kingdom *without any claim* that you deserve it, you will never enter it. Apparently, by Pentecost Peter had absorbed the point that Jesus had made that day: Jesus does not expel children from his community, for his kingdom belongs to them (those left outside are those who refuse to swallow their pride, who refuse to come as insignificant children, unworthy in themselves but dependent on the King).

Paul Talks to Children in the Church, Calling Them to Obey “in the Lord” without Distinguishing Between “Insiders” (Who Have Confessed Faith and Been Baptized) and “Outsiders” (Too Young to Be Baptized as Believers). This perspective – that children are not excluded from the community of the King with the coming of the New Testament – also explains why Paul can address children in his letters with instructions that presuppose Christ’s authority over them: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ which is the first commandment with a promise ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth’” (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20: “for this pleases the Lord”). Paul does not talk to two categories of children: (1) children who have confessed faith and been baptized; and (2) children who have not been baptized, and are presumed not to be believers. Rather, he speaks to all the children present in the congregation, and he implies that their identity “in the Lord,” their trust in the promises of God, and their desire to do what “pleases the Lord,” should motivate all these children to obey their parents. Of course, these congregations may include some children who are not born again, not believers; but Paul is not presuming to read individual hearts at long distance. He is simply treating the children, as a group, as members of the King’s community, under the King’s authority, and therefore responsible to the King for their response to their parents.

What About Infant Dedication as a Way of Symbolizing that the Children of Christian Parents Have a Special Place and Special Responsibilities?

Now, we could ask, couldn’t a “dedication” ceremony such as that practiced at many Baptist churches serve the same purpose as infant baptism in recognizing that the children of believers do have *some sort of special place* in the community of Christ’s covenant? Well, yes and no.

Yes. Infant dedication in Baptist churches seems to reflect a sort of Spirit-prompted “instinct” that, even though (in such churches) they are treated as unbelievers and outsiders by being denied baptism, the children of believers actually do have *some sort of a relation* to Christ and his church. It would be more consistent, it seems to me, for churches of “believer baptism” convictions not to replace infant baptism with dedication, but simply to wait and see what path kids choose (faith or rebellion) as they grow up. Typically the dedication services I have heard still imply that believing parents are doing *something* in relation to the Lord on behalf of their infant children. Wouldn’t it be more consistent to wait until children are old enough to *decide for themselves* whether they want to be dedicated to God? And yet, frankly, *I’m glad that Baptist churches are inconsistent* enough to have infant dedication, and that Baptist parents bring their children to church and teach them the Gospel at home and sing “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know” with their kids. The way I see it, in all these ways they are *acting as though* their children have a place in the community of Christ, even though Baptist parents don’t acknowledge that their children can receive the sign of inclusion in Christ’s community, baptism. And since (in my view) the Bible teaches that believers’ children have a place in the community of Christ (though that doesn’t *guarantee* their salvation!), the more that Christians act in ways consistent with the Bible (even if our understanding of its teaching is unclear), the more the Lord is glorified.

No. A Biblical Case for Infant Dedication in the New Testament Is Far Weaker than the Case for Infant Baptism. If we are looking for a biblical justification for how we treat the infants of believers, it seems to me that it is far harder to make a case for dedication than for infant baptism. Consider the biblical examples of infant dedications: There was Samuel, whom his mother Hannah promised to return to the Lord for tabernacle service even before he was conceived (1 Sam. 1:11, 24-28). But Hannah’s dedication of Samuel did not replace his circumcision, of course. Rather, it made him a “Nazirite,” whose uncut hair signified his special consecration as a servant of God (1 Sam. 1:11; Num. 6:1-21). Nor is it treated as an ongoing pattern for Israelite infants in the Old Testament, let alone for the children of believers in the New Testament. There were Samson and John the Baptist (also Nazirites from conception), whom God had promised to barren parents and set apart for his own special purposes even before their conception (Judges 13:3-5; Luke 1:13-17).

Then there is the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-24) when he was about 41 days old. (He was circumcised at 8 days, and then 33 days later Mary could be “purified” following her son’s birth, Lev. 12:37). But we should notice that this presentation fulfills the command that came from the Exodus from Egypt, and specifically the night when the Passover lamb died in the place of the Israelites’ firstborn: “Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord” (Exod. 13:2).

Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed as holy to the Lord (Exod. 13:12). Firstborn sons were to be redeemed (Exod. 13:15). It is hard for me to see how this *Old Testament custom*, which had to be observed carefully for Jesus since he came to fulfill every requirement of the Law of Moses, could be viewed as a model for Christians dedicating their children. Christian infant dedication services don't mention the *ceremonial purification* of the infant's mother after the birth; they are performed not only for *firstborn sons* but also for later children – of both genders! They do not involve offering sacrifices for the redemption of the child from death or the purification of the mother. In all these ways Christian infant dedication services today are *very different* from Jesus' presentation to the Lord at the age of a month and a half – and they should be! The Old Testament sacrificial system, which included the redemption of Israel's firstborn and the ceremonial cleansing of Israel's mothers, was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Because I find no convincing biblical command or example that would provide a basis for infant dedication by Christian parents today, if we have to choose between infant dedication and infant baptism on the basis of *biblical evidence*, it seems clear that the weight of biblical evidence favors infant baptism because of the continuity between circumcision and baptism as signs of entry into God's community.

“Dedication” Focuses More on the Parents’ Action Than on God’s Promise of Grace through Faith

Finally, infant dedication as a ceremony lacks an important element that infant baptism has: infant baptism encourages us and our children to *trust in Christ* by symbolizing the *promises of God*, achieved for us by Christ and received by faith alone. Dedication tends to focus more on what *we* do than on what *Christ* has done. As parents look back on that day with their kids, they are saying, “We dedicated you to the Lord's service when you were a baby.” On the other hand, as “infant baptist” parents look back on the day of their child's baptism, they say to her, “On that day long ago, the Lord Jesus promised to you that if you trust him he will wash away your sins and give you a heart to love and serve him by the power of his Spirit. Just as the water ‘cleansed’ your baby skin, so the Holy Spirit will make your heart clean if you trust in Jesus, because Jesus died for the sins of everybody who trusts in him.” You can see the difference. Both sets of parents are calling their kids to respond in faith, and both sets do so by teaching the Gospel about what Jesus did for us in his sacrifice on the cross, but children baptized as infants have received a *sign/symbol* that points *directly* to that gift of God's grace.

So I would say that infant dedication is better than nothing (since it is a way of recognizing that the children of believers have the privileges and responsibilities of being included in the Lord's community), but it seems to me that infant baptism has much stronger *biblical* support than does infant dedication in the New Testament church.

Fatherly Encouragement: Study the Scriptures, Pray, Think, Ask

Since I've walked the road between "believer baptism" and "infant baptism," I appreciate the fact that you want to re-examine childhood assumptions in the light of what God's Word teaches. Go to it! I also sympathize with you, since we both realize that this issue is not as "cut-and-dried" as whether Jehovah or Baal is God, or whether we are saved by faith in Jesus or by our own obedience to the Law. The biblical answers to those questions are plain and clear. But sincere believers who love the Lord and want to follow his Word have drawn very different conclusions on this question of infant baptism. So I would just encourage you to study the Bible's teaching, not only in *individual verses* that contain the word "baptism" but also in passages that *explain the symbolism of circumcision and baptism*, that show *how God treats children* in the Old Testament in the New, that show us *who belongs to the community of Christ* on earth (both ancient Israel and the Church today), and that explain *ideas like "covenant" and the role of the family/household* in God's plan for his covenant people. I would encourage you to think and pray over what you have read. No doubt I haven't covered in this letter all the questions you may have, so please feel free to ask them and I'll do my best to give you answers that are faithful to God's Word.

Love,

Dad

Endnotes

1. © 1998 Dennis E. Johnson.

2. My pastor also believed that immersion (Rom. 6:4) is the *only* right *mode* by which to apply the water of baptism. He would not recognize sprinkling (Heb. 9:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:2; Ezek. 36:25) or pouring (Acts 1:5; 2:17-18,33: “You will be baptized with Spirit” = “I will pour out my Spirit”; see Tit. 3:5-6), even though these methods of applying cleansing liquid (water/blood) are used repeatedly in Scripture, and sometimes tied directly to the language of baptism (as in Acts 1-2). The verses above suggest that baptism symbolizes not only death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, but also cleansing from sin’s uncleanness (sprinkling) and the gift of the Spirit (pouring). Therefore it seems that any of these modes is appropriate, since each mode points to some aspect of the spiritual reality of which baptism is a sign.

3. Over Labor Day weekend I was preaching in Portland, OR, and spent the afternoon with a couple in the church there. We were talking about infant baptism, and I learned that the husband had come to faith in a Baptist church and had then come to believe that infant baptism was biblical while he was studying at Western Conservative *Baptist* Seminary. I asked him what had changed his mind, and he mentioned especially coming to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of “the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:11), and yet Abraham was commanded to circumcise infants who were too young to demonstrate faith. If that was so in the Old Testament, he concluded, it could also be true of baptism in the New. I’ll pick up this idea below, but I thought you would be interested to learn of this brother’s experience of coming to believe in the appropriateness of infant baptism not in an “infant baptist” seminary like Westminster but in a “believer baptist” seminary like Western.

4. Timothy is the only individual whose “childhood history” we know much about, but it’s likely that both he and his mother were, so to speak, “Old Testament believers” until Paul arrived in Lystra bringing the news that God’s Old Testament promises had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Acts 16:13; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:10,15). Since Timothy’s mother had taught him the Scriptures “from infancy,” apparently she would have had him circumcised as an infant as the Law commanded, were it not for the fact that his Gentile father forbade it. Paul circumcised him as a young adult not because circumcision is a sacrament/sign still applied to believers under the New Covenant, but simply to remove a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of Timothy’s ministry among Jews. Anyway, we don’t ever read about when Timothy was baptized.

5. The expression is from Isa. 57:19 and is applied to Gentiles in Acts 22:21; Eph. 2:13,17.

SHARING THE FATHER'S WELCOME

Edmund Clowney

AMERICANS HAVE TAKEN to hanging up yellow ribbons along with the red, white, and blue. It all began at the outset of Ronald Reagan's presidency, when the hostages were released from Iran. They were welcomed with yellow ribbons fluttering from trees and utility poles in Washington, D.C., and on Main Street U.S.A. The image came from a popular ballad about a wife signaling a welcome to her husband, just released from jail, by tying a yellow ribbon "round the old oak tree." The song has mercifully faded, but the symbol has caught on. The yellow ribbon has become our sign of a joyful welcome home.

One of the stories that Jesus told gives us the picture of a yellow ribbon tied across the open gate of heaven. Jesus described the joy of heaven in welcoming home a penitent sinner. The familiar story is often called the parable of the prodigal son. Some have said it might better be called the parable of the elder brother, since it ends with his reaction to his brother's homecoming. But the central figure in the story is the father, who would welcome both sons to his feast. Jesus tells the story so that we might understand the welcome of his heav- enly Father and join in its joy.

In the first part of his story, Jesus shows the *grace* of the Father's welcome; in the second part he tells us about the *demand* of that welcome.

The Grace of the Father's Welcome

The story begins with the younger of two brothers. This youth is liv- ing at home and hating every minute of it. Everything turns him off: the household, the farming, the lifestyle of his father. There is only one thing about his father that he does like: the old man's money. But the prospects of cashing in on it are remote. His father shows no sign of an early decease. At last the young man's patience runs out. "Father," he says, "give me what's coming to me from your estate."

It would be a rude demand in any society; it was especially harsh in view of the Old Testament laws of inheritance. Jewish wisdom, too, advised fathers against dividing their holdings before the day of their death: "For it is better that your

children ask of you than that you should look to the hand of your sons" (Ecclesiasticus 33:22). But the father does what his younger son asks. He divides his estate. The young man finds himself holding title to at least a third, perhaps half, of his father's living. He gathers it all together. That is, he converts it into cash, so that he can put it in a bag and pull the string around it. Now he has what he has always wanted. He can go where he wants and do what he wants.

He does.

He leaves home at once; every step is a step into freedom, so he keeps on traveling. With a world of distance between him and his father's house he can live a little.

In the Sunday school of my childhood there were varnished oak chairs set in circles and pictures on the painted walls. They were all Sunday school pictures. In the basement, though, behind a door to a corridor, there was an engraving that didn't look like a Sunday school picture at all. It showed the prodigal son at a party. Some party. It didn't occur to me when I peered at the picture, but no doubt the prodigal picked up the tab.

In his story, Jesus does not give any details as to how the prodigal spent his money. Did months or years pass before his high living had to be scaled down? Did his funds evaporate in a rush, or did he ration sin on a budget? In any case, at last it was no more a question of the cheapest wineshops or the cheapest women. It was the question of a crust of bread. The prodigal was penniless just as a famine struck the country, inflating the price of food. His wasted inheritance had bought him no friends. He had to get a job if he were not to starve, and the only job he could get was as a swineherd, feeding pigs. The point is not that feeding pigs is a messy occupation. The point is that pigs are an unclean animal in the technical sense of Old Testament law. Every bond with his father's house was broken. The prodigal was an alien, far from home, estranged, lost, unclean.

The prodigal's repentance is not glamorized in the parable. It began not in the depths of his heart but in the pit of his stomach. He watched the pigs crunch the dry carob pods that he fed them. His meager earnings could not provide him with daily bread, especially at famine prices. Perhaps he could manage carob pods. They were, after all, edible. How hungry he was! What meals he used to enjoy! His mind went back, not to the luxurious banquets that had cost him his inheritance, but to the dinners in his father's house. His father's

house! "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" (Luke 15:17, NIV).

Yes, he had said it aloud. It was true. He had been a fool, and a wicked fool at that. "He who keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father" (Prov. 28:7, NIV). He had to go home. He had to face his father again. What could he say? "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:18-19, NIV).

His father would take him in and give him employment and food. He was sure of it. He had no right to claim the old relationship, but he could see again his father's face.

The prodigal's confession of his complete unworthiness prepares us to marvel at his father's mercy and the grace of his welcome.

We may gain fresh amazement if we compare the story Jesus told with a somewhat similar story in the literature of Mahayana Buddhism. In a famous "Lotus Sutra" the story is told.¹ A young man leaves his father's house and is gone for many years, "twenty or thirty or forty or fifty." His father searches for him and moves to another country, where he becomes immensely wealthy. The son, on the other hand, continues his wanderings as a despised beggar. One day the son happens to come to the town where his father lives. He does not recognize his father, but stares with curiosity at the princely magnificence of this elderly man. Fanned by attendants, the father sits on a throne under a jeweled awning, his footstool decorated in gold and silver. He is concluding business deals in gold bullion, corn, and grain with a surrounding crowd of merchants and bankers. The beggar is thoroughly alarmed. "People like me don't belong here," he thinks. "Let me get out of here before I am seized to do forced labor."

But the father has recognized his son at first sight and sends his servants after him. They bring him back, kicking and screaming in terror. Sure that he will be put to death, he faints dead away. The father sprinkles cold water on him, and tells the servants to let him go. He does not identify himself to his son, or his son to his servants. Instead, he sends servants to find him again in the slum section of the city, and to bring him back with an offer of employment. The servants disguise themselves as street people, smearing dirt on themselves and wearing rags, so as to gain the trust of this beggar. Their mission succeeds, and

¹ Chapter 4 of the *Saddharma-Pundarika*, ed. F. Max Mueller, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 21 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 98-117.

the poor man is set to work at the lowliest of tasks. (The estate is not equipped with septic tanks.) The father watches his son through a window as he is shoveling manure, or, rather, basketing it. He, too, smears on dirt and puts on rags so as to go and talk to his son and encourage him on the job. The son works faithfully on the grounds, but continues to live in a shack nearby. Many years later, the father expresses great appreciation for the son's faithful work; he declares that he will treat him as a son and make him his heir. The son is indifferent to all the wealth that is now declared to be his; he continues to live in his shack and work on the estate.

After some twenty years, "the householder perceives that his son is able to save, mature and mentally developed; that in the consciousness of his nobility he feels abashed, ashamed, disgusted, when thinking of his former poverty." Aware of his approaching death, the householder calls his relatives, officials, and neighbors, and declares before them all, "This man is my natural son, the heir of all that I possess."

The moral at the end of the story is that "as we have always observed the moral precepts under the rule of the Knower of the world, we now receive the fruit of that morality which we have formerly practised."

What is the difference between these two stories? One word describes it: *grace!* Amazing grace! Watch the father in the parable told by Jesus. Far down the road he sees that familiar figure. He sweeps up the skirt of his robe, thrusts it into his belt, and runs down the road to meet his son. He flings his arms around him, hugs him to his chest, and kisses the dusty cheeks of that swineherd. "Father," the son begins, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son . . ."

The father will not hear more. Turning back to the house with his arm around his son, he is calling to the servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:22-24, NIV).

So full and free is the forgiveness of the father that he will have no delay in restoring to his son the symbols of his status. The best robe is a symbol of honor; the signet ring bears the father's seal; even sandals carry meaning—servants went barefoot. And then the feast! What a welcome!

Where is the father's prudence? Didn't the younger son disgrace his name? What has the man been doing? What of those rumors? What does he expect now, more money?

No, the father does not arraign his son with questions; he welcomes him in the triumph of joy. His son was dead, and is alive; was lost, and is found. The father's joy is kindled by the fire of his love.

The Scripture often pictures the love of a father: Abraham taking his beloved son Isaac up Mount Moriah. Must he, indeed, offer him up in sacrifice there?

Old Israel had been shown the blood-stained coat of Joseph, his favorite son, and had given him up for dead, the prey of some wild beast. Then he learned that Joseph, sold as a slave by his brothers, was a prince of Egypt. He went down to Egypt and was met on the way by Joseph. His son, whom his grief had counted to be dead, was alive in his arms.

King David was a poor father, by turns too strict and too indulgent, but he loved his rebellious son Absalom desperately. When the great battle was fought between the forces of David and Absalom, the king seemed less concerned about the outcome than about the safety of his son. When the messenger of victory confirmed that Absalom was dead, David wept, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33, NIV).

Yet the greatest cry of a father's love in the Old Testament comes not from David but from his God. The Lord had owned the people of Israel as his son in Egypt. His demand to Pharaoh was, "Let my son go, so he may worship me" (Ex. 4:23, NIV). The Lord guided his first-born son through the desert, as a father might teach an infant son to walk (Hos. 11:1-4). When Israel became a rebellious son, God pronounced his judgments on their apostasy. Yet from his heart of love he cried out,

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?... My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused" (Hos. 11:8, NIV).

The Demand of the Father's Welcome

The scene shifts. We are out in the field as the furrows fall into shadow. The older brother is coming in from his work. As he nears the house, he listens and looks up. Yes, it's music, the music of a band playing. The house is blazing

with light. There is singing, dancing; the whole hilltop is rocking. He calls to one of the hands. "What," he asks, "is going on up there?"

We have the feeling that he knows very well what is going on. There hasn't been a party like this since before his brother left home! The servant answers, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound" (Luke 15:27, NIV).

The older brother flings down his staff, folds his arms, and begins a slow burn. A celebration, indeed! He's not too surprised that the prodigal has shown up, but what has he done to deserve this? He should be flogged rather than feted! The brother is disgusted at his father's behavior. *At least he can't expect me to celebrate*, he thinks. *After all, the property has been divided, and what remains is mine: that best robe, that signet ring, and most particularly that sleek calf saved for a great feast.*

He despises the father's joy, is made furious by his grace, and resents his love for the prodigal.

The servant takes the news to the father. His older son is stalk- ing about in the field, furiously angry, and refuses to come in to the feast. The father quickly leaves the feast; he goes down the path the second time to call his older son home. Clearly the older brother in the story images the Pharisees, Jesus' self-righteous opponents. In the preceding chapter of Luke another parable issues a stern warning to them. They are like guests who refuse an invitation to a banquet. The offended host sends his servant to bring in other guests from the streets and alleys of the town and from the highways and byways of the country. Every seat will be filled with the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. There will be no room any longer for the invited guests.

The Pharisees despise the poor and disdain Christ's call to the feast of the kingdom. They are warned that others will be seated at heaven's feast, and they will find themselves forever excluded. But in this parable, Jesus still holds the door open for the Pharisees. They are standing outside, furious because Jesus is celebrating with publicans and sinners. But Jesus says the Father still comes down the path to call to them. Let them consider what it means if they reject his call, if they refuse to come in to the feast of glory.

The father pleads with his older son to come in to the banquet. He receives a bitter response: "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered

your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:29-30, NIV).

That bitter son is farther from home there in the field than the prodigal was in the pigpen. He has no love for his father. Keeping his father's orders is drudgery; working for him is slavery. His real pleasure is not with his father; like the prodigal at the beginning of the story, he would prefer celebrations with his own friends. He has no conception of his father's love—for his brother, or for him. He has no love for his brother, either. He will not call him "my brother" but only "this son of yours."

The father's rebuke is gentle: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:31-32, NIV).

The tenderness is there. Did it mean nothing to the older son that he was ever with the father? Was his relation with his father really that of a slave? Did he begrudge a fattened calf when the whole inheritance was his? Did he care nothing that his brother was not dead but alive?

Yes, the rebuke is tender, but the demand is clear. If he is indeed a true son of the father, he must come in to the feast. He cannot remain there in the outer darkness, burning with anger and jealous rage.

Suppose the older brother had indeed known his father's heart. What would he have done? Surely he would have come running into the house when he was told that his brother had returned. Might he have done more? Well, if he had really shared his father's feelings, he, too, would have been looking for his brother. Perhaps, being already out in the field, he might have seen him first and gone running to meet him. Could he have done more?

During the war in Vietnam, Army Lieutenant Daniel Dawson's reconnaissance plane went down over the Vietcong jungle. When his brother Donald heard the report, he sold everything he had, left his wife with \$20, and bought passage to Vietnam. There he equipped himself with a soldier's gear and wandered through the guerilla-controlled jungle, looking for his brother. He carried leaflets picturing the plane and describing in Vietnamese the reward for news of the missing pilot. He became known as *Anh toi phi-cong*—the brother of the pilot. A *Life* magazine reporter described his perilous search.²

² "A Haunted Man's Perilous Search," *Life*, March 12, 1965.

Yes, the older brother could have done more. If he had really cared, he could have done what Donald Dawson did. He could have gone to the far country, looking for his brother. Indeed, this is not an idle suggestion, for it is at the heart of the parable. This parable is one of three that Jesus told in Luke 15, all in response to the bitter criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus was surrounded by tax collectors and sinners, eager to hear his teaching. The Pharisees muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2, NIV).

Jesus replied with the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Each story ends with a joyful feast to celebrate the finding of what had been lost. The shepherd calls his friends to a party because he has found his sheep. The woman invites her friends because she has found her lost coin. The father celebrates the recovery of his lost son, and calls the older brother to join in the joy. Jesus is teaching that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. But he is also contrasting his ministry with the attitude of his critics. They complain because he associates with sinners. He replies that he seeks sinners because his Father does. Jesus is pictured in the shepherd, who seeks the one sheep that is lost. He is pictured, too, in the woman who sweeps her house seeking the coin that was lost. Jesus does not appear, however, in the parable of the prodigal son. Instead, he steps out of the story and puts in his place the figure of the Pharisees. The older brother is doing just what they were doing: refusing to associate with sinners. Jesus is doing the opposite. He understands his Father's heart of mercy. He is not only willing to go in with sinners to heaven's feast; far more, he has come to look for sinners where they are. He has come to seek and to save that which is lost. He seeks out tax collectors, stopping under the sycamore-fig tree to call Zacchaeus down, and inviting himself to his house. He finds a fallen woman by a well in Samaria, and speaks forgiveness to a murderer crucified with him.

We do not understand this parable if we forget who told it, and why. Jesus Christ is our older Brother, the firstborn of the Father. He is the seeking Shepherd who goes out to find the lost; he is the Resurrection and the Life who can give life to the dead; he is the Heir of the Father's house. To him the Father can truly say, "Son, all that I have is yours." He who is the Son became a Servant that we might be made the sons and daughters of God. This parable is incomplete if we forget that our older brother is not a Pharisee but Jesus. He does not merely welcome us home as the brother did not; he comes to find us in the pigpen, puts his arms around us, and says, "Come home!"

Indeed, if we forget Jesus, we do not grasp the full measure of the Father's love. The heavenly Father is not permissive toward sin. He is a holy God; the penalty of sin must be paid. The glory of amazing grace is that Jesus can welcome sinners because he died for them. Jesus not only comes to the feast, eating with redeemed publicans and sinners; he spreads the feast, for he calls us to the table of his broken body and shed blood.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus sings God's praise in the midst of his brethren (Heb. 2:12).³ The joy of heaven's feast is already anticipated in the fellowship of the singing Savior. Jesus knows his Father's heart, and rejoices with him. Full of joy through the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (Luke 10:21, NIV).

Come home to the Father's love, to the joy of Jesus' feast. Are you a prodigal, far from the gate of heaven? Jesus now comes to lift you up. Are you a smug Pharisee, flaunting the filthy rags of your self-righteousness outside the Father's house? Hear the words of Jesus: his Father calls you to repent and come home as a little child. Or are you somehow both at once: prodigal and proud, debased but despising? No matter; cast all away and hold fast to Jesus.

Or are you a believer? Has Jesus found you like the lost sheep and borne you home on his shoulder? Then consider the demand this parable puts on you. You have tasted of heaven's grace. You know the embrace of your Father's love. You know that he rejoices over you with singing. What does heaven's joy, his joy, over lost sinners mean to you?

You say, "It means that I, too, must welcome sinners, be ready to eat with them, even as I have been brought to his table." Is that enough? The true Son, who knows his Father's heart, did not simply share with sinners his robe, his ring, his sandals. He went to find them to bring them home. Where will you look today?

"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8, NIV).

³ Not only is the cry of abandonment at the beginning of Psalm 22 fulfilled by Jesus, the cry of victory in verse 22 of that psalm is also his. The author of Hebrews ascribes it to him in this passage.

THE “PLUS-ONE” APPROACH TO CHURCH

Kevin De Young

Are you just starting out at a new church and don't know how to get plugged in? Have you been at your church for years and still haven't found your place? Are you feeling disconnected, unhappy, or bored with your local congregation? Let me suggest you enter the “Plus One” program of church involvement.

I don't mean to sound like a bad infomercial. Here's what I mean: *In addition to the Sunday morning worship service, pick one thing in the life of your congregation and be very committed to it.*

This is far from everything a church member should do. We are talking about minimum requirements and baby steps. This is about how to get plugged in at a new church or how to get back on track after drifting away. This is for people who feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start. This is for the folks who should make a little more effort before slipping out the back door.

The idea is simple. First, be faithful in attending the Sunday morning worship service. Don't miss a Sunday. Sure, you may miss a couple Sundays during the year because of illness. Vacation and business travel may take you away from your local congregation several other Sundays too. But keep these to a minimum. Don't plan all your cottage getaways over the weekend so that you miss out on your own church (and perhaps church altogether) for most of the summer. Don't let the kids' activities crowd out Sunday services. (What did Joshua say? “If soccer be god then serve soccer, but as for me and my household we will serve the Lord.” Something like that.) Don't let homework or football or too much rain or too much sun keep you from the gathering of God's people for worship. Commit right now that Sunday morning is immovable. You go to church. Period.

Now, add one more thing.

When you meet people who feel disconnected from church, start with this question: Are you committed to worshiping with us every Sunday unless you are providentially hindered? If they say yes, then move on to “Plus One.” Is there at least one other activity in the life of the church in which you are consistently and wholeheartedly participating? Usually the answer is no. Most people who feel disconnected from church feel that way because they have not

made the effort to connect consistently. This doesn't mean churches don't have to do more to care for senior saints, singles, those with special needs, or any number of other folks in the church. This doesn't mean pastors can say (or think), "It's all your fault." Sometimes it precisely the pastor's fault. But I find that most often—not always, but normally—people who want to get involved, find a way to get involved through the existing structures of the church.

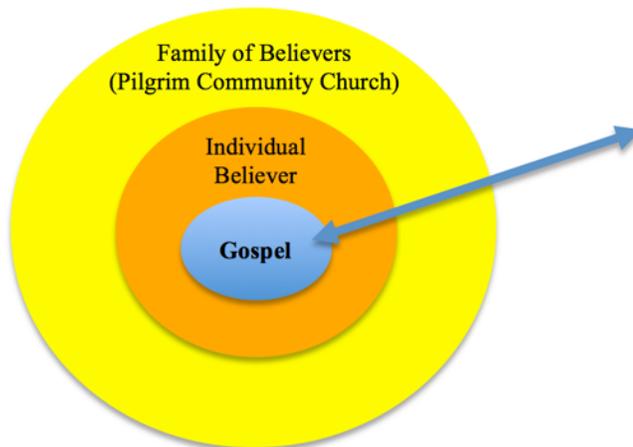
That's why I say, be faithful on Sunday morning, plus one more thing. Personally, I'm partial to the Sunday evening service. I think it's the easiest, most historic, and one of the most biblical ways to really get to know your church. In most churches, the evening service (if they have one) is smaller, more informal, and contains elements of prayer and sharing that may not be as present on Sunday morning. Plus, the time after the service is usually less rushed and allows for more genuine fellowship.

If Sunday evening is not an option, join a small group. (I reiterate: these are baby steps. I hope people in our church will participate in Sunday evenings *and* small groups.) If your church doesn't have formal small groups, you could still invite a group of friends over every other week for prayer and fellowship. If that's too much right off the bat, find a good Sunday school class and go every week. Or join the choir. Or get involved with the youth group. Or sign up to be a greeter. Or go on the men's retreat. Or join the outreach committee. Or take the leadership training course. Or come to the prayer meeting each week. Or teach a kids class. Or volunteer with a local ministry your church supports. Or do Meals on Wheels. Or join the softball team. Or do the mid-week Bible study. You get the idea.

Large churches have hundreds of Plus One opportunities. Even small church will have plenty to choose from. Make Sunday morning your first priority. Then try one more thing and stick with it for at least six months. Maybe you'll realize the church is not for you. Maybe you'll still need help getting plugged in. Maybe you'll find it's time to sit down in person with a pastor or elder. But I suspect you will find that you feel more invested, you've made new friends, and you're eager to see Plus One become Plus Two or Three.

SERVING AT PILGRIM COMMUNITY CHURCH

James Bryner Chu¹



The Gospel is what unites and shapes our ministry to other—in our church, our city, our nation, and our world!

Ministry is an expression of our commitment to serve Jesus, His family & and to align our individual missions to God’s mission in the world.

a) In unity, as one

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ” (Ephesians 4:1-6, ESV)

b) To grow and build his family to love and become more like Jesus

“But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the

¹ This paper is a modified version of GracePoint Church’s “Serving @ GracePoint,” a paper used at that church and graciously passed on to me by their Lead English Pastor, Rev. Eugene Hor.

apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of 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... ” (Ephesians 4:7-13, ESV)

c) Using your gifts, skills, abilities and resources for the good of the Body of Christ

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27, ESV)

Helping You Serve Others: Discovering Your Passion

Definition of Spiritual Gifts

Spiritual Gifts are the God-given abilities we have been blessed with through coming to know Christ. These can be abilities and skills that God in his common grace has given you, which is now used for serving his people, or they can be new and unique God given gifts for the building up of his people. God has given each Christian a unique gift/s for ministry that fulfills his plan to see the Body of Christ built up.

Key Characteristics of Spiritual Gifts:

1. Spiritual Gifts are God-given **abilities**.
2. Each believer is given a spiritual gift/s for the building up of the Church
3. Spiritual Gifts answer the “how” question of service – how can I best serve and work to help God’s people grow in their maturity in Jesus at Pilgrim Community?

Definition of Passion

Passion is the God-given **desire** that compels us to make a difference in a particular ministry.

Key Characteristics of Passion

1. Passion is God-given desire.
2. Passion seeks as its ultimate end, the manifestation of God’s glory.
3. Passion answers the “where” question of service – what avenues and opportunities are there for ministry that correspond to my desire/passion and ability/gifts?

Well-defined passion will not always be evident at first glance. Prayer, thought, action and experiences will give one more insight. It will become more focused over time.

The Way to Discover Your Spiritual Gift

1. Look at the Scriptures and what they say about spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor.12; Eph.4:11-16)
 - a. *What is a spiritual gift?*
 - b. *Where do spiritual gifts come from?*
 - c. *What is the purpose of a spiritual gift?*
 - d. *How is a spiritual gift is to be used?*
2. Pray and ask God to help you discover your spiritual gift: God is the giver and enabler of all spiritual gifts.
3. Look at what skills and abilities you might have that could be used to serve others at Pilgrim Community in helping them treasure Jesus in their lives?

4. Look at what you are passionate about in serving at Pilgrim Community?
5. Look for opportunities to serve others at Pilgrim Community because as you serve you'll discover your spiritual gift.
6. Ask other believers who know you where they think you can be serving at Pilgrim Community or what they believe your gifts/passion are.

THE DISCIPLINE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

James Bryner Chu

Introduction

Among many of the important recoveries of the Protestant Reformation is the rediscovery of the marks of the true church. The reformers, realizing the need to distinguish the true gospel community of Jesus Christ from other sects that would indiscriminately apply the designation Church to themselves, searched the scriptures diligently to ascertain for themselves the marks or characteristics of the true church of Jesus Christ. These marks are summarized in article twenty-nine of the *Belgic Confession* (c. 1561), which says,

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in chastening of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.

The reformers rightly recognized that the true church of Jesus Christ must neither be defined by the number of its members and the rate of its quantitative growth; nor by its existing ministries and committees. Rather the true church of Jesus Christ must be identified by three very important marks: (1) The preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, (2) the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, (3) and the faithful exercise of church discipline according to the Word of God.

Sadly in our age of pluralistic relativism, the cry for the proper exercise of church discipline is often met with much opposition and condescension. “Live and let live” is the new golden rule. The rights of the individual are asserted over and against the norms of institutions and organizations. People do not want to join a church where their secret lives are revealed and appraised in the light of God’s infallible Word. As a result, more and more congregations have opted to feign amnesia and to disregard this third mark of Christ’s true church. After all, was it not our Lord Christ Himself who cautioned us with the words: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1, ESV)? How are we then to square this with the biblical practice of church discipline? And is there really a need to do so?

Today, more than ever, we Christians are faced with the important task of contending for the marks that prove us to be the true body of Christ. Where amnesia has become the rule of the day, it is now our responsibility to open up the Word of God to bring about anamnesis in the minds and hearts of our people. In this short study, I intend to show the reader the relationship between church discipline and Christian discipleship and the role of the latter in exercising this very important mark of the true church of Jesus Christ.

Revisiting Discipline and Discipleship

I find it interesting that while biblical church discipline may be at a decline in our congregations today, yet there seems to be a renewed interest in doing discipleship especially through adult Sunday school classes, small groups' ministries, and cell church initiatives. Increasingly, the need to care for and to grow our people in a more focused and intimate setting as a supplement to the Sunday worship service preaching is seen to be the better way to do church. In this regard, I think that our Churches are to some extent moving on the right track.¹ Unhappily however, it seems that church discipline is seldom the subject of such discipleship initiatives. Often times, even "accountability" groups tend to be mere focus and support groups where members simply taking turns relating their own negative experiences to the group in order to be sorted out together and to be ended with encouraging and inspirational words from other members. More often than not, sin is not dealt with and biblical discipline is not properly served.

I am convinced that the prevailing pessimism towards church discipline is borne out of a misunderstanding of what biblical church discipline is all about. People tend to have a negative notion of what discipline is, equating all discipline with punishment, penalty, and censure. While discipline may indeed be negative at times, yet not all discipline is and should be seen as negative.

In fact, one connection that I feel is often missed in our discussion of discipline is the fact that, etymologically, *discipline* derives from the word *disciple*. And though we are able to see the words 'discipleship' and 'disciple' in relation to instruction and knowledge, yet we fail to see the same link with the word 'discipline.'

¹ I am convinced that even a cursory observation of Jesus' earthly ministry would show us that He Himself placed emphasis not only on one-to-big-group discipleship, but also to one-to-small-group as well as one-to-one discipleship. Thus we too should place emphasis on doing discipleship in all three of these settings.

Discipleship and discipline are interrelated. When our Lord Jesus Christ gave us the great commission, He Himself affirmed this important connection by saying: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.** And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ (Matthew 28:19-20, ESV; emphasis added.)” Here our Lord Jesus charges us to make disciples not only by baptizing them into the Name of the Triune God but also by teaching them to **observe** everything that He has commanded. Discipleship carries with it the responsibility of teaching our people to observe or obey the words of Christ. Surely everyone would agree that obedience and disobedience are matters that relate to discipline. So too is discipleship a matter that relates to discipline.

In our efforts to teach the pure gospel to our people, we ought likewise to guard them against counterfeit gospels and outright false teachings. When Jude appealed to his original audience to “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 3, NAS),*” he certainly did not mean that Christians were to be passive with regards to false teachings and practices. We are to faithfully teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), recognizing that “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.* (1 Timothy 3:16-17)”

Revisiting Discipline and Discipleship

I find it interesting that while biblical church discipline may be at a decline in oWhether we find ourselves in a church setting where there are already existing small group ministries in place, or whether we are part of a more traditional church whose ministry is presently centered on the Sunday worship service and other age-group fellowships, I believe that the principle of discipline in discipleship is something that all Christian churches can and ought to pursue.

While my intention for this study is to focus on the exercise of church discipline and not to provide a suggested strategy for starting a small groups discipleship ministry, I should make it clear that my view of church discipline

presupposes a faithful gospel community whether in the form of a small group, a break-out group², or a small church congregation.

The work of discipleship is one that involves the work of redemption. As believers we understand all too well what redemption means as it has been applied to us firsthand. We know that we have been sold as slaves to sin and misery with absolutely no hope or help in and of ourselves to better our condition. In fact because of our true guilt, we know that we did not even deserve anything less than eternity in hell. Yet in spite of this, we know that God was pleased to send His only Son Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, Himself God of very God, to come to earth and to take upon Himself our humanity so that He can fulfill all righteousness as the second Adam. Jesus came to earth to live a perfectly holy and righteous life, a life that no other human being could have and ever will live. Then at the end of His life, He suffered and died on the cross in order to redeem a people for Himself. Our Lord died the death that we should have died, a death that served as payment for sin. Indeed the bible tells us that the wages of sin is death, and we are all sinners—and therefore all deserving of nothing but death and then hell. But Jesus paid it all by dying on the cross and owning the sin of His people. He suffered the pain of hell for a while but then He overcame death and sin by resurrecting from the dead. This is what the Lord has done so that He can buy His people back from the misery of sin. Thus as soon as people recognize this wonderful truth: the truth that there is nothing that they can do to save themselves from their doomed state as sinners but that Christ has done everything in the sinner's stead; if anyone realizes her own condition as a sinner, repents and believes in the truth of Christ's saving work on the cross, then she too would be counted among the people God and she too will not taste death or hell. That is what redemption is all about. Indeed, that is the gospel—the mutual experience that I share with every other Christian in the world. The gospel is what unites us as believers and the gospel is our basis for discipleship.

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

² This is a viable option for more traditional churches that still have existing age-group based fellowships which act as “mini-churches” but that are realizing the need to minister in smaller and more intimate gatherings. Break-outs could be scheduled after talks where certain individuals join a semi-permanent group to discuss the sermon that has just been preached and how it can be applied to their lives. This is a good way to care for each other and to have accountability between each other.

collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:15-20, ESV)

Matthew 18:15-20 is commonly recognized as the portion of scripture where our Lord Jesus Christ was teaching about church discipline. For the longest time, Christians have understood this passage to be applicable to the traditional church setting where individuals came together on Sundays to worship together and to listen to the preaching from the bible. Then it is assumed that a brother or a sisters sins against another maybe through a harsh word or action while in church. But it is interesting that when Jesus taught this to His original hearers, none of them has ever stepped into anything resembling our modern day Christian churches. The fact of the matter is that Jesus was here not just talking about sins committed within the church as a physical building but the church as gospel community, as the body of Christ.

Step One: In verse 15 Jesus says, *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (ESV)"* What this means is that if a brother commits a sin that offends us, then we ought to approach our brother privately, and in the spirit of humility and gentleness make known to them their sin. Some see this passage as exclusively applicable to scandalous sins such as drunkenness, promiscuity, adultery, or other *serious* sins only. It is interesting however that our Lord does not continue His statement with a long list of sins that merit this kind of confrontation. Some may simply prefer that our Lord enumerate to us what kinds of sins deserve **Step One** but our Lord does not seem to see the need for this. So what kind of sin should we seek to guard against anyway? I believe that as Christians we ought to flee from all kinds of sin. We should not choose between big or small sins. The point is that we ought to correct all wrongdoings and we need to inform our brothers and sisters in the faith of whenever they say or do something that hurts us.

In the context of a small group, this may happen often as we may inadvertently hurt our brothers and sisters by sinning against them in a certain way. Usually this is in the form of a hurtful or careless word or comment. Within a small group setting, it would be easier to reconcile with a brother or sister because then we would be able to talk to the offending brother or sister immediately to express our hurt and to initiate reconciliation. However, **Step One** is often not that simple.

The idea of confronting a sinning brother or sister is borne out of the need to maintain the unity and purity of the body of Christ. Of course when our brother sins against us, that is a threat to unity and therefore we ought to seek reconciliation as soon as possible. However, it is the case that sometimes the sin that is of concern is not one that is committed against us or against anyone else in our small group. In cases such as these, the point of doing **Step One** is to maintain the purity of the body of Christ and to encourage our sinning brother or sister to repent and to seek forgiveness from the Lord.

In such cases, if we are aware of a specific sin that our brother or sister has done, then let us first spend some time in prayer to the Lord beseeching Him to be merciful to us and to grant us a heart of gentleness and humility. May we not forget that we too are mere sinners saved by grace. Let us also examine ourselves to see if we too have any sins that we need to repent of.

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.” (Luke 6:41-42, ESV)

Then, being convinced in our own hearts that we have the Lord's bidding to speak to our brother, let us seek him out to speak the truth to him in all love and concern for his repentance. This should be done in private. If our brother confesses to the sin and repents, then the matter should be considered settled. If the brother who confesses also confesses that the sin in question is one that is a constant struggle for him³, then the confronting brother should then offer to hold the repenting brother accountable by regularly checking up on him and spending time with him in prayer⁴. The small group is a wonderful way to follow up on certain corrected sins in a more encouraging environment as the group may take some time to talk about certain sins and how to deal with them biblically without mentioning specific names.

Step Two: If the sinning brother refuses to listen to the brother when he lovingly rebukes him in private, then this step may be pursued. Jesus tells us in verses 16, “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you,

³ This same step of dealing with a recurring sin in the repentant brother should be dealt with in similar fashion when found out during the whole process of discipline.

⁴ These are of course mere suggestions, the Christian is advised to prayerfully discern what further steps to take in order to help his brother to overcome certain patterns of sin in his life. The important thing is that the repenting brother is helped by the confronting brother because of genuine love and concern for the brother's spiritual well-being and the purity of Christ's church.

that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Here in **Step Two**, the confronting brother ought now to take with him one or two other Christians with to again rebuke the brother in love. The idea of taking two or three witnesses in **Step Two** is to ensure that fairness and justice is maintained. The accompanying witnesses would serve to confirm whether the sinning brother was indeed rebuked biblically and whether he responds positively or negatively. This is important especially if the first confronting brother is the one sinned against. How easy it would be for him to claim that the sinning brother is obstinate and would not repent simply because he himself harbored ill feelings toward the brother on account of the offense he sustained. The one or two witnesses would serve to guard against such biases and should therefore not take sides or gang up against the sinning brother. The protection is not so much for the confronting brother as it is for the sinning brother as well. The witnesses need to confirm whether there is a true heart of repentance or whether the sinning brother is indifferent or hostile. If the brother repents and seeks forgiveness, then the matter is settled and no other people need to know about this incident unless the repenting brother wishes to address a larger congregation in order to confess his sin and to implore the church to pray for him. If the brother who confesses also confesses that the sin in question is one that is a constant struggle for him, then the confronting brothers should then offer him steps to keep the repenting brother accountable.

Step Three is the ‘tell it to the church’ step and should only be pursued if after repeated entreating by the two or three groups, the sinning brother still is unresponsive. If the sinning brother obstinately refuses to listen and respond to the confrontation of two or three fellow Christians after a reasonable period of time⁵, the concerned brothers (the witnesses) should then tell it to the church. In verse 17a, Jesus says, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”

The way that this should be done must be in an orderly fashion. Just because **Step Three** means to tell it to the church does not mean that the two or three witnesses could just go around at church spreading the news about the sinning brother. The matter must first be brought to the knowledge of the shepherds of the church. The witnesses are to approach an elder of the church to schedule an emergency meeting with the church session (board of elders comprising of all ruling elders as well as all teaching elders).

⁵ I leave the judgment of ‘reasonable period of time’ my readers who are elders in a church. Each church or denomination must prayerfully come up with their own book of church discipline where the specific steps or protocol must be determined. I personally would suggest that about a month (perhaps three to four tries) would be reasonable enough time.

At the meeting, the witnesses would be permitted to present their case before session paying attention to every detail followed in steps one and two. Unless the session is convinced that the alleged sinning brother has truly sinned or is continuing in sin and therefore refusing to repent even after having been appropriately confronted for a reasonable period of time, then **Step Three** is not carried out. The whole session must agree and be of one mind before further action may be sought. It is important that the session be unanimous in their decision as **Step Three** is a matter that would involve the whole congregation including possibly the sinning brother's close friends and family members. If they are less than sure of actual sin, then the elders must decide to ascertain the truth of things first by having a representative seek a meeting with the sinning brother and then report to the rest of the session.

If the session is convinced of the matter and recognizes that sin has indeed been committed that threatens the purity and unity of Christ's church, then the session should send a letter by courier mail to the individual warning and explaining to him that **Step Three** of church discipline will be taken if the session does not receive word of repentance by a certain date⁶.

On the set Sunday, the elders are to make the individual's sin and refusal to repent public during a Communion service⁷. The elders are to explain the case to the congregation and emphasize to them that the intent of Church discipline is not punitive but restorative. The congregation is to actively and aggressively pursue the offending individual and to plead with him to repent before **Step Four** is sought by the church to protect the purity of the fellowship⁸, to warn the Church of the weightiness of sin⁹, and to testify to the watching world that righteousness and holiness are non-negotiable within the church of Jesus Christ. In carrying out **Step Three**, the congregation is to remember that the offending brother, though in sin, is still a brother nonetheless and therefore they must lovingly beseech the offender to confess his sin and to repent of it. The members of the congregation, and most especially his close friends and

⁶ Again, the interval of time between the decision to send a letter and the decision to serve **Step Three** should be determined by the session. My personal suggestion is a maximum of two or three weeks.

⁷ In the case of churches where communion services are only administered once a month, a special exception should be made on the Sunday when the session tells it to the church. The reason for this is to express and emphasize the gesture of the communion service as a covenant renewal ceremony where the people of God reaffirm their sincere faith in the finished Cross-work of Jesus Christ. The communion service excludes unbelievers to ensure the purity of the body of Christ and thus as an exercise of discipline the offending brother is from that day forth excluded from this communion until he repents of his obstinacy.

⁸ **1 Corinthians 5:6-7** "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." (ESV)

⁹ **1 Timothy 5:20** "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." (ESV)

family members and to seek opportunities to call him back and to make him aware of his sin. If the brother listens to the church and repents then he is to be publicly forgiven¹⁰ and restored. This is to be initiated by the elders of the church. How long should the church continue to pursue the sinning brother? This is a question hard to answer and must be determined on a case to case basis. The shepherds of the church must continue to send letters to the sinning brother while also seeking ways to meet with him personally. The rule of love should guide the elders as well as the congregation in their efforts to seek out the lost sheep.

Step Four Sometimes, even after being sought out by the church and encouraged to repent and to desist of his sin, a sinning brother would still be unresponsive and refuse the counsel of his church. In such instances, the final step of church discipline should be administered to vindicate holiness and purity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

A professing Christian who still refuses to repent of his sin proves himself to be a walking contradiction. Whereas the entirety of Christian life is to be characterized by an attitude of repentance and humility, any person who claims to be part of the gospel community of Jesus Christ but persists in sin shows himself to be otherwise. In such instances, the elders must carry out **Step Four**.

In verse 17b, our Lord Jesus says, *“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”* During the time of Jesus, the Jews viewed themselves as the chosen people of God and considered any non-Jew a gentile. The Jews refused to have fellowship with gentiles because they were not worshippers of Yahweh but rather devoted themselves to all forms of immorality in connection to their idol worship. The tax collectors on the other hand were Jews who purposely alienated themselves from their people being traitors of their own people. The tax collectors cut ties with their own people by working for the Romans who ruled over Israel during that time.

In the context of the church, we too do not have fellowship with non-believers because these people have not confessed Jesus Christ and repented of their sin. The unrepentant offender concerned is then like the gentiles and the tax collectors in his refusal to repent of his sin and to maintain fellowship with his church.

¹⁰ This should again take place during a communion service to ensure full restoration in the sight of the whole congregation.

The fact of the matter is not that the church refuses to accept the brother anymore in **Step Four** but rather that the offending brother, by his obstinacy, has first rejected the fellowship of his church and Lord and rather has placed shame upon the name of Jesus Christ. This ought never to be tolerated and thus the church should vindicate the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by excluding this sinner from our fellowship.

The elders are to initiate this by informing the church that the offending brother has, after much entreating and encouragement, refused to repent of his sin and to seek restoration with the church. From that time on then, the church is to treat the offender as one treats an unbeliever. He is to be excommunicated from the fellowship of believers.

It must be stressed again that the intent even of excommunication is not punitive but restorative. By excluding the individual from the fellowship, it is not meant that he or she would no longer be admitted to the church but rather that he or she is to be treated as an unbeliever. If he continues to attend our church services, he is not to be barred from hearing the word preached perchance the Holy Spirit works through the word in drawing back the backslider to Himself. Other than the hearing of the word preached however, the individual is to be excluded from all spiritual exercises of the church. He is to be barred from the Lord's table and individual members are also to refrain from continuing to associate with the individual casually over coffee or a meal. The reason for this is that the church is not to have approving fellowship with this person until he repents.

The goal of this step of course is the call back the wandering sinner to the fold of Christ. If after all efforts, he still does not return then the church is to leave him be. Perhaps if he really is a chosen one of God, the Lord would allow him so sink deeper still in his own sinfulness until he eventually bottoms out and returns to the Christ repentant. If this does not happen, the man has apostatized and proved himself to never have truly professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Restoring Discipleship

If the offending brother, after having been excommunicated, finally returns to the church to confess his sin, then a fifth step is to be taken. After being in sin for so long and then finally returning to the church, the man must first be tested with regards to true faith.

The elders are to welcome him back but he is to be placed on probation to

ensure that after a process of counseling and re-discipleship, the individual would be ready for full restoration as a member in the church.

While on probation, the individual is still to be barred from the Lord's table but no longer to be excluded from other spiritual exercises. The members of the congregation are informed of the individual's confession and encouraged to aid him in his spiritual growth. Meanwhile, the elders are to schedule regular counseling with this member to ensure that he has truly forsaken his past sinful deeds and is truly repentant. After a probationary period of monitoring, the session should decide to restore the brother fully during a communion service. It is important that before this final restoration is enacted that the repentant brother be reinstated in a loving small group to continue in discipleship and nurture.

Conclusion

The matter of discipline and discipleship is one that must be carried out by all true and faithful gospel communities. Though it may seem like a daunting task yet it must be exercised to ensure the purity of Christ's church and to enable the members to grow in their faith as a body. When practiced faithfully, **Steps Three** and **Four** would normally not be reached as a sufficiently gospel-centered congregation would be characterized by repentance and calling all peoples to repentance and subjection to the Kingship of Jesus Christ. May this material serve as a helpful tool for those who seek to be faithful and true to the calling by which they have received. This manual is intended to be a guide as each disciplinary case would differ from the next and wisdom, discernment and much prayer must always come to play when seeking to exercise discipline in discipleship for the glory of God!

THE MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN

Francis Schaeffer

Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts.

Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of this, if one feels it is his calling. But there is a much better sign — a mark that has not been thought up just as a matter of expediency for use on some special occasion or in some specific era. It is a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church until Jesus comes back.

What is this mark?

At the close of His ministry, Jesus looks forward to His death on the cross, the open tomb and the ascension. Knowing that He is about to leave, Jesus prepares His disciples for what is to come. It is here that He makes clear what will be the distinguishing mark of the Christian.

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me; and as I said unto the Jews, Where I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:33-35)

This passage reveals the mark that Jesus gives to label a Christian not just in one era or in one locality, but at all times and all places until Jesus returns.

Notice that what He says here is not a statement or a fact. It is a command which includes a condition: “A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love one to another.” And if is involved. If you obey, you will wear the badge Christ gave. But since this is a command, it can be violated.

The point is that it is possible to be a Christian without showing the mark; but if we expect non-Christians to know that we are Christians, we must show the mark.

In 1 John 3:11 John says, “For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” Years after Christ’s death, John,

in writing the epistle, calls us back to Christ's original command in John 13. Speaking to the church, John in effect says, "Don't forget this ... Don't forget this. This command was given to us by Christ while He was still on the earth. This is to be your mark."

Men and Brothers

The command in John 13 and 1 John 3 is to love our fellow-Christians, our brothers. But, of course, we must strike a balance and not forget the other side of Jesus' teaching: we are to love our fellow men, to love all men in fact, as neighbors.

All men bear the image of God. They have value, not because they are redeemed, but because they are God's creation in God's image. Modern man, who has rejected this, has no clue as to who he is, and because of this he can find no real value for himself or for other men. Hence, he downgrades the value of other men and produces the horrible thing we face today — a sick culture in which men treat men as less than human, as machines. As Christians, however, we know the value of men.

All men are our neighbors, and we are to love them as ourselves. We are to do this on the basis of creation, even if they are not redeemed, for all men have value because they are made in the image of God. Therefore, they are to be loved even at great cost.

This is, of course, the whole point of Jesus' story of the good Samaritan: because a man is a man, he is to be loved at all cost.

So when Jesus gives the special command to love our Christian brothers, it does not negate the other command. The two are not antithetical. We are not to choose between loving all men as ourselves and loving the Christian in a special way. The two commands reinforce each other.

If Jesus has commanded so strongly that we love all men as our neighbors, then how important it is especially to love our fellow-Christians. If we are told to love all men as our neighbors — as ourselves — then surely, when it comes to those with whom we have the special bonds as fellow-Christians — having one Father through one Jesus Christ and being indwelt by one Spirit — we can understand how overwhelmingly important it is that all men be able to see an observable love toward those with whom we have these special ties. Paul

makes the double obligation clear in Galatians 6:10 — “As we have, therefore, opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” He does not negate the command to do good to all men. But it is still not meaningless to add, “especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” This dual goal should be our Christian mentality, the set of our minds; we should be consciously thinking about it and what it means in our one-moment-at-a-time lives. It should be the attitude that governs our outward observable actions.

Very often the true Bible-believing Christian, in his emphasis on two humanities — one lost, one saved — one still standing in rebellion against God, the other having returned to God through Christ — has given a picture of exclusiveness which is ugly.

There are two humanities. That is true. Some men made in the image of God still stand in rebellion against Him; some, by the grace of God, have cast themselves upon God’s solution.

Nonetheless, there is in another very important sense only one humanity. All men derive from one origin. By creation all men bear the image of God. In this sense all men are of one flesh, one blood.

Hence, the exclusiveness of the existence of the two humanities is undergirded by the unity of all men. And Christians are not to love their believing brothers to the exclusion of their nonbelieving fellow men. We are to have the example of the good Samaritan consciously in mind at all times.

A Delicate Balance

The first commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. The second commandment bears the universal command to love men. Notice that the second commandment is not just to love Christians. It is far wider than this. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

First Thessalonians 3:12 carries the same double emphasis: “And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you.” Here the order is reversed. First of all, we are to have love one toward another and then toward all men, but that does not change the double emphasis. Rather, it points up the delicate balance — a balance that is not in practice automatically remained.

For True Christians Only

If we look again at the command in John 13, we will notice some important things. First of all, this is a command to have a special love to all true Christians, all born-again Christians. From the scriptural viewpoint, not all who call themselves Christians are Christians, and that is especially true in our generation. The meaning of the word Christian has been reduced to practically nothing. Surely, there is no word that has been so devalued unless it is the word God itself. Central to semantics is the idea that a word as a symbol has no meaning until content is put into it. This is quite correct. Because the word Christian as a symbol has been made to mean so little, it has come to mean everything and nothing.

Jesus, however, is talking about loving all true Christians. And this is a command that has two cutting edges, for it means that we must both distinguish true Christians from all pretenders and be sure that we leave no true Christians outside of our consideration. In other words, humanists and liberal theologians who continue to use the Christian label, or church members whose Christian designation is only a formality, are not to be accounted true Christianity.

But we must be careful of the opposite error. We must include everyone who stands in the historic, biblical faith whether or not he is a member of our own party or our own group.

But even if a man is not among the true Christians, we still have the responsibility to love him as our neighbor. So we cannot say, "Now here's somebody that, as far as I can tell, does not stand among the group of true Christians, and therefore I don't have to think of him any more; I can just slough him off." Not at all. He is covered by the second commandment.

The Standard of Quality

The second thing to notice in these verses in John 13 is the quality of the love that is to be our standard. We are to love all Christians "as I," Jesus says, "have loved you." Now think of both the quality and the quantity of Jesus' love toward us. Of course, He is infinite and we are finite; He is God, we are men. Since He is infinite, our love can never be like His; it can never be an infinite love.

Nevertheless, the love He exhibited then and exhibits now is to be our standard. We dare have no lesser standard. We are to love true Christians as Christ has loved us. When we say this, either of two things can happen. We can just say, “I see! I see!” and we can make a little flag and write on it, “We Love All Christians!” You can see us trudging along with our little flags — all rolled up — “We Love All Christians!” — and at the appropriate moment, we take off all the rubber bands, unzip the cover, and put it up. We wave it as we carry it along — “We Love All Christians!” How ugly!

It can be either this exceedingly ugly thing, as ugly as anything anyone could imagine, or it can be something as profound as anyone could imagine. And if it is to be the latter, it will take a great deal of time, a great deal of conscious talking and writing about it, a great deal of thinking and praying about it on the part of the Bible-believing Christians.

The church is to be a loving church in a dying culture. How, then, is the dying culture going to consider us? Jesus says, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” In the midst of the world, in the midst of our present culture, Jesus is giving a right to the world. Upon His authority He gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians.

That’s pretty frightening. Jesus turns to the world and says, “I’ve something to say to you. On the basis of My authority, I give you a right: you may judge whether or not an individual is a Christian on the basis of the love he shows to all Christians.” In other words, if people come up to us and cast in our teeth the judgment that we are not Christians because we have not shown love toward other Christians, we must understand that they are only exercising a prerogative which Jesus gave them.

And we must not get angry. If people say, “You don’t love other Christians,” we must go home, get down on our knees, and ask God whether or not what they say is true. And if it is, then they have a right to have said what they said.

Failure in Love

We must be very careful at this point, however. We may be true Christians, really born-again Christians, and yet fail in our love toward other Christians. As a matter of fact, to be completely realistic, it is stronger than this. There will be times (let us say it with tears), there will be times when we will fail in our

love toward each other as Christians. In a fallen world, where there is no such thing as perfection until Jesus comes, we know this will be the case. And, of course, when we fail we must ask God's forgiveness. But Jesus is not here saying that our failure to love all Christians proves that we are not Christians.

Let each of us see this individually for ourselves. If I fail in my love toward Christians, it does not prove I am not a Christian. What Jesus is saying, however, is that if I do not have the love I should have toward all other Christians, the world has the right to make the judgment that I am not a Christian.

This distinction is imperative. If we fail in our love toward an Christians, we must not tear our heart out as though it were proof that we are lost. No one except Christ Himself has ever lived and not failed. If success in love toward our brothers in Christ were to be the standard of whether or not a man is a Christian, then there would be no Christians, because all men have failed. But Jesus gives the world a piece of litmus paper, a reasonable thermometer. There is a mark which, if the world does not see, allows them to conclude, "This man is not a Christian." Of course, the world may be making a wrong judgment because if the man is truly a Christian, as far as the reality goes, they made a mistake.

It is true that a non-Christian often hides behind what he sees in Christians and then screams, "Hypocrites!" when in reality he is a sinner who will not face the claims of Christ. But that is not what Jesus is talking about here. Here Jesus is talking about our responsibility as individuals and as groups to so love all other true Christians that the world will have no valid reason for saying that we are not Christians.

The Final Apologetic

But there is something even more sober. And to understand it we must look at John 17:21, a verse out of the midst of Christ's high priestly prayer. Jesus prays, "That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." In this, His high priestly prayer, Jesus is praying for the oneness of the church, the oneness that should be found specifically among true Christians. Jesus is not praying for a humanistic, romantic oneness among men in general. John 17:9 makes this clear: "I pray not for the world, but for them whom thou hast given me; for they are thine." Jesus here makes a very careful distinction

between those who have cast themselves upon Him in faith and those who still stand in rebellion. Hence, in 17:21, when He prays for oneness, the “they” He is referring to are the true Christians.

Notice, however, that 17:21 says, “that they all may be one ...” The emphasis, interestingly enough, is exactly the same as in John 13 — not that those in certain parties in the church should be one, but that all born-again Christians should be one.

Now comes the sobering part. Jesus goes on in 17:21 to say something that always causes me to cringe. If as Christians we do not cringe, it seems to me we are not very sensitive or very honest, because Jesus here gives us the final apologetic. What is the final apologetic? “That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” This is the final apologetic.

In John 13 the point was that if an individual Christian does not show love toward other true Christians, the world has a right to judge that he is not a Christian. Here Jesus is stating something else which is much more cutting, much more profound: we cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus’ claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians.

Now that is frightening. Should we not feel some emotion at this point? Look at it again. Jesus is not saying that Christians should judge each other (as to their being Christian or not) on this basis. Please notice this with tremendous care. The church is to judge whether a man is a Christian on the basis of his doctrine, the propositional content of his faith, and then his credible profession of faith. When a man comes before a local church that is doing its job, he will be quizzed on the content of what he believes. If, for example, a church is conducting a heresy trial (the New Testament indicates there are to be trials in the church of Christ), the question of heresy will turn on the content of the man’s doctrine. The church has a right to judge — in fact it is commanded to judge — a man on the content of what he believes and teaches.

But we cannot expect the world to judge that way, because the world cares nothing about doctrine. That is especially true in the second half of the twentieth century when, on the basis of their epistemology, men no longer believe even in the possibility of absolute truth. And if we are surrounded by a world which no longer believes in the concept of truth, certainly we cannot

expect people to have any interest in whether a man's doctrine is correct or not.

But Jesus did give the mark that will arrest the attention of the world, even the attention of the modern man who says he is just a machine. Because every man is made in the image of God and has therefore aspirations for love, there is something that can be in every geographical climate — in every point of time — which cannot fail to arrest his attention.

What is it? The love that true Christians show for each other and not just for their own party.

Honest Answers, Observable Love

Of course, as Christians we must not minimize the need to give honest answers to honest questions. We should have an intellectual apologetic. The Bible commands it, and Christ and Paul exemplify it. In the synagogue, in the marketplace, in homes, and in almost every conceivable kind of situation, Jesus and Paul discussed Christianity. It is likewise the Christian's task to be able to give an honest answer to an honest question and then to give it.

Yet, unless true Christians show observable love to each other, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers. Let us be careful, indeed, to spend a lifetime studying to give honest answers. For years the orthodox, evangelical church has done this very poorly. So it is well to spend time learning to answer the questions of those who are about us. But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.

While it is not the central consideration that I am dealing with at this time, yet the observable love and oneness among true Christians exhibited before the world must certainly cross all the lines which divide men. The New Testament says, Neither Greek nor barbarian, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

In the church at Antioch, the Christians included Jews and Gentiles and reached all the way from Herod's foster brother to the slaves; and the naturally proud Greek Christian Gentiles of Macedonia showed a practical concern for the material needs of the Christian Jews in Jerusalem. The observable and

practical love among true Christians that the world has a right to be able to observe in our day certainly should cut without reservation across such lines as language, nationalities, national frontiers, younger and older, colors of skin, levels of education and economics, accent, line of birth, the class system in any particular locality, dress, short or long hair among whites and African and non-African hairdos among blacks, cultural differentiations, and the more traditional and less traditional forms of worship.

If the world does not see this down-to-earth practical love, it will not believe that Christ was sent by the Father. People will not believe only on the basis of the proper answers. The two should not be placed in antithesis. The world must have the proper answers to their honest questions, but at the same time there must be a oneness in love between all true Christians. This is what is needed if men are to know that Jesus was sent by the Father and that Christianity is true.

False Notions of Unity

Let us be clear, however, about what this oneness is. We can start by eliminating some false notions.

First, the oneness that Jesus is talking about is not just organizational oneness. In our generation we have a tremendous push for ecclesiastical oneness. It is in the air — like German measles in a time of epidemic — and it is all about us. Human beings can have all sorts of organizational unity and yet exhibit to the world no unity at all. The classic example is the Roman Catholic Church down through the ages. The Roman Catholic Church has had a great external unity — probably the greatest outward organizational unity that has ever been seen in this world — but there have been at the same time titanic and hateful power struggles between the different orders within the one church.

Today there is a still greater difference between the classical Roman Catholicism and progressive Roman Catholicism. The so-called “progressive” Roman Catholic theologians are the same as the liberal theologians in the Protestant groups. The Roman Catholic Church still tries to stand in organizational oneness, but there is only organizational unity, for here are two completely different religions, two concepts of God, two different concepts of truth.

And exactly the same thing is true in the Protestant ecumenical movement. There is an attempt to bring people together organizationally on the basis of Jesus' statement, but there is no real unity, because two completely different religions — biblical Christianity and a "Christianity" which is no Christianity whatsoever — are involved. It is perfectly possible to have organizational unity, to spend a whole lifetime of energy on it, and yet to come nowhere near the realm that Jesus is talking about in John 17.

I do not wish to disparage proper organizational unity on a proper doctrinal basis. But Jesus is here talking about something very different, for there can be a great organizational unity without any oneness at all — even in churches that have fought for purity of doctrine.

I believe very strongly in the principle and practice of the purity of the visible church, but I have seen churches that have fought for purity and are merely hotbeds of ugliness. No longer is there any observable, loving, personal relationship even in their own midst, let alone with other true Christians.

There is a further reason why one cannot interpret this unity of which Christ speaks as organizational. All Christians — "that they all may be one" — are to be one. It is obvious that there can be no organizational unity which could include all born-again Christians everywhere in the world. It is just not possible. For example, there are true, born-again Christians who belong to no organization at all. And what one organization could include those true Christians standing isolated from the outside world by persecution? Obviously organizational unity, while it has its proper place, is not the fulfillment of Christ's commands.

There is a second false notion of what this unity involves. This is the view under which evangelical Christians have often tried to escape. Too often the evangelical has said, "Well, of course Jesus is talking here about the mystical union of the invisible church." And then he lets it go at that and does not think about it any more — ever.

In theological terms there are, to be sure, a visible church and an invisible church. The invisible Church is the real Church — in a way, the only church that has a right to be spelled with a capital. It is most important because it is made up of all those who have thrown themselves upon Christ as Savior. It is Christ's Church. As soon as I become a Christian, as soon as I throw myself upon Christ, I become a member of this Church, and there is a mystical unity binding me to all other members. True. But this is not what Jesus is talking about in John 13 and John 17, for we cannot break up this unity no matter

what we do. Thus, to relate Christ's words to the mystical unity of the invisible Church is to reduce Christ's words to a meaningless phrase.

Third, he is not talking about our positional unity in Christ. It is true that there is a positional unity in Christ — that as soon as we accept Christ as Savior we have one Lord, one baptism, one birth (the second birth), and we are clothed with Christ's righteousness. But that's not the point here.

Fourth, we have legal unity in Christ, but he is not talking about that. There is a beautiful and wonderful legal unity among all Christians. The Father (the judge of the universe) forensically declares, on the basis of the finished work of Christ in space, time and history, that the true moral guilt of those who cast themselves upon Christ is gone. In that fact we have a wonderful unity; but that is not what Jesus is talking about here.

It will not do for the evangelical to try to escape into the concept of the invisible Church and these other related unities. To relate these verses in John 13 and John 17 only to the existence of the invisible Church makes Jesus' statement a meaningless statement. We make a mockery of what Jesus is saying unless we understand that He is talking about something visible.

This is the whole point: the world is going to judge whether Jesus has been sent by the Father on the basis of something that is open to observation.

True Oneness

In John 13 and later 17, Jesus talks about a real visible oneness, a practicing oneness, a practical oneness across all lines, among all true Christians.

The Christian really has a double task. He has to practice both God's holiness and God's love. The Christian is to exhibit that God exists as the infinite-personal God; and then he is to exhibit simultaneously God's character of holiness and love. Not His love without His holiness — that is only compromise. Anything that an individual Christian or Christian group does that fails to show the simultaneous balance of the holiness of God and the love of God presents to a watching world not a demonstration of the God who exists, but a caricature of the God who exists.

According to the Scripture and the teaching of Christ, the love that is to be shown is to be exceedingly strong — as Christ loved us. It's not just something you mention in words once in a while.

Visible Love

What, then, does this love mean? How can it be made visible?

First, it means a very simple thing: it means that when I have made a mistake and when I have failed to love my Christian brother, I go to him and say, "I'm sorry." That is first.

It may seem a letdown — that the first thing we speak of should be so simple! But if you think it is easy, you have never tried to practice it.

In our own groups, in our own close Christian communities, even in our families, when we have shown lack of love toward another, we as Christians do not just automatically go and say we are sorry. On even the very simplest level it is never very easy.

It may sound simplistic to start with saying we are sorry and asking forgiveness, but it is not. This is the way of renewed fellowship, whether it is between a husband and wife, a parent and child, within a Christian community, or between groups. When we have shown a lack of love toward the other, we are called by God to go and say, "I'm sorry ... I really am sorry."

If I am not willing to say, "I'm sorry" when I have wronged somebody — especially when I have not shown him love — I have not even started to think about the meaning of a Christian oneness which the world can see. The world has a right to question whether I am a Christian. And more than that, let me say it again, if I am not willing to do this very simple thing, the world has a right to question whether Jesus was sent from God and whether Christianity is true.

How well have we consciously practiced this? How often, in the power of the Holy Spirit, have we gone to Christians in our own group and said, "I'm sorry"? How much time have we spent reestablishing contact with those in other groups, saying to them, "I'm sorry for what I've done, what I've said, or what I've written"? How frequently has one group gone to another group with whom it differed and said, "We're sorry"? This is so important that it is, for all practical purposes, a part of the preaching of the gospel itself. The observable

practice of truth and the observable practice of love go hand in hand with the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

I have observed one thing among true Christians in their differences in many countries: what divides and severs true Christian groups and Christians — what leaves a bitterness that can last for twenty, thirty or forty years (or for fifty or sixty years in a son's memory) — is not the issue of doctrine or belief which caused the differences in the first place. Invariably it is lack of love — and the bitter things that are said by true Christians in the midst of differences. These stick in the mind like glue. And after time passes and the differences between the Christians or the groups appear less than they did, there are still those bitter, bitter things we said in the midst of what we thought was a good and sufficient objective discussion. It is these things — these unloving attitudes and words — that cause the stench that the world can smell in the church of Jesus Christ among those who are really true Christians.

If, when we feel we must disagree as true Christians, we could simply guard our tongues and speak in love, then in five or ten years the bitterness could be gone. Instead of that, we leave scars — a curse for generations. Not just a curse in the church, but a curse in the world. Newspaper headlines bear it in our Christian press, and it boils over into the secular press at times — Christians saying such bitter things about other Christians.

The world looks, shrugs its shoulders, and turns away. It has not seen even the beginning of a living church in the midst of a dying culture. It has not seen the beginning of what Jesus indicates is the final apologetic — observable oneness among true Christians who are truly brothers in Christ. Our sharp tongues, the lack of love between us — not the necessary statement of differences that may exist between true Christians — these are what properly trouble the world.

How different this is from the straightforward and direct command of Jesus Christ to show an observable oneness which may be seen by a watching world!

Forgiveness

But there is more to observable love than saying we are sorry. There must also be open forgiveness. And though it's hard to say, "I'm sorry," it's even harder to forgive. The Bible, however, makes plain that the world must observe a forgiving spirit in the midst of God's people.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus Himself teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Now we must say at once, this prayer is not for salvation. It has nothing to do with being born again, for we are born again on the basis of the finished work of Christ plus nothing. But it does have to do with a Christian's existential, moment-by-moment experiential relationship to God. We need a once-for-all forgiveness at justification, and we need a moment-by-moment forgiveness for our sins on the basis of Christ's work in order to be in open fellowship with God. What the Lord has taught us to pray in the Lord's prayer should make a Christian very sober every day of his life: we are asking the Lord to open to us the experiential realities of fellowship with Himself as we forgive others.

Some Christians say that the Lord's prayer is not for this present era; but most of us would say it is. And yet at the same time we hardly think once in a year about our lack of a forgiving heart in relationship to God's forgiving us. Many Christians rarely or never seem to connect their own lack of reality of fellowship with God with their lack of forgiveness to men, even though they may say the Lord's prayer in a formal way over and over in their weekly Sunday worship services.

We must all continually acknowledge that we do not practice the forgiving heart as we should. And yet the prayer is, "Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, as we forgive our debtors." We are to have a forgiving spirit even before the other person expresses regret for his wrong. The Lord's prayer does not suggest that when the other man is sorry, then we are to show a oneness by having a forgiving spirit. Rather, we are called upon to have a forgiving spirit without the other man having made the first step. We may still say that he is wrong, but in the midst of saying that he is wrong, we must be forgiving.

We are to have this forgiving spirit not only toward Christians, but toward all men. But surely if it is toward all men, it is important toward Christians.

Such a forgiving spirit registers an attitude of love toward others. But even though one can call this an attitude, true forgiveness is observable. Believe me, you can look on a man's face and know where he is as far as forgiveness is concerned. And the world is called on to look at us and see whether we have love across the groups, love across party lines. Do they observe that we say, "I'm sorry," and do they observe a forgiving heart? Let me repeat: our love will not be perfect, but it must be substantial enough for the world to be able to observe or it does not fit into the structure of the verses in John 13 and John 17. And if the world does not observe this among true Christians, the world

has a right to make the two awful judgments which these verses indicate: that we are not Christians, and that Christ was not sent by the Father.

When Christians Disagree

What happens, then, when we must differ with our brothers in Christ because of the need also to show forth God's holiness either in doctrine or in life? In the matter of life, Paul clearly shows us the balance in 1 and 2 Corinthians. The same thing applies in doctrine as well.

First, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 he scolds the Corinthian church for allowing a man who is an active fornicator to stay in the church without discipline. Because of the holiness of God, because of the need to exhibit this holiness to a watching world, and because such judgment on the basis of God's revealed law is right in God's sight, Paul scolds the church for not disciplining the man.

After they have disciplined him, Paul writes again to them in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 and scolds them because they are not showing love toward him. These two things must stand together.

I am thankful that we have the record of Paul writing this way, in his first letter and his second, for here you see a passage of time. The Corinthians have taken his advice, they have disciplined the Christian, and now Paul writes to them, "You're disciplining him, but why don't you show your love toward him?" He could have gone on and quoted Jesus in saying, "Don't you realize that the surrounding pagans of Corinth have a right to say that Jesus was not sent by the Father because you are not showing love to this man that you properly disciplined?"

A very important question arises at this point: how can we exhibit the oneness Christ commands without sharing in the other people's mistakes? I would suggest a few ways by which we can practice and show this oneness even across the lines where we must differ.

Regret

First, we should never come to such difference with true Christians without regret and without tears. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Believe me, evangelicals often have not shown it. We rush in, being very, very pleased, it would seem at

times, to find other people's mistakes. We build ourselves up by tearing other people down. This can never show a real oneness among Christians.

There is only one kind of person who can fight the Lord's battles in anywhere near a proper way, and that is the person who by nature is unbelligerent. A belligerent man tends to do it because he is belligerent; at least it looks that way. The world must observe that when we must differ with each other as true Christians, we do it not because we love the smell of blood, the smell of the arena, the smell of the bullfight, but because we must for God's sake. If there are tears when we must speak, then something beautiful can be observed.

Second, in proportion to the gravity of what is wrong between true Christians, it is important consciously to exhibit an observable love to the world. Not all differences among Christians are equally serious. There are some that are very minor. Others are overwhelmingly important.

The more serious the wrongness is, the more important it is to exhibit the holiness of God, to speak out concerning what is wrong. At the same time, the more serious the differences become, the more important it becomes that we look to the Holy Spirit to enable us to show love to the true Christians with whom we must differ.

If it is only a minor difference, showing love does not take much conscious consideration. But where the difference becomes really important, it becomes proportionately more important to speak for God's holiness. And it becomes increasingly important in that place to show the world that we still love each other.

Humanly we function in exactly the opposite direction: in the less important differences we show more love toward true Christians; but as the difference gets into more important areas, we tend to show less love. The reverse must be the case: as the differences among true Christians get greater, we must consciously love and show a love which has some manifestation the world may see.

So let us consider this: is my difference with my brother in Christ crucially important? If so, it is doubly important that I spend time upon my knees asking the Holy Spirit, asking Christ, to do His work through me and my group, that I and we might show love even in this larger difference that we have come to with a brother in Christ or with another group of true Christians.

Costly Love

Third, we must show a practical demonstration of love in the midst of the dilemma, even when it is costly. The word love should not be just a banner. In other words, we must do whatever must be done, at whatever cost, to show this love. We must not say “I love you,” and then — bang, bang, bang!

So often people think that Christianity is only something soft, only a kind of gooey love that loves evil equally with good. This is not the biblical position. The holiness of God is to be exhibited simultaneously with love. We must be careful, therefore, not to say that what is wrong is right, whether it is in the area of doctrine or of life, in our own group or another. What is wrong is wrong anywhere, and we have a responsibility in that situation to say that what is wrong is wrong. But the observable love must be there regardless of the cost.

The Bible does not make these things escapable. First Corinthians 6:1-7 reads: Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust (that is, the

unsaved people), and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life? If, then, ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now, therefore, there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?

What does this mean? The church is not to let pass what is wrong; but the Christian should suffer practical, monetary loss to show the oneness true Christians should have rather than to go to court against other true Christians; that would destroy such an observable oneness before the watching world. This is costly love, but it is just such practicing love that can be seen.

Paul is talking about something which is observable, something that is very real: the Christian is to show such love in the midst of an unavoidable difference with his brother that he is willing to suffer loss — not just monetary loss (though most Christians seem to forget all love and oneness when money gets involved), but whatever loss is involved.

Whatever the specifics are, there is to be a practical demonstration of love appropriate to a particular place. The Bible is a strong and down-to-earth book.

A fourth way we can show and exhibit love without sharing in our brother's mistake is to approach the problem with a desire to solve it, rather than with a desire to win.

We all love to win. In fact, there is nobody who loves to win more than the theologian. The history of theology is all too often a long exhibition of a desire to win.

But we should understand that what we are working for in the midst of our difference is a solution — a solution that will give God the glory, that will be true to the Bible, but will exhibit the love of God simultaneously with His holiness. What is our attitude as we sit down to talk to our brother or as group meets with group to discuss differences? A desire to come out on top? To play one-upmanship? If there is any desire for love whatsoever, every time we discuss a difference we will desire a solution and not just that we can be proven right.

The Difference of Differences

A fifth way in which we can show a practicing, observable love to the world without sharing in our brother's mistake is to realize, to keep consciously before us and to help each other to be aware, that it is easy to compromise and to call what is wrong right, but that it is equally easy to forget to exhibit our oneness in Christ. This attitude must be constantly and consciously developed — talked about and written about in and among our groups and among ourselves as individuals.

In fact, this must be talked about and written about before differences arise between true Christians. We have conferences about everything else. Who has ever heard of a conference to consider how true Christians can exhibit in practice a fidelity to the holiness of God and yet simultaneously exhibit in practice a fidelity to the love of God before the watching world? Have you heard of sermons or writings which carefully present the simultaneous practice of two principles which at first seem to work against each other: (1) the principle of the practice of the purity of the visible church in regard to doctrine and life; and (2) the principle of the practice of an observable love and oneness among all true Christians?

If there is no careful preaching and writing about these things, are we so foolish as to think that there will be anything beautiful in practice when differences between true Christians must honestly be faced?

Before a watching world, an observable love in the midst of difference will show a difference between Christians' differences and other men's differences. The world may not understand what the Christians are disagreeing about, but they will very quickly understand the difference of our differences from the world's differences if they see us having our differences in an open and observable love on a practical level.

That is different. Can you see why Jesus said this was the thing that would arrest the attention of the world? You cannot expect the world to understand doctrinal differences, especially in our day when the existence of truth and absolutes are considered unthinkable even as concepts.

We cannot expect the world to understand that on the basis of the holiness of God we are having a different kind of difference, because we are dealing with God's absolutes. But when they see differences among true Christians who also show an observable unity, this will open the way for them to consider the truth of Christianity and Christ's claim that the Father did send the Son.

As a matter of fact, we have a greater possibility of showing what Jesus is speaking about here, in the midst of our differences, than we do if we are not differing. Obviously we ought not to go out looking for differences among Christians; there are enough without looking for more. But even so, it is in the midst of a difference that we have our golden opportunity. When everything is going well and we are all standing around in a nice little circle, there is not much to be seen by the world. But when we come to the place where there is a real difference, and we exhibit uncompromised principles but at the same time observable love, then there is something that the world can see, something they can use to judge that these really are Christians, and that Jesus has indeed been sent by the Father.

Love in Practice

Let me give two beautiful examples of such observable love. One happened among the Brethren groups in Germany immediately after World War II.

In order to control the church, Hitler commanded the union of all religious groups in Germany, drawing them together by law. The Brethren divided over this issue. Half accepted Hitler's dictum and half refused. The ones who submitted, of course, had a much easier time, but gradually in this organizational oneness with the liberal groups their own doctrinal sharpness and spiritual life suffered. On the other hand, the group that stayed out remained spiritually virile, but there was hardly a family in which someone did not die in a German concentration camp.

Now can you imagine the emotional tension? The war is over, and these Christian brothers face each other again. They had the same doctrine, and they had previously worked together for more than a generation. Now what is going to happen? One man remembers that his father died in a concentration camp and knows that these people in the other group remained safe. But those on the other side have deep personal feelings as well.

Then gradually these brothers came to know that this situation just would not do. A time was appointed when the elders of the two groups could meet together in a certain quiet place. I asked the man who told me this, "What did you do?" He said, "Well, I'll tell you what we did. We came together, and we set aside several days in which each man would search his own heart." Here was a real difference; the emotions were deeply, deeply involved. "My father has gone to the concentration camp, my mother was dragged away." These things are not just little pebbles on the beach; they reach into the deep wellsprings of human emotions. But these people understood the command of Christ about this, and for several days every man did nothing except search his own heart concerning his own failures and the commands of Christ. Then they met together.

I asked the man, "What happened then?"

And he said, "We just were one."

To my mind, this is exactly what Jesus speaks about. The Father has sent the Son!

Divided But One

The principle we are talking about is universal, applicable in all times and places. Let me, then, give you a second illustration — a different practice of the same principle.

I have been waiting for years for a time when two groups of born-again Christians who for good reasons find it impossible to work together separate without saying bitter things against each other. I have longed for two groups who would continue to show a love to the watching world when they came to the place where organizational unity seems no longer possible between them.

Theoretically, of course, every local church ought to be able to minister to the whole spectrum of society. But in practice we must acknowledge that in certain places it becomes very difficult. The needs of different segments of society are different.

A problem of this nature arose in a church in a large city in the United States. A number of people attuned to the modern age were going to a certain church, but the pastor gradually concluded that he was not able to preach and minister to the two groups together. Some men can, but he personally did not find it possible to minister to the whole spectrum of his congregation — the counterculture people and the far-out ones they brought, and at the same time the people of the surrounding neighborhood.

The example of observable love I am going to present now must not be taken as an “of course” situation in our day. In our generation the lack of love can easily cut both ways. A middle-class people can all too easily be snobbish and unloving against the counterculture Christians, and the counterculture Christians can be equally snobbish and unloving against the middle-class Christians.

After trying for a long time to work together, the elders met and decided that they would make two churches. They made it very plain that they were not dividing because their doctrine was different; they were dividing as a matter of practicability. One member of the old session went to the new group. They worked under the whole session to make an orderly transition. Gradually they had two churches, and they were consciously practicing love toward each other.

Here is a lack of organizational unity that is a true love and unity which the world may observe. The Father has sent the Son!

I want to say with all my heart that as we struggle with the proper preaching of the gospel in the midst of the twentieth century, the importance of observable love must come into our message. We must not forget the final apologetic. The world has a right to look upon us as we, as true Christians, come to practical differences, and it should be able to observe that we do love each other. Our love must have a form that the world may observe; it must be visible.

The One True Mark

Let us look again at the biblical texts which so clearly indicate the mark of the Christian:

A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:34, 35)

That they all may be one as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. (John 17:21)

What then shall we conclude but that as the Samaritan loved the wounded man, we as Christians are called upon to love all men as neighbors, loving them as ourselves. Second, that we are to love all true Christian brothers in a way that the world may observe. This means showing love to our brothers in the midst of our differences — great or small — loving our brothers when it costs us something, loving them even under times of tremendous emotional tension, loving them in a way the world can see. In short, we are to practice and exhibit the holiness of God and the love of God, for without this we grieve the Holy Spirit.

Love — and the unity it attests to — is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father.

Lament

Weep, weep for those
Who do the work of the Lord
with a high look
And a proud heart.
Their voice is lifted up
In the streets, and their cry is heard.
The bruised reed they break
By their great strength, and the smoking flax They trample.
Weep not for the quenched
(For their God will hear their cry
And the Lord will come to save them)

But weep, weep for the quenchers
For when the Day of the Lord
Is come, and the vales sing
And the hills clap their hands
And the light shines
Then their eyes shall be opened
On a waste place,
Smouldering,
The smoke of the flax bitter
In their nostrils,
Their feet pierced
By broken reed-stems ...
Wood, hay, and stubble,
And no grass springing,
And all the birds flown.
Weep, weep for those
Who have made a desert
In the name of the Lord.

EVANGELISTIC WORSHIP

Timothy Keller

Worship isn't just about honoring tradition or keeping up with culture, it's about attracting nonbelievers through comprehensible worship and leading those people to personal commitment.

THE WORSHIP WARS

One of the basic features of church life in the United States today is the proliferation of worship and music forms. This in turn has caused many severe conflicts within both individual congregations and whole denominations. Most books and articles about recent worship trends tend to fall into one of two broad categories. Contemporary worship (CW) advocates often make rather sweeping statements, such as “Pipe organs and choirs will never reach people today.” Historic worship (HW) advocates often speak similarly about how incorrigibly corrupt popular music and culture are and how they make contemporary worship completely unacceptable.¹

Contemporary Worship: Plugging In?

One CW advocate writes vividly that we must “plug in” our worship to three power sources: “the sound system, the Holy Spirit, and contemporary culture.”² But several problems attend the promotion of strictly contemporary worship.

First, some popular music *does* have severe limitations for worship. Critics of popular culture argue that much of it is the product of mass-produced commercial interests. As such, it is often marked by sentimentality, a lack of artistry, sameness, and individualism in a way that traditional folk art was not. Second, when we ignore historic tradition, we break our solidarity with Christians of the past. Part of the richness of our identity as Christians is that we are saved into a historic people. An unwillingness to consult tradition is not in keeping with either Christian humility or Christian community. Nor is it a thoughtful response to the postmodern rootlessness that now leads so many to seek connection to ancient ways and peoples.

Finally, any worship that is strictly contemporary will quickly become dated. Also, it will necessarily be gauged to a narrow market niche. When Peter

Wagner says we should “plug in” to contemporary culture, which contemporary culture does he mean—white, black, Latin, urban, suburban, boomer, or Gen X contemporary culture?

Hidden (but not well!) in the argument of CW enthusiasts is the assumption that culture is basically neutral. Thus there is no reason why we cannot wholly adapt our worship to any particular cultural form. But worship that is not rooted in historic tradition will often lack the distance to critique and avoid the excesses and distorted sinful elements of the surrounding, present culture. For example, how can we harness contemporary Western culture’s accessibility and frankness but not its individualism and psychologizing of moral problems?

Historic Worship--Pulling Out?

HW advocates, on the other hand, are strictly high culture promoters who defend themselves from charges of elitism by arguing that modern pop music is inferior to traditional folk art.³ But problems also attend the promotion of strictly traditional, historic worship.

First, HW advocates cannot really dodge the charge of cultural elitism. A realistic look at the Christian music arising from the grassroots folk cultures of Latin America, Africa, and Asia (not commercially produced pop music centers) reveals many of the characteristics of contemporary praise and worship music: simple and accessible tunes, driving beat, repetitive words, and emphasis on experience.⁴ In the United States, an emphasis on strictly high-culture music and art will probably appeal only to college-educated elites.

Second, any proponent of historic worship will have to answer the question, *whose* history? Much of what is called traditional worship is rooted in Northern European culture. While strict CW advocates bind worship too heavily to one present culture, strict HW advocates bind it too heavily to a past culture. Do we really believe that the sixteenth-century Northern European approach to emotional expression and music (incarnate in the Reformation tradition) was completely biblically informed and must be preserved as if it were essential to the gospel?

Hidden (but not well!) in the arguments of traditional worship advocates is the assumption that certain historic forms are purer, more biblical, and untainted by human cultural accretions. Those who argue against cultural relativism

must also remember the essential relativity of all traditions. Just as it is a lack of humility to disdain tradition, it is also a lack of humility (and a blindness to the noetic effects of sin) to elevate any particular tradition or culture's way of doing worship. A refusal to adapt a tradition to new realities may come under Jesus' condemnation of making our favorite human culture into an idol, equal to the Scripture in normativity (Mark 7:8–9).⁵ While CW advocates do not seem to recognize the sin in all cultures, the HW advocates do not seem to recognize the amount of (common) grace in all cultures.

Bible, Tradition, and Culture

At this point, the reader will anticipate that I am about to unveil some grand “Third Way” between two extremes. Indeed, many posit a third approach called blended worship.⁶ But it is not so simple as that. My major concern is that both sides are equally simplistic in the process by which they shape their worship.

CW advocates consult the Bible and contemporary culture, while HW advocates consult the Bible and historic tradition. But we forge worship best when we consult the Bible, the cultural context of our community,⁷ and the historic tradition of our church.⁸ The result of this more complex process will not be simply a single, third middle way. There are at least nine worship traditions in Protestantism alone.⁹

This more complex approach is challenging but extremely important. The Bible simply does not give us enough details to shape an entire worship service. When the Bible calls us to sing God's praises, we are not given the tunes or the rhythm. We are not told how repetitive the lyrics are to be or how emotionally intense the singing should be. When we are commanded to do corporate prayer, we are not told whether those prayers should be written, spoken in unison, or extemporaneous.¹⁰ So to give any concrete form to our worship, we must fill in the blanks that the Bible leaves open. When we do so, we will have to draw on tradition, the needs, capacities, and cultural sensibilities of our people, and our own personal preferences. Though we cannot avoid drawing on our own preferences, they should never be the driving force (cf. Rom. 15:1–3). But if we fail to do the hard work of consulting both tradition and culture, we will—wittingly or unwittingly—choose music just to please ourselves.

SEEKER-SENSITIVE WORSHIP

Another proposed model is seeker-sensitive worship, which was designed to appeal to a specific type of un-churched person. But many younger pastors say that seeker-sensitive worship does several things that alienate the seekers of *their* generations:

1. It over-adapts to the rational, ahistorical, high-modern worldview. These services have typically been calibrated for a very narrow and transitory kind of unchurched person: namely, the college-educated white baby boomer suburbanite. The increasingly multiethnic, urban-oriented, less rational or word-oriented, and more secular generations under the age of thirty-five are not the same kind of unchurched people.
2. It removes transcendence from its services by utilizing light, happy music and tone, complete accessibility of voice, and dramatic sketches that create a nightclub or TV-show atmosphere. But their generations hunger for awe.
3. It ditches connection to history and tradition and goes contemporary in all cultural references, from sermon illustrations to decorations to a suburban mall/office building setting. But their generations hunger for rootedness and love a pastiche of ancient and modern.
4. It emphasizes polish and technical excellence, professionalism, and management techniques. But their generations hunger for authenticity and community.
5. It emphasizes rationality and practical how-to maps. But their generations hunger for narrative and the personal.

Two models, with problems

The most thoughtful members of the Seeker Friendly Service (SFS) movement agree that the straight "seeker service" is not really worship, and therefore new believers are brought out of the seeker service into a weekly worship service for believers. The critics, on the other hand, generally see the worship service as the place for renewing and edifying believers who then go out into the world to do evangelism. The two models then, seem to be as follows:

Seeker service (evangelism) —> Worship service (edification)

Worship service (edification) —> World (evangelism)

There are pragmatic problems with both models. The SFS model is very expensive; it is hard to assimilate new Christians out of seeker services into real worship services. And if the main worship service is very oriented toward seekers, the Christians often feel underfed.¹¹ On the other hand, the critics cannot avoid the charge that they are not proposing any alternative to the current evangelistically ineffective church. One critic is very typical when he writes:

*“While we [the seeker-friendly church] try to entice the world to come to church to hear the Gospel, the New Testament proclaims a powerful church worshipping God going out into the world in order to reach the lost (cf. the book of Acts.). True revivals have historically proved . . . that a revived and healthy church reaches a dying and lost world through its own awakened people.”*¹²

This view says that evangelism will take care of itself as long as we have great worship. But the history of revivals also shows us innovations in outreach.

The Great Awakening was marked by two remarkable innovators: George Whitefield in evangelism and John Wesley in organization. Many criticize seeker services as being not worship but entertainment. Often they call us to look instead at the revivals of the past. But they do not criticize George Whitefield for attracting huge crowds to his own “seeker programs.” He drew people into open-air meetings with a preaching that was unparalleled at the time in its appeal. His humor, his stories, his dramatically acted-out illustrations, and his astounding oratorical gifts drew tens of thousands.¹³ At the time he was labeled an entertainer. His meetings were not worship, nor did they replace worship, but they were certainly critical to the revival. They provided Christians with a remarkable place to do friendship evangelism. His meetings were all over a given city on virtually every day of the week.

Whitefield’s evangelism was enormously aggressive and passionate. His preaching was lively and popular while pointing toward the transcendent and holy God. Yet his public meetings shared many of the characteristics of seeker services today (and attracted many of the same criticisms). Whitefield and Wesley did not become instruments of revival by simply being great expository preachers and renewing historic worship.

The main problem with the two models, however, is theological. They both assume that worship cannot be highly evangelistic. I want to show that this is a false premise. Churches would do best to make their “main course” an

evangelistic worship service, supplemented by both (a) numerous, variegated, creative, even daily (but not weekly) seeker-focused events and (b) intense meetings for Bible study and corporate prayer for revival and renewal.

A SOLUTION: EVANGELISTIC WORSHIP

Theological basis

God commanded Israel to invite the nations to join in declaring his glory. Zion is to be the center of world-winning worship (Isaiah 2:2-4; 56:6-8.) "Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord...so the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship the Lord" (Psalm 102:18.) Psalm 105 is a direct command to believers engage in evangelistic worship. The Psalmist challenges them to "make known among the nations what he has done" (v.1.) How? "Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of his wonderful acts" (v.2) Thus believers are continually told to sing and praise God before the unbelieving nations. (See also Psalm 47:1; 100:1-5.) God is to be praised before all the nations, and as he is praised by his people, the nations are summoned and called to join in song.

Peter tells a Gentile church, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Peter 2:9.) This shows us that the church is challenged to the same witness that Israel was called to--evangelistic worship. A key difference: in the Old Testament, the center of world-winning worship was Mt. Zion, but now, wherever we worship Jesus in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-26) we have come to the heavenly Zion (Heb.12:18-24.) In other words, the risen Lord now sends his people out singing his praises in mission, calling the nations to join both saints and angels in heavenly doxology. Jesus himself stands in the midst of the redeemed and leads us in the singing of God's praises (Hebrews 2:12), even as God stands over his redeemed and sings over us in joy (Zeph. 2:17.)

Biblical Case Studies

I Corinthians 14:24-25

Paul is addressing the misuse of the gift of tongues. He complains that tongues speaking will cause unbelievers to say they are out of their minds (v.23.) He

insists that the worship service must be comprehensible to them. He says that if an unbeliever "or unlearned one" (an uninitiated inquirer) comes in, and worship is being done "unto edification", "he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all" (v.24.) Of what does this conviction consist? "The secrets of his heart will be laid bare" (v.25.) It may mean he realizes that the worshippers around him are finding in God what his heart had been secretly searching for, but in the wrong ways. It may mean the worship shows him how his heart works. The result: "so falling on his face, he will worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you'" (v.25.)

Acts 2

When the Spirit falls on those in the upper room, a crowd gathers (v.5) because a) they are hearing the disciples praising God ("we hear them declaring the wonders of God" v.11), and b) and also because this worship is "in our own tongues" (v.11.) As a result, they are first made very interested ("amazed and perplexed they asked one another, 'what does this mean'" v.11), and later they are convicted deeply ("they were cut to the heart and said...'Brethren, what shall we do?'" v.37.)

Comparison

There are obvious differences between the two situations. I Cor 14 pictures conversion happening on the spot (which is certainly possible.) In Acts 2 the non-believers are shaken out of their indifference (v.12), but the actual conversions (v.37-41) occurred at the end of an "after meeting" in which Peter explained the gospel (v.14-36) and showed them how to individually receive Christ (v.38-39.) It is often pointed out that the tongues in the two situations are different. But students usually are looking so carefully at what the two passages teach about tongues and prophecy that they fail to note what they teach about worship and evangelism. We can learn this:

1. Non-believers are expected to be present in Christian worship. In Acts 2 it happens by word-of-mouth excitement. In I Cor 14 it is probably the result of personal invitation by Christian friends. But Paul in 14:23 expects both "unbelievers" and "the unlearned" (literally "a seeker"-- "one who does not understand") to be present in worship.
2. Non-believers must find the praise of Christians to be comprehensible. In Acts 2 it happens by miraculous divine intervention. In I Cor 14 it happens by human design and effort. But it cannot be missed that Paul directly tells a local congregation to adapt its worship because of the presence of

- unbelievers. It is a false dichotomy to insist that if we are seeking to please God we must not ask what the unchurched feel or think about our worship.
3. Non-believers can fall under conviction and be converted through comprehensible worship. In I Cor 14 it happens during the service, but in Acts 2 it is supplemented by "after meetings" and follow-up evangelism. God wants the world to overhear us worshipping him. God directs his people not to simply worship, but to sing his praises "before the nations." We are not to simply communicate the gospel to them, but celebrate the gospel before them.

THREE PRACTICAL TASKS

1. Getting Unbelievers Into Worship

The numbering is not a mistake. This task actually comes second, but nearly everyone thinks it comes first! It is natural to believe that non-Christians must get into worship before "doxological evangelism" can begin. But the reverse is the case. Non-Christians do not get invited into worship unless the worship is already evangelistic. The only way to have non-Christians in attendance is through personal invitation by Christians. Just as in the Psalms, the "nations" must be directly asked to come. But the main stimulus to building bridges and issuing invitations is the comprehensibility and quality of the worship experience.

Christians will instantly sense if a worship experience will be attractive to their non-Christian friends. They may find a particular service wonderfully edifying for *them* and yet know that their nonbelieving neighbors would react negatively. Therefore, a vicious circle persists. Pastors see only Christians present, so they lack incentive to make their worship comprehensible to outsiders. But since they fail to make the adaptations, Christians who are there (though perhaps edified themselves) do not think to bring their skeptical and non-Christian friends to church. They do not think they will be impressed. So no outsiders come. And so the pastors respond only to the Christian audience. And so on and on. Therefore, the best way to get Christians to bring non-Christians is to worship as if there were dozens and hundreds of skeptical onlookers. And if you worship as *if*, eventually they will be there in reality.

2. Making Worship Comprehensible To Believers

Our purpose is not to make unbelievers comfortable. (In 1 Corinthians 14:24–25 or Acts 2:12, 37, they are cut to the heart!) We aim to be intelligible to them. We must address their heart secrets (1 Cor. 14:25). That means we must remember what it is like to not believe; we must remember what an unbelieving heart is like. How do we do that?

A. Worship and preach in the vernacular.

It is hard to overstate how ghettoized our preaching is. It is common to make all kinds of statements that appear persuasive to us but are based upon all sorts of premises that the secular person does not hold; it is common to use terms and phrases that mean nothing outside of our Christian subgroup. So avoid unnecessary theological or evangelical subculture jargon, and explain carefully the basic theological concepts—confession of sin, praise, thanksgiving, and so on. In the preaching, show continual willingness to address the questions that the unbelieving heart will ask. Speak respectfully and sympathetically to people who have difficulty with Christianity. As you write the sermon, imagine a particular skeptical non-Christian in the chair listening to you. Add the necessary asides, the definitions, the extra explanations. Listen to everything said in the worship service with the ears of someone who has doubts or troubles with belief.

B. Explain the service as you go along.

Though there is danger of pastoral verbosity, learn to explain each new part of the service briefly and without jargon, in one or two sentences. For example, to introduce a time of prayer and confession, say: “When we confess our sins, we are not groveling in guilt but dealing with our guilt. If you deny your sins, you will never get free from them.” It is good to begin worship services as the African-American church often does, with a “devotional,” a brief talk that explains the meaning of worship. This way you continually instruct newcomers in worship.

C. Directly address and welcome nonbelievers.

Speak regularly to “those of you who aren’t sure you believe this, or who aren’t sure just what you believe.” Give them many asides, even employing the language of their hearts. Articulate their objections to Christian living and belief better than they can do it themselves. Express sincere sympathy for their difficulties, even when challenging them severely for their selfishness and unbelief. Admonish with tears (literally or figuratively). Always grant whatever degree of merit their objections have. It is extremely important that unbelievers feel you understand their objections: “I’ve tried it before and it did not work.” “I don’t see how my life could be the result of the plan of a loving

God.” “Christianity is a straitjacket.” “It can’t be wrong if it feels so right.” “I could never keep it up.” “I don’t feel worthy; I am too bad.” “I just can’t believe.”

D. Cultivate high-quality aesthetics.

The power of art draws people to behold it. Good art bears its message into the soul through the imagination and begins to appeal to reason, for art makes ideas plausible. The quality of music and speech in worship will have a major impact on its evangelistic power. In many churches, the quality of the music is mediocre or poor, but it does not disturb the faithful. Their faith makes the words of the hymn or the song meaningful despite its artistically poor expression, and further, they usually have a personal relationship with the song leader and musicians. But any outsider who arrives not convinced of the truth and having no relationship to the music leaders will be bored or irritated by the poor offering. Excellent aesthetics includes outsiders, while mediocre or poor aesthetics exclude. The low level of artistic quality in many churches guarantees that only insiders will continue to come. To say this positively, the attraction of good art will play a major part in drawing non-Christians.

E. Celebrate deeds of mercy and justice.

We live in a time when public esteem of the church is plummeting. For many outsiders and inquirers, the deeds of the church will be far more important than words in gaining plausibility. The leaders of most towns see “word-only” churches as costs to their community, not as value. Effective churches will be so involved in deeds of mercy and justice that outsiders will say, “We cannot do without churches like this. This church is channeling so much value into our community through its services to people that if it went out of business, we’d have to raise everybody’s taxes.” Mercy deeds give the gospel words plausibility (Acts 4:32–33). Therefore, evangelistic worship services should highlight offerings for deed ministry and should celebrate through reports and testimonies and prayer what is being done. It is best that offerings for mercy ministry be separate, attached to the Lord’s Supper. This brings before the non-Christian the impact of the gospel on people’s hearts (it makes us generous) and the impact of lives poured out for the world.

F. Present the sacraments in ways that make the gospel clear.

Baptism, and especially adult baptism, should be made a much more significant event if worship is to be evangelistic. There may need to be opportunity for the baptized to offer personal testimony as well as assent to questions. The meaning of baptism should be made clear. A moving, joyous, personal charge to the baptized (and to all baptized Christians present) should be made.

Similarly, the Lord's Supper too can become a converting ordinance. If it is explained properly, the unbeliever will see the difference between walking with Christ and living for oneself. The Lord's Supper will confront every individual with the question: "Are you right with God *today, now?*" There is no more effective way to help a person take a spiritual inventory. (See below for more on addressing unbelievers during Communion.)

G. Preach grace.

The one message that both believers and unbelievers need to hear is that salvation and adoption are by grace alone. A worship service that focuses too much and too often on educating Christians in the details of theology will simply bore or confuse the unbelievers present. For example, a sermon on abortion will generally assume that the listener believes in the authority of the Word and the authority of Jesus and does not believe in individual moral autonomy. In other words, abortion is "doctrine D," and it is based on "doctrines A, B, and C." Therefore, people who don't believe or understand doctrines ABC will find such a sermon unconvicting and even alienating. This does not mean we should not preach the whole counsel of God, but we must major on the ABCs of the Christian faith.

If the response to this is "Then Christians will be bored," it shows a misunderstanding of the gospel. The gospel of free, gracious justification and adoption is not only the way we enter the kingdom but also the way we grow into the likeness of Christ. Titus 2:11–13 tells us how it is the original, saving message of grace alone that leads us to sanctified living: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Many Christians are defeated and stagnant in their growth because they try to be holy for wrong motives. They say no to temptation by telling themselves, "God will get me," or "People will find out," or "I'll hate myself in the morning," or "it will hurt my self-esteem," or "It will hurt other people," or "It's against the law—I'll be caught." or "It's against my principles," or "I will look bad." Some or all of these may be true, but Titus tells us they are inadequate. Only the grace of God, the logic of the gospel, will work. Titus says it teaches us, it argues with us.

Therefore, the one basic message that both Christians and unbelievers need to hear is the gospel of grace. It can be applied to both groups, right on the spot and directly. Sermons that are basically moralistic will be applicable only to

either Christians or non-Christians. But Christocentric preaching both grows believers and challenges nonbelievers. If the Sunday service and sermon aim primarily at evangelism, they will bore the saints. If they aim primarily at education, they'll bore and confuse unbelievers. If they aim at praising the God who saves by grace, they'll both instruct insiders and challenge outsiders.

3. Leading To Commitment

Our experience at Redeemer has shown that unbelievers in worship actually "close with Christ" in two basic ways. Some may come to Christ during the service itself (1 Cor. 14:24-25); others must be followed up very specifically.

A. During the service.

One major time to invite people to receive Christ during the service is as the Lord's Supper is distributed. We say, "If you are not in a saving relationship with God through Christ today, do not take the bread and the cup, but as they come around, take Christ. Receive him in your heart as those around you receive the food. Then immediately afterward, come up here and tell an officer or a pastor about what you've done, so we can get you ready to receive the Supper the next time as a child of God."

Another way to invite commitment during the service is to give people a time of silence after the sermon. A prayer of belief could be prayed by the pastor (or printed in the bulletin at that juncture in the order of worship) to help people reach out to Christ.¹⁴ Sometimes it may be good to put a musical interlude or an offering after the sermon but before the final hymn. This affords people time to think about and process what they have heard and offer themselves to God in prayer. If, however, the preacher ends his sermon, prays very briefly, and moves immediately into the final hymn, no time is given to people under conviction to offer up their hearts.

B. After meetings.

Acts 2 seems to show us an "after meeting." In verses 12 and 13 we are told that some folks mocked upon hearing the apostles praise and preach, but others were disturbed and asked, "What does this mean?" Then Peter very specifically explained the gospel, and in response to a second question, "What shall we do?" (v. 37), he explained very specifically how to become a Christian. Historically, it has been found effective to offer such meetings to unbelievers and seekers immediately after evangelistic worship. Convicted seekers have just come from being in the presence of God, and they are often most teachable

and open at this moment. To seek to get them into a small group or even merely to get them to return next Sunday is asking a lot of them. Yet they may be “amazed and perplexed” (Acts 2:12), and it is best to strike while the iron is hot. This is not to cast doubt on the teaching that God is infallibly drawing his elect! The knowledge that conversions are not dependent on our eloquence helps us to relax as we do evangelism. But the Westminster Confession tells us that God ordinarily works through secondary causes, normal social and psychological processes. Therefore, to invite people into a follow-up meeting immediately is usually more conducive to conserving the fruit of the Word than it would be to let them go.

After meetings may consist first of having one or more persons wait at the front of the auditorium to pray and talk with any seekers who come forward to make inquiries right on the spot. A second after meeting can consist of a simple question-and-answer session with the preacher in a room near the main auditorium or even in the auditorium. Third, after meetings should also consist of one or two classes or small group experiences targeted to specific questions non-Christians ask about the content, relevance, and credibility of the Christian faith. After meetings should be attended by skilled lay evangelists who can come alongside newcomers, answer spiritual questions, and provide guidance for their next steps.

Endnotes

1. Some writers who emphasize historic continuity, tradition, high culture, and theological exposition in worship are Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), and David Wells, "A Tale of Two Spiritualities," in *Losing Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Examples of those urging a move to contemporary worship with emphasis on "visual communication, music, sensations, and feelings" are Lyle Schaller, "Worshipping with New Generations," in *21 Bridges to the 21st Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) and C. Peter Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1998). See also Michael S. Hamilton, "The Triumph of the Praise Songs," *Christianity Today* 43, no. 8 (July 12, 1999): 28-ff., for a discussion of "Reformers" who value tradition and liturgical forms and "Revolutionaries" who promote contemporary music.
2. C. Peter Wagner, "Another New Wineskin—the New Apostolic Reformation," *Next* 5 (Jan-Mar 1999), 3. Leadership Network: www.leadnet.org/archive_next.asp (April 21, 2009).
3. Marva Dawn does an excellent job of distilling Ken Myer's concerns about pop music in her chapter "Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water," in *Reaching Out*.
4. See "The Triumph of the Praise Songs," *ibid.*
5. Too often advocates for high-culture or pop-culture worship music try to make their advocacy a matter of theological principle, when it is really more a matter of their own tastes and cultural preferences. For example, when pressed, HW advocates admit that jazz is not really a product of commercial pop culture but qualifies as a high-culture medium that grew out of genuine folk roots, requires great skill and craft, and can express a fuller range of human experience than rock and pop music can. (See Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Hendrickson, 1984), 59–62 on folk music and jazz.) On their own stated principles, then, there is no reason for traditionalists not to allow jazz music in worship, yet I see no traditional-worship proponents encouraging jazz liturgies. Why not? It appears that they are going on their own aesthetic preferences.
6. Unfortunately, for many people blended worship consists of a simple, wooden, 50-50 division between contemporary songs and traditional hymns. This is often quite jarring and unhelpful. It is more of a political compromise than the result of reflection about a community's culture and church tradition. A far better example of a "third way" is Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Hendrickson, 1996). Webber is talking of a more organic blend of liturgical elements, content-filled preaching, and a variety of music forms. In many ways my essay agrees with Webber's basic thrust. We would not use the term blended worship, however, because it usually connotes the political compromise mentioned above. On the problems of 50-50 music division, see comments below under "Selecting Worship Music."
7. A good case for a balanced view of consulting culture within an evangelical view of the authority of Scripture is made by Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" and "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).
8. A balanced view of consulting tradition within an evangelical view of the authority of Scripture is laid out by Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon for Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), 83–101. He writes that Christian humility makes us recognize the reality of our biases and prejudices when coming to Scripture. This means it is unbiblical (in our doctrine of sin) to think we can find the biblical way without consulting our own tradition and other traditions to check our own scriptural findings. See also John Leith, "Traditioning the Faith," chap. 1 in *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (John Knox, 1981).
9. James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Abingdon, 1993), 107, identifies the Protestant worship traditions as follow
 - 16th century: Anabaptist, (Continental) Reformed, Anglican, Lutheran / 17th century: Quaker, Puritan/Reformed
 - 18th century: Methodist / 19th century: Frontier / 20th century: Pentecost
10. John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), does a good job of showing how great a variety of forms the basic biblical elements can take. Some have argued against the use of choirs and solos on the basis of the "regulative principle," namely, that they are not prescribed by Scripture. But Frame asks, if some are allowed to pray aloud while the rest of the congregation meditates, why can't some be allowed to sing or pray aloud while the rest of the congregation meditates (p. 129)? Why would song be regulated differently from prayer and preaching? Some have argued against using hymns and nonscriptural songs on the basis of the regulative principle. But Frame asks, if we are allowed to pray or to preach using our own words (based on Scripture), why can we not sing using our own words (based on Scripture) (p. 127)? Why would song be regulated differently from prayer and preaching? Some have argued against the use of dance in worship, but aside from many apparent references to dance in worship in the Psalter, Frame asks, if we are exhorted to raise hands (Neh. 2:8; Ps. 28:2; 1 Tim. 2:8), clap hands (Ps. 47:1), and fall down (1 Cor. 14:25), is it not expected and natural that we accompany words with actions (p. 131)? We can't preach, surely, without using our bodies to express our thoughts and words, so how can we arbitrarily draw the

line to exclude dance? Frame points out that the real way to make decisions about these issues (such as dance) is with wisdom and love—that is, by asking what will edify. If you think that dancers in leotards will be too distracting and sexually provocative for your congregation, just say so—don't try to prove that the Bible forbids it. It is a bad habit of mind to seek to label as forbidden what is really just unwise.

11. Some disadvantages of the SFC approach:
 1. Costliness. It is extremely expensive and difficult to do seeker services well. Essentially, they don't work unless the unchurched feel the art is as good as what they could pay to see in a theater. Many SFC attempts are mediocre, and unless you hit a home run every time, the effect is quite discouraging.
 2. Sunday issue. When Sunday is the day for seeker-focused services, it gives the world the impression that this is the people of God in worship, that this is all there is. Further, it isn't good for Christians to have to squeeze their weekly worship into a weeknight evening between two busy days of labor. It robs Christians of a whole day for worship and renewal.
 3. Assimilation issue. Regular weekly seeker-focused services can create a large assimilation problem. If a person comes to Christianity through a seeker service, he or she may then settle into that environment for weekly worship. Supposedly the new Christian is to be invited out of the seeker service into worship, but the jump is not easy to accomplish. In one church, persons who met Christ through the seeker service could not be assimilated into the regular worship because the believers' worship was totally oriented toward long-time Christians who are immersed in the evangelical subculture and inhabit a very different world from that of the new Christian. (See Ed Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service* [Zondervan, 1993], 83.) And if the seeker service becomes the worship service of new believers, either they will not be fed properly or the service will gradually become a contemporary worship service and will lose its effectiveness in outreach.
 4. Friendship evangelism issue. The most effective way to reach a nonbeliever is for a Christian to share the gospel with him or her in the context of a friendship. But if a Christian wants to bring a non-Christian friend to a seeker-focused weekly service, he or she will have to come out twice a week, once to take the friend to church and once to get his or her own nurture.
 5. Nurture issue. A church may have one seeker-sensitive service that is heavily focused on the unchurched but that serves as the weekly worship for believers. As time goes on, however, the Christians often hunger for something deeper. In response to complaints, the pastor often "gets more meaty" and begins to lose the non-Christians.
12. John H. Armstrong, "The Mad Rush to Seeker Sensitive Worship," *Modern Reformation* (January/February 1995), 25. 13. Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1991).

