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ADVENT CHRISTIAN CATECHISM SECTION 7: COMMUNITY AND KINGDOM LIVING

Summary

Throughout the New Testament we see a glorious picture of salvation — all that God has done in order to rescue people from sin and death and restore them to himself. But, to say that all the New Testament describes is individual salvation is to miss one of its most important emphases. Moreover, to live your life as if all that matters is your personal relationship with the Lord is to miss one of God’s most precious gifts.

God’s work in this world is to redeem a people for his own possession (1 Peter 2:9). This new, redeemed community is what Scripture calls “the church” (Q. 111), or the *ekklēsia* — the assembly of those who have been called out by God and knit together as one people. There are numerous ways the Scriptures describe the church (Q. 112), but some of the most predominant metaphors are that of a body (Eph. 1:23; 4:12), a bride (Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 19:7) and a family (1 Tim. 3:15).

The New Testament refers to the church in two senses: the universal church and the local church. The universal church (sometimes called the “invisible church”) refers not to a specific group of believers, but to every true believer from every place and every age. When one confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior, having been born of the Spirit, he or she is automatically welcomed into Christ’s universal church (Q. 113; 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:27).

However, the reality of membership in this universal body is intended to be demonstrated in the context of a real commitment to a local church (1 Cor. 12:13). A group of Christians simply meeting together for leisurely activities is not the “church” in this sense unless they are an ordered assembly of a specific group of believers in a specific place (Q. 114; Acts 16:5; 1 Cor. 12:20–27; 16:19) gathered with the goal of loving one another (Q. 115), mak-

ing disciples (Q. 116) and celebrating the ordinances that Christ passed on (Q. 117).

The church is the steward of two visible symbols which demonstrate the invisible reality of God's grace: believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper (Q. 117). These are discernible and tangible representations of the gospel *and* of our union with Christ through the gospel. With both ordinances, believers have an opportunity to "remember" God's goodness and grace, especially as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is a one-time symbol of a Christian's union with Christ that takes place by immersion into water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Qs. 118–119).

The Lord's Supper is a recurring symbolic meal that consists of the eating of bread and drinking of wine in remembrance of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ until he returns (Qs. 120–122).

These two ordinances are open to all believers in Jesus Christ who have repented of their sins and desire to symbolically reenact the truth of the gospel, thereby being moved to a greater understanding and appreciation of all that has been accomplished for them (Q. 123).

From Scripture, we can be certain that Christ's church has a very clear mission on this earth: to make disciples and to worship and obey the Lord (Q. 116; Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 12:30; 1 Peter 2:9). This commission is fulfilled within the context of the local church as the people of God live according to his good design for his community, which can be seen, among other places, in Acts 2:42, where the church was devoted to the apostles' teaching, the fellowship of the saints, the breaking of bread and to prayer (Q. 124).

Of particular note is the apostles' teaching (Q. 125), which encompasses the commands of the New Testament concerning both orthodoxy ("right belief;" John 1:1–4; Titus 1:9) and orthopraxy ("right behavior;" Matt. 28:20; 1 Tim. 3:15). In the church, believers in Jesus Christ are known for the intimacy and authenticity of their fellowship. The fellowship that so characterizes members of God's household consists of deep relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ and a profound sacrificial love for one another

(Qs. 115, 126; Eph. 4:25; Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9–10; 1 John 4:7; 1 Peter 1:22).

Within the context of the committed relationships of the local church, believers in Jesus Christ also enjoy the gift of prayer, the pouring out of one's heart in conversation with God (Q. 127; Lam. 2:19; Ps. 142:1–2). Though often viewed only as an individual and private activity (Matt. 6:6), prayer is also intended to be a corporate activity. Jesus is often seen praying in crowds, teaching his disciples to pray “our Father” (not “my” as an individual; Matt. 6:9) and, after his ascension and throughout the book of Acts, God's people regularly gather for communal prayer.

In light of the entire counsel of Scripture, we see that we are called to pray to God our Father (Q. 128) by the Spirit (Rom. 8:26) in the name of Jesus (Q. 129). Some pray “in the name of Jesus” almost as some mystical formula in order to get their prayers answered without realizing that, for the Christian, every prayer is always answered all the time (Q. 130; “no” and “wait” are still answers!). Rather, to pray in the name of Jesus is to pray according to the will of Jesus (1 John 5:14) revealed in the Word of God and discerned through practice (Rom. 12:2). One way to practice prayer to better understand God's will is to master the pattern given by Jesus — namely, the Lord's Prayer (Qs. 131–132; Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:1–4).

Still today, the Lord's Prayer helps believers in Christ conform their prayers — and their lives — to the priorities and petitions of Jesus. The petitions of the Lord's Prayer also serve as necessary reminders to us of our dual citizenship in the kingdom of this world and in the kingdom of God. When we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we are pleading for the priorities and principles of God's kingdom to come to bear on our lives today. This is our aim as believers in Jesus Christ: to glorify him by loving him and by living as citizens of his kingdom here on earth (Qs. 133–134; Phil. 3:20; 1 John 5:2).

If the Spirit of the living God resides within us and within our community chosen by Christ, then our lives and our congregations' lives will be marked by love both toward God and

toward one another so much that it spills out to the surrounding culture. By submitting ourselves entirely to the rule and reign of King Jesus, we serve as ambassadors for his kingdom, seeking to protect the poor, the widow and the orphan, declaring the good news of the kingdom of God, and representing its priorities and principles in this world while we wait in eager expectation for the return of our King (Qs. 135–136).

Recommended Resources for this Section:

Please note that resources are ordered with those aimed at the lay-person first and more theological works at the bottom.

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*.
- Chester, Tim, and Steve Timmis. *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around the Gospel and Community*.
- *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission*.
- Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*.
- Stedman, Ray C. *Body Life*.
- Banks, Robert. *Going to Church in the First Century*.
- Clowney, Edmund. *The Church*.
- Dever, Mark. *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*.
- Bounds, E.M. *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds*.
- The Heritage Foundation. *Seek Social Justice: Transforming Lives in Need* (DVD).

COMMUNITY AND KINGDOM LIVING

111. What do you call the redeemed community of Christ?

The church.

1 Cor. 1:2: *To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours ...*

See also Acts 9:31; Eph. 1:22–23.

112. What are some metaphors for the church?

The body of Christ, the bride of Christ and the household of God.

Eph. 1:22–23: *And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

See also 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 2:19; 4:12; 5:25-27; Col. 1:18, 24; 1 Tim 3:15; Rev. 19:7.

113. Who are members of the church?

All those who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, are born of the Spirit, and seek to love and obey the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1 Cor. 12:12–14: *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.*

See also Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 4:4-6.

114. What does it mean to be a member of the church?

To be united and accountable to a local, ordered assembly of believers.

Heb. 10:24–25: *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

See also 1 Cor. 12:20-27; Heb. 13:17.

115. How do we live as members of Christ's church?

By loving one another as brothers and sisters in the faith.

1 Peter 1:22: *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart ...*

See also Rom. 12:10; Eph. 4:25; Heb. 13:1; 1 John 4:7.

116. What did Jesus commission his church to do?

To make disciples of all nations who worship and obey him.

Matt. 28:18–20: *And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.”*

See also Mark 12:30; John 4:24; 1 Peter 2:9.

117. What are the two ordinances Jesus gave the church?

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Acts 2:41–42: *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

See also Matt. 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–24.

118. What is baptism?

Baptism is immersion with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for those who profess personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Acts 2:38: *And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ...”*

See also Matt. 3:16; 28:19–20; Acts 2:36–38; 8:35–36; 16:29–34.

119. What does baptism symbolize?

Union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

Rom. 6:3–5: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

See also 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21; Heb. 9:14; 10:22.

120. What is the Lord's Supper?

The breaking of bread and drinking of wine in remembrance of the sufferings and death of Christ until he returns.

1 Cor. 11:26: *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

See also Matt. 26:20–30; Luke 22:19–20; John 6:35–71; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:20–25.

121. What does the bread represent?

The body of Christ, broken for our sins.

Matt. 26:26: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."*

See also 1 Cor. 11:23–24; John 6:35–71.

122. What does the wine represent?

The blood of Christ, poured out for our salvation.

Matt. 26:27–28: *And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ..."*

See also 1 Cor. 11:23–25; John 6:35–71.

123. Who should be baptized and partake of the Lord's Supper?

All who have truly repented of their sins, believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and are willing to do what he teaches.

Acts 16:31–33: *And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.*

See also Acts 2:37–38; 8:36–38; 10:44–48.

124. What is the church devoted to?

The apostles' teaching, the fellowship of the saints, the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2:42: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

See also Rom. 12:12; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 1:13; 1 John 1:6–7.

125. What is the apostles' teaching?

The New Testament commands for belief and behavior in the household of God.

1 Tim. 3:14–15: *I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*

See also Rom. 1:5; 16:17, 26; 1 Cor. 5:9–11; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor. 11:2; 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim. 3:10; Titus 1:9.

126. What is fellowship?

Sacrificial love for one another.

Rom. 12:10: Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

See also John 13:34–35; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 1:3.

127. What is prayer?

Pouring out my heart in conversation with God.

Lam. 2:19: *“Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.”*

See also Ps. 18; 62:5–8; 142:1–2; Rom. 8:26; Phil. 4:6–7; Acts 16:25.

128. To whom should you pray?

God, our Heavenly Father.

Matt. 6:9: *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ...”*

See also Luke 22:42; 23:34, 46.

129. In whose name do you ask God to hear and answer your prayers?

In the name of Jesus Christ, his Son.

John 14:13–14: *“... Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. ...”*

See also John 16:23; 1 John 5:14.

130. Does God answer all prayer?

Yes, according to his wisdom and good pleasure.

1 John 5:14–15: *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*

See also Matt. 7:7–11; Rom. 8:26–27.

131. What pattern has Jesus given to guide the church in prayer?

The Lord's Prayer.

Luke 11:1: *Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."*

132. What is the Lord's Prayer?

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

See Matt. 6:9–13; 1 Chron. 29:11.

133. What is your aim as a Christian?

To glorify God as a citizen of his kingdom here on earth.

Phil. 3:20–21: *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*

See also 1 Cor. 6:20; Col. 3:2–4.

134. How can you glorify God?

By loving him and doing what he commands.

1 John 5:2: *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.*

See also 1 Sam. 15:22; John 14:15; Rom. 12:1–2.

135. How can you live as a citizen of his kingdom?

By persevering as his chosen possession in this suffering world, eager to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with my God.

Mic. 6:8: *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

See also Phil. 3:20–21; Col. 3:2–4; 2 Peter 3:10–14; 1 Peter 2:9; Titus 2:11–14.

136. How do you persevere in the face of suffering?

By clinging to the promises of God and patiently waiting for my blessed hope.

James 5:8: *You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*

See also Mark 10:29–30; John 15:20; 16:33; Acts 5:41; Rom. 5:3–5; 8:17, 36; 2 Cor. 4:7–18; Phil. 1:6; 3:10; 2 Tim. 3:12; James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 4:12; Rev. 2:3.

AMONG FRIENDS

By Dawn Rutan

I read the following quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (originally from “Life Together”) in a compilation of writings titled “Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People”:

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to

God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ. . . . The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.¹

Moments after reading that, I read another part of the same Bonhoeffer quote in “Messy Beautiful Friendship” by Christine Hoover (a book I recommend):

The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. . . . When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. . . . So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.²

I find that to be both convicting and frustrating. As Hoover spells out in her book, we all make assumptions about friendship and fellowship, and more often than not, our assumptions are based on what we want and need for ourselves.

Some of our assumptions may be biblical, but many are not. I sometimes find myself thinking things like “If people were really committed to our church, so many would show up for Bible study that we’d have groups meeting every night of the week” or “If we were pursuing real fellowship, we wouldn’t have so many people who feel alone and isolated” or even “If people really cared about one another, it wouldn’t be so hard to get real conversations going.”

I wrestle with finding a balance somewhere between selfishly expecting too much from people and apathetically expecting nothing from anyone. As I read the Scripture’s “one another” admonitions, I still believe that the modern church ought to raise

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer et al., *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* (Plough Publishing House, 2016), 95-96.

² Christine Hoover, *Messy Beautiful Friendship: Finding and Nurturing Deep and Lasting Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2017).

the bar for what we expect in relationships — love one another, outdo one another in showing honor, live in harmony with one another, welcome one another, instruct one another, comfort one another, serve one another, bear one another’s burdens, be kind to one another, encourage one another, exhort one another, confess your sins to one another, pray for one another, show hospitality to one another, abound in love for one another ...

But at the same time, I realize that my needs and desires may differ from others in both type and intensity because we have different types of responsibilities, homes and interests. And if we are building relationships based on our commonalities rather than our differences, it will likely take more intense effort in more condensed periods of time. Tim Keller once said, “In a busy culture like ours, all our other loves will push themselves upon us. Friendship takes incredibly deliberate time.”

It is not always easy to be thankful for what we do have rather than bemoan what we don’t. We also need to consider whether we are expecting from people what only God can give. I completely agree with Hoover that

In our wish-dreams, we tend to make people our gods. We look to them — at least I have — to know us intimately at all times, to meet our every need, to be there when we want them near, and to love us unconditionally and perfectly, when the map points only to God as having these abilities.³

I think we probably all have some learning and growing to do in our relationships with one another in the body of Christ.

Gracious Lord Jesus, I need to know You as my friend. It is not for some specific blessing I ask, but for the greatest of all blessings, the one from which all others flow. I dare to ask You for a renewal of the wonderful friendship that makes the conversation called prayer a natural give-and-take divine dialogue... Open my mind so I may see myself and my relationships from Your perspective.⁴

³ Hoover, 37–38

⁴ Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Praying Through the Tough Times* (Harvest House Publishers, 2005), 222.

RECENT BOOKS ABOUT THE CHURCH

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ASSEMBLY, BODY AND BRIDE

by Rev. Jefferson Vann

The Chosen

God loves you, but not just you. The Bible makes it clear in both Testaments that God’s plan for redemption involves a people, not just individual persons. When theologians seek to explain this, doctrines of the church emerge. A biblical doctrine of the church has to answer at least three general questions: “What is the church?” (the identity question), “What does the church do?” (the mission question) and “How should churches be governed?” (the leadership question). The most important of these questions is the first, because biblical answers to the latter two questions only make sense in light of a clear understanding of question one. The reason for this is that both mission and leadership emerge from a proper understanding of a person’s identity as a part of the whole, and the relationship that the whole (church) has to God.

When Jesus began to draw a community of believers to himself, he instructed them to pray to God by saying “our Father.”⁵ He drew attention first to the relationship that these people had with God. The fact of that relationship was the most important thing for them to know. The same is true today. The most important thing anyone needs to know about the church is that it consists of people who have a relationship with God.

That relationship is described in images and with metaphors. Those metaphors are “the picture language of another century,”⁶ but still manage to speak the truth powerfully in our own. Even the term “Father” is a metaphor. While it is true that God is the creator of all humanity, we use “Father” to speak of a more specific relationship than the creator/creature one. God is the source of our existence, but he is more than that. He is the supplier of our every need, but he is more than that. He delights in our existence. We bring him joy by just existing, and greater joy when we reflect his nature by ours. Jesus taught that those who call God “Father” will act like it:

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”⁷

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”⁸

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁹

⁵ Matthew 6:9. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

⁶ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 17.

⁷ Matthew 5:16.

⁸ Matthew 5:44–45.

⁹ Matthew 5:48.

The term speaks of a dependence upon God as well. We do what we do because we expect to be rewarded by our Father who commanded it.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”¹⁰

“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”¹¹

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”¹²

“When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”¹³

The deeds themselves (and even the rewards) are not the point. Jesus condemned those who thought that good deeds themselves were what God wants. He commanded that his church do acts of righteousness as a manifestation of the relationship we have with our Father. We give because he first gave. We love because he first loved us. God is the chooser, we are the chosen.

Family

The image of God choosing people to be his family begins in the Old Testament. He is the father of all in the sense of our creator, but “the usual biblical language speaks of him as Father in relation to his spiritual children.”¹⁴ God called Abram, and renamed him

¹⁰ Matthew 6:1.

¹¹ Matthew 6:3–4.

¹² Matthew 6:6.

¹³ Matthew 6:17–18.

¹⁴ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 114.

Abraham: the father of many nations. This was true physically, as many nations trace their ancestry back to him — not just Israel. But it is also true because Abraham is regarded as the father of the faithful as well.

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.¹⁵

God's sovereign and gracious choice of people from all ethnic, economic and social backgrounds, and both genders produces a whole new nation out of all nations. Being chosen suggests a special relationship which brings about a new identity with special status and responsibilities. It also implies a new destiny, an inheritance.

Being all in the same family, we now call ourselves brothers¹⁶ and sisters.¹⁷ God intends us to recognize and live according to that new distinction.

“Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”¹⁸

A church made up of children of God is expected to be different from the world from which it emerges.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions — is not from the Father but is from the world.¹⁹

¹⁵ Galatians 3:26-29.

¹⁶ Romans 16:23; 2 Corinthians 1:1.

¹⁷ Romans 16:1; Philemon 2.

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:17-18.

¹⁹ 1 John 2:15-16.

We have been adopted,²⁰ and are therefore in the process of releasing the allegiances and habits of our old family, learning those of our new family. This is not an easy process, and the Adversary wants us to cling to the old self/kingdom/family because that remains under his control.

New

Within the shell of the old creation, there is now a new one. It gives us a new identity but also involves a struggle with the old one. All believers are encouraged to embrace the reality of their new selves. Paul taught that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”²¹ Many aspects of our old life will remain, but they will be spiritually insignificant.²² We can still be categorized by race, gender, social status, age, geographical background, etc., but those categories no longer need to limit our new identity in Christ or our relationships with other believers.

The people of God are fresh new wineskins into which the Master Vintner is pouring his new wine.²³ They are scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven, new treasures that the Master brings out of his house.²⁴ They are a new garment, capable of taking a patch without tearing.²⁵ They are participants in the new covenant.²⁶ They are recipients of the new commandment.²⁷ These images speak of the church as a fundamentally different way that God intends to do things in the new world,²⁸ and we begin following those new instructions now.

²⁰ Romans 8:15, 23; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5.

²¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²² Galatians 6:15.

²³ Matthew 9:17.

²⁴ Matthew 13:52; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37.

²⁵ Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36.

²⁶ Luke 22:20.

²⁷ John 13:34.

²⁸ Matthew 19:28.

Old

There is continuity with the people of God manifested in Old Testament times as well. It is best not to make such a clear distinction between the New Testament church and the Old Testament saints. Movements within Christendom sometimes insist that the church was born at Pentecost, and did not exist before then. Yet this New Testament church had the same Old Testament Scriptures for its Bible, the same God for its Father and the same Messiah for its Savior as the Old Testament saints did.

Paul described it this way: the people of God are like a tree. The Old Testament saints are its root, those descendants of Abraham who rejected Jesus as the Messiah are natural branches that have been broken off of the tree and the Gentiles who come to faith are wild branches grafted into the tree.²⁹ There are plenty of Gentiles in Old Testament times who, by faith, were grafted in to Israel.

There is both continuity and discontinuity in the analogy. The continuity is found in the faithful who have a relationship with God. The discontinuity is found in the “natural branches” which do not have a relationship with God, and therefore were broken off from the tree, and the fact that Jesus commanded his church to target all nations with the gospel.

Implications

There is only one church. We may call ourselves by many names and trace our existence to various traditions, but all true believers are united in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The church consists of many individuals, all of whom have the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and each of whom has a ministry to perform as part of the body of Christ. The temptation has always been for some individuals to “lead” by downplaying the gifts and ministries of others while promoting their own. This

²⁹ Romans 11:16–21.

kind of leadership is disastrous, and does not reflect the reality that God wants to reach the world through all of us, has chosen all of us and has called all of us to ministry. Change is to be expected.

One of the most dangerous things that any church can do is try to decide what the original “biblical” church did, and force its membership to comply. Such attempts always produce division and stifling of the Holy Spirit. The church at Pentecost was a product of both continuity with the old traditions and radical changes brought on by the new wine, which required the development of new traditions.

The most important question any church movement should ask is not “Do we conform to the patterns of the past?” but “Are we accurately reflecting our relationship with God?” The people of God has undergone numerous changes since Old Testament times, yet has survived those changes because of its relationship with God. Therefore, believers should be less worried about conforming to some artificial standard and more concerned with the reality of their individual relationships with the Lord.

Believers need to be more comfortable with the diversity that exists among themselves and less inclined to correct each other’s faults. Paul taught the Romans, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”³⁰ That certainly applies to the issue of interdenominational cooperation. We should feel free to support and work with any true believer, and any organization of true believers, regardless of their historical background or chosen affiliation. Believers should look on each other not according to the limits and preconceptions inherent in who they are “in the flesh” but according to who they will be for eternity thanks to their new relationship with God through Christ. The limiting factors of our “in the flesh” existence will not survive the new age, when Christ comes and gives us our immortality. Instead, we will be “like angels”³¹ — no longer defined by the things that limit us now.

³⁰ Romans 14:4.

³¹ Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25.

The Saved

The apostle Paul taught that believers are “the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”³² We leave the scent of Christ wherever we go, and with whomever we come into contact. Those who have never met Christ can do so by meeting us. Those who find a friend in Christ find a friend in us. Those who reject Christ will probably despise or choose to ignore us.

Believers have a symbiotic link to the person of Christ. Every metaphor which describes his person and role has a corresponding implication for the identity and role of his disciples. The best way to get a grasp on the biblical view of the church is to know clearly who Christ is and what he did, and then extrapolate our place and work based on his.

He is the Savior; we are the saved

The New Testament proclaims that Jesus is a Savior,³³ Israel’s Savior,³⁴ the church’s Savior³⁵ and the world’s Savior.³⁶ Believers are delivered from the penalty of their sins as a result of what Christ did for them on the cross, so it is appropriate for us to identify ourselves as the people who *were* saved.³⁷ We are also in the process of being delivered from the present power and consequences of our past sinful life, so it is appropriate to refer to ourselves as *being* saved.³⁸ We also expect and anticipate a culmination of Christ’s saving work in our lives — a glorification at his return. This means

³² 2 Corinthians 2:15–16.

³³ Luke 2:11; Philippians 3:20.

³⁴ Acts 5:31; 13:23.

³⁵ Ephesians 5:23; 2 Timothy 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6; 2 Peter 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18.

³⁶ John 4:42; 1 John 4:14.

³⁷ Romans 8:24; 10:10.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:2; 2 Corinthians 2:15.

that it is also still appropriate to say that *we will be saved*.³⁹ Jesus has saved us, is saving us and will save us.

This relationship the church has with Jesus as her Savior helps answer one of the sticky questions that have emerged about us: “Can a believer sin all he wants to and still be saved?” If salvation is seen as some kind of spiritual/mechanical event in a person’s life, we would expect the answer to that question to be “No.” We would expect that once a person had been zapped by the salvation wand, he would no longer be under the influence of the flesh, but would be totally under the Spirit’s power. He would find himself no longer wanting to sin and no longer capable of sinning even if he had the desire to do so.

The reality is that Christians struggle with sins, sinning and the desire to commit sins all their lives. This is not to deny that a miracle takes place inside us when we come to Jesus. It merely concedes that the initial miracle of regeneration is just the beginning of a process that will not be complete until our Savior returns. Our salvation is secure — not because it has made us sinless, but because our Savior is.

The connection between the church and its Savior is seen clearly in Paul’s use of “a number of Greek prepositions to stress the close identification between Christ and his followers that bonds them together in union as a distinct community.”⁴⁰ The saved have been immersed into the person of Christ, and are now growing up into him.⁴¹ Their lives are no longer destined to be what they were because their spiritual DNA has changed to reflect his. Their destiny is now the destiny of their Savior. The saved are said to be “in Christ.”⁴² Their identities are somehow

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:15.

⁴⁰ Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 101.

⁴¹ Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:15.

⁴² Romans 6:11; 8:1f; 9:1; 12:5; 15:17; 16:3, 7, 9f; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 30; 3:1; 4:10, 15, 17; 15:18f, 22, 31; 16:24; 2 Corinthians 1:21; 2:14, 17; 5:17, 19; 12:2; Galatians 1:22; 3:26, 28; 5:6; Ephesians 2:6f, 10, 13; 3:6, 11, 21; Philippians 1:1, 26; 2:1, 5; 4:21; Co-lossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 4:16; 5:18; 1 Timothy 1:14; Philemon 1:23; Hebrews 3:14; 1 Peter 3:16; 5:10, 14.

fused with his. They have experienced all of the crucial events of Christ's life, along with him, having been crucified, buried and spiritually raised with him.⁴³

These realities certainly affect how believers act, but they also affect how others act around and react to them. The saved are expected to influence the world as the Savior did. He is the light of the world, and now, so are his disciples.⁴⁴ The saved are not saviors themselves, but they are infected with and carriers of the salvation virus. Anyone coming in contact with believers in the church is exposed to potential salvation.

He is the King; we are his subjects

The Bible describes both the present reality of salvation and the destiny of ultimate salvation using the metaphor of a king and his kingdom.⁴⁵ One of the most important implications of this metaphor is that of authority and submission. A king is only as powerful as his subjects let him be. If a king has to deal with constant rebellion and ignorance of his commands, he cannot reign effectively. Jesus' teachings in the Gospels relating to the kingdom of God constantly encouraged his followers to stay true to him, to commit themselves to obeying his words. Jesus' sharpest criticisms were to those who only pretended to follow God's Word, but were secretly only interested in building their own kingdoms.

The king/kingdom metaphor also reminds the church who the boss is. A king is sovereign over his domain. He is king regardless of whether his domain has accepted that fact or not. The

⁴³ Romans 6:8; 8:17; 15:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:5; Philippians 1:23; Colossians 2:20; 3:1, 3.

⁴⁴ Matthew 5:14; John 8:12; 9:5.

⁴⁵ Matthew 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43; Mark 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14f, 23f; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43; Luke 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, 27, 60, 62; 10:9, 11; 11:20; 13:18, 20, 28f; 14:15; 16:16; 17:20f; 18:16f, 24f, 29; 19:11; 21:31; 22:16, 18; 23:51; John 3:3, 5; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31; Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 6:9f; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; Colossians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:5.

subjects of the king do not make the rules, and they do not have veto power when the king commands them to do something. His commands are their business.

King Solomon reigned for decades and was constantly building in Jerusalem and in other cities as well. It was impossible to be a subject of Solomon's reign and not be involved in some way in Solomon's work. The majestic temple and the royal palace could be seen from anywhere in the city and were constant reminders of what it meant to be in the kingdom of Solomon. In the same way, it is impossible to be in Jesus' kingdom without being constantly reminded of the gospel and the church's role in spreading it.

Jesus is building a kingdom. We will either be involved in his work, or not. The extent to which we are involved in his work determines our identity as his subjects. Obedience is the more important way to profess that we are part of Christ's kingdom.

He is the Head; we are his body

Many of the implications of the metaphor of Christ as the head and the church as his body will be examined more closely in another chapter. What is important to see at this point is the symbiotic relationship which is communicated by this and the previous metaphors as well. The Savior came to save. The saved exist for the Savior. The kingdom needs a king. We have not only been delivered from the penalty of our past sins, but also into the kingdom of our Savior. The head and body exist as a unit. Our many bodies are now being assimilated into his one body.

Before coming to Christ, we were fairly comfortable with our own bodies and found ways of utilizing them to meet our needs, bring us pleasure and accommodate our interests. Now, things are different. Now the many have to become one. Now the many wills have to become subservient to the one will.

He is the Bridegroom; we are the espoused bride

The Bible uses the bridegroom/bride metaphor in a number of

places.⁴⁶ It speaks of preparation for and anticipation of the event of a wedding, and for the joy that both parties have in each other. The church is seen in the book of Revelation crying out, “Come, Lord Jesus!”⁴⁷ This is partly a cry for relief from all the suffering and battle she has endured. But it is also the cry of a fiancée who has endured too long without her beloved. To say that the church is a bride is to admit the longing in our hearts to see our Savior again — for the first time.

Once accepting the proposal, the bride begins preparing herself for the day when she will no longer be single. She has to orient her life around the anticipated new reality. She begins to scribble her new name on table napkins. Although she has had a lifetime of seeing the world from her perspective, she now has to ask what her future husband thinks. Though she has limited her associations according to her own standards for friendships and companionships, she now has to adjust to her future husband’s associates and friends.

The church of Jesus Christ exists in this life as a preparation for the next. Our life now matters precisely because eternity matters. Jesus is returning to this earth to claim us for his own. That makes it very important for us to use this time before his return wisely. We find that in every place we look there are preparations to be made. As we get older, those preparations become more significant — more urgent. We begin to realize how little we have accomplished and how little time we have left.

To be an Advent Christian is to embrace the preparation process because of the joy anticipated when our Savior comes for us. We cannot help but evaluate all the possibilities that are around us on the basis of the reality that awaits us. We will puzzle the watching world as we turn down this promotion (because it will take us away from our family) or accept this volunteer position (because it will help us spread the gospel to a group we could not reach otherwise).

⁴⁶ Isaiah 61:10; 62:5; Jeremiah 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Joel 2:16; John 3:29; Revelation 18:23.

⁴⁷ Revelation 22:20.

We realize that the experiences we have, and the choices we make, are significant because we are being groomed for the Groom.

Before we were saved, we tended to spend our lives looking out for number one. Now, we do the same thing — except that number one is now our Savior. He deserves to be first place because he rescued us from dead last place. He has also given us a taste of the divine presence when he sent his Holy Spirit to reside within us. That taste can make us hungry for more.

Sanctification changes us. At first, we hope for Christ to come because we expect him to fix all of our problems. As the maturation process continues, we begin to see that although his coming will solve our problems, it is not about us. His coming will reboot the world to its original agenda — his agenda. The more we stay stuck on ourselves, the less we enjoy the idea of being interrupted by his glory. The more we concentrate on being like him, the more we anticipate our glorification at his return. Most of our lives are spent in a kind of spiritual adolescence. We are changing, but we do not always like it, and we do not always show it.

As we all go through this process, the best thing we can do for each other is to encourage each other to give in to the transformation. We need to be careful not to expect too much of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Growth is a slow process, and it is not easy to adjust to the changes. We know how often we fail ourselves, so it should make us that more forgiving to those around us.

The commands of the King are of utmost importance, and they should not be trivialized. It is not a coincidence that our Savior, while giving us his Great Commission to “make disciples,” used an explanatory participle phrase: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” It is impossible to be a disciple without both learning and obeying Christ’s commands. Our King expects us to be about his business, doing what he commanded.

The Lord’s commands are messy. They will not allow us to stay comfortable in our social circles, our schools, our political parties or our jobs. They demand too much. They cry out for justice for those whom we would rather neglect. They cry out for work when we would rather rest. They cry out for us to stay connected to this

suffering world when we would rather zone out and be entertained by fantasy. It is just this messiness that reminds us that Christ's kingdom is not yet fully realized. We cannot seem to get it right. That does not stop us from trying, but knowing that the King is not here yet does help console us when we blow it.

The body analogy can also be helpful. Knowing that our Savior is separated from us physically, it is hard for us. Remembering that he is the Head of the whole body, the church, reminds us that there is still a connection. We are his body, not his corpse.⁴⁸ He is just as alive today as he was when his feet walked the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In fact, his feet are still walking the shores of that sea, and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. His hands still heal, because he uses our hands. His presence still does miracles, and he allows some of us to experience them. Whatever he is doing, he wants to use us to do it.

The saved, not the system

Jesus empowers people through the indwelling Holy Spirit to minister to the world in his name. He has not ordained a particular system of government or ministry along with the church. Too often, believers, thinking that they are backing the "biblical" system, become defensive and divisive over issues relating to the various systems, and the unity of the Holy Spirit becomes an illusory thing. All systems are humanly contrived and humanly run. Some may be more practical in some situations than others, but none have any kind of divine stamp of approval.

The vast number of Advent Christian churches and conferences follow a congregational form of government. Most are led by pastors in cooperation with a church board, or perhaps a board of elders. This works for most of our churches because most of them

⁴⁸ David A. Dean, *Resurrection Hope* (Charlotte, N.C.: Advent Christian General Conference, 1992), 46. "The church is the body — but not the corpse — of Christ. Through it he continues to minister to the world's needs. Because he lives, the church survives all attacks and advances its crusade for truth."

were planted in countries with democratic governments, and our churches are more familiar with this kind of check-and-balance leadership. Some of our mission fields adapted this structure wholesale, and in some it has worked well. In others, not so much. The structure of the organization is not the important thing. It is the spirit of the people that matters. Structures should reflect the people who are doing the ministry. The people should not be slaves to the structures. Most of our ecclesiastical structures are antiquated — including those that are called “congregational.”

How we organize ourselves should be reevaluated every few years. Making changes in our structure might free the people in our churches to be who they are called to be. It might enable more of the saved to introduce their communities to the Savior. Churches and conferences should not be afraid of making those changes.

Of course, change simply for change’s sake might be just as counterproductive. Some churches are constantly fighting battles having to do with their own self-identity. The ministry of the gospel loses out, because the controversies distract. Often that happens because both sides tend to think that there can only be one “biblical” solution. But when it comes to structure, the Bible describes many multi-level ministries going on and thriving at the same time: apostles, prophets, elders, evangelists, teachers, etc. Our systems tend to simplify those structures, but the Bible does not. It just throws them out there and says, “This is the way it was.”

Old Testament history was like that too. Most of the time, it was not clear who had jurisdiction over a matter: the king, the prophets, the priests, the elders ... It was usually clear when the Holy Spirit was acting, but it could not be easily mapped out according to the human political and social structures. The people who usually got into the most trouble were those who assumed that they understood how God wanted to work, as well as what he wanted to do. The Old Testament is filled with irony because the Holy Spirit refused to act according to human expectations.

It is this same gloriously unpredictable Holy Spirit who resides within each believer in the church of Jesus Christ. He ministers through anyone he chooses within the body, regardless of their status

in the community or their experience in ministry. He surprises us constantly, and intends to do so. There is no hierarchy in his sight. He looks on a saved soul and says “I choose to use her in this ministry” without stopping to ask our permission or to check her credentials.

Most of us who have been in ministry for decades are really frustrated by this. We see people who are new in the Lord getting involved in ministry regularly, and it is unsettling to us. We are afraid. We find it hard to trust people who did not come up through the school of ecclesiastical hard knocks that we did. We are tempted to assume that their zeal will not last, and sometimes it does not. Yet, the reality is, the ministry of Jesus Christ is now being orchestrated by the omnipresent Holy Spirit. He does not need our structures as much as we think he does.

The aroma

Being the aroma of Christ is simply a matter of being authentically Christian. Anyone who dares to have a personal relationship with Christ, follow his commands in Scripture and live what he believes is going to have that accompanying influence. It does not mean that we always know the right thing to say or do to fix every problem. It means we have decided to stop allowing the worldliness of our old self to block the scent of our new self. We invest ourselves in that authenticity, and the investment pays off. People see the Savior when they look our way.

The Transformed

The author of Hebrews identifies the church as a people caught up in what God is doing. At first, the prophets spoke of Jesus in the Old Testament, then Jesus fulfilled what they predicted, then the apostles and other early believers attested to that truth. Finally, God has continued the testimony through the church, verifying our words “by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Hebrews 2:4.

Just how does the Holy Spirit verify the gospel we preach? There are at least three ways: 1) he transforms us into the image of Christ, 2) he brings about new growth in the church by helping us reach people with the gospel, and 3) he breaks through the normal issues of life and manifests supernatural interference, i.e., miracles.

New people

When the religious traditionalists of Jesus' day complained that his disciples did things differently than they did, Jesus responded to their complaint. He implied that we should expect his church to be different. Believers in Christ were "new wine" and could not be contained in the "old wineskins."⁵⁰ If anyone dared to put new wine in a wineskin that had been previously expanded, it would expand again, and he would have a mess to clean up. That is why those who make wine start afresh with a new skin. And that is what God has done.

It is true that there is continuity between ancient Judaism and Christianity. Most of our biblical content is the same. Most of the spiritual principles taught in the New Testament have their origin in the Old Testament. But, the questions asked in the Old Testament that had no answer are answered in the New Testament. In many cases, the Old Testament testified to a "what" but did not prescribe "how." The New Testament fills in its blanks.

One of those all-important "whats" is the concept of the new covenant. Jeremiah predicted this:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall

⁵⁰ Matthew 9:17.

each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”⁵¹

The old covenant was the result of God’s grace rescuing his people from Egypt, and leading them to a new life governed by his laws in the Promised Land. There was a time when that was the new covenant. It promised the newness of freedom rather than the oldness of slavery. Yet, following it proved to be problematic. It can be stated in this way: *If God’s people will follow his laws, he will keep them free and give them new hearts.* We all know what happened. The people of Israel as a whole never got to the “new hearts” part.

The new covenant would reverse the process. It would be the work of the Holy Spirit, who would first write God’s laws on the hearts of the forgiven, enabling them to know him. Then, he would bring them to their new land. Instead of being attested to by the sacrifice of a lamb, this new covenant would begin with the death of Christ on a cross.⁵² Once initiated, the new covenant was meant to replace the old one, making its provisions obsolete.⁵³ There was nothing wrong with the old covenant except that it only offered a temporary inheritance. It was designed to point us all to the new covenant, which promises an “eternal inheritance.”⁵⁴

It is in that sense that the church today can be called the new Israel. God’s new covenant with Israel is not intended to add to one nation but to multiply through all nations. The blessing of faith that Abraham manifested is now possible for all of those who believe in Christ, no matter who they descended from. Rights to that new covenant were purchased for all through the blood of Christ.

Just as people served under the old covenant, we also serve under the new covenant. The difference is “that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Jeremiah 31:31–34.

⁵² Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25.

⁵³ Hebrews 8:8–13.

⁵⁴ Hebrews 9:15.

⁵⁵ Romans 7:6.

We begin with grace and we end with glory. If we attempt to get to the glory by means of keeping the law, we will fail. But if we dare to walk by the same Holy Spirit who has regenerated us, we can become like Christ. We can give others a taste of that new wine.

New growth

There was a missions aspect of the old covenant. People were supposed to be drawn to God by seeing his blessings and glory manifested in loyal Israel. God wanted Abraham's faith to result in blessings for all the nations surrounding Israel.⁵⁶ The surrounding nations were blessed occasionally, but the process was often overshadowed by the opposite effect: people ridiculing God because of the sufferings and disloyalty of Israel.

Missions was built into the DNA of the new covenant. Jesus commanded his church to make disciples of all nations,⁵⁷ to proclaim the gospel to all nations,⁵⁸ to offer repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations.⁵⁹ If the old covenant could be described as "come to us," the new covenant is best described as "go to them." In the Great Commission text, the word "go" does not have the same weight as the imperative "make disciples." However, the fact that Jesus was sending his disciples somewhere (in actuality, Jerusalem) was significant. It set the stage for a church that would always be going with the gospel.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4.

⁵⁷ Matthew 28:19.

⁵⁸ Mark 13:10.

⁵⁹ Luke 24:47.

⁶⁰ When Jesus gave his Great Commission, it was to the eleven in Galilee, just before they were to return to Jerusalem. It would make sense to take the participle of πορεύομαι (go) as adverbial of time, which would result in Jesus telling them that after they go (to Jerusalem) they were to make disciples. Translators usually take the participle as having a practically equal status with the imperative (μαθητεύσατε from μαθητεύω) in that text. Each case when Matthew uses the aorist participle of πορεύομαι with an accompanying verb, the stress is on the action of that accompanying verb. See Matthew 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 21:6; 27:66. The command in Matthew 28:19 is to make disciples. Going places is incidental, but necessary to obeying that command.

That role of expanding ourselves through reaching new lands and cultures with the gospel is also described by Jesus in his “vine and branches” message. He told his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit ...”⁶¹ Jesus did not simply command us to stay where we are and bear fruit. He appointed us to “go” and “bear fruit.” The word translated “go” in that text is not the same word used in Matthew 28. It is the word used for sending someone off in a particular direction for a particular purpose. The mission of reaching new lands, peoples, and cultures with the gospel is built into our new identity as branches of Christ’s vine.

The church is made of people who have found the greatest thing that could ever be found. It is therefore no surprise when we selflessly abandon all that we have for that treasure. As Jesus put it, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”⁶² Here again, the words “he goes” are a form of that same mission we were appointed to by Jesus. However, the motivation for our mission is made clear in this text: “in his joy.” The church expands and permeates not because we are bound by some solemn obligation. We have good news to share with the nations. We go in our joy.

The cultural mandate is also part of our great commission mandate. Jesus told the rich young ruler to “go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”⁶³ Some people will never be able to come to Jesus because they will always refuse to go away from their possessions. The rich young ruler went away sad and unchanged because what he had was more important to him than what he could gain in Christ. There are some people who are like this with their homes and families. They will not come to Christ because Christ would require that they give up life in their comfort zone.

⁶¹ John 15:16.

⁶² Matthew 13:44.

⁶³ Matthew 19:21.

For believers in Christ, what we have now is his to give away through us. We embrace the cultural mandate to bless the nations with food, clothing and other things they need. We do not see this as something separate from spreading the gospel. It is a way of our divesting ourselves of that which is superfluous in our lives so that we can share him. It is also something that brings us joy. We can either give as Christ compels us, and gain joy in doing so, or we will “go away sad” as this young man did.

The mission to go does not always mean to cross geographical boundaries. Sometimes we want to go away and the Lord calls us to go home. The delivered Gerasene wanted to hop in the boat and go away with Jesus and the other disciples. Jesus would not allow him to do so. Instead he said, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”⁶⁴ Sometimes abiding in the Vine means abiding in your own hometown. It is still a mission when it is responding to the “go” from the Master. It is still a mission when its end result is more people in the kingdom.

New normal

The new people that is the church of Jesus Christ is a people that is born of the Spirit,⁶⁵ has the firstfruits of the Spirit,⁶⁶ is set free by the law of the Spirit⁶⁷ and is setting their mind on the things of the Spirit.⁶⁸ Outwardly, they still look like they did when they were merely of the flesh, but inwardly, they have undergone a transformation. Normal is no longer what it was. There is a new normal, because everything believers think and do is now judged by a new standard: the image of Christ within. People without the experience of regeneration cannot understand this new disposition. The things of the Holy Spirit are foolishness to them.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Mark 5:19.

⁶⁵ John 3:5–8.

⁶⁶ Romans 8:23.

⁶⁷ Romans 8:2.

⁶⁸ Romans 8:5.

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:14.

That original disposition toward exalting and caring for the body of flesh has now been, not removed, but challenged. Believers still want to be preserved from death and hunger and the like, but they also have a strong desire to care for and promote the welfare of Christ's body, which they are now a part of. Just one look into the eyes of Jesus makes the born again person want to be like him, to introduce others to him and to experience his power. The Holy Spirit inside believers wants our sanctification, our involvement in evangelism, and our experience and demonstration of his miracles.

The Holy Spirit is an amazing person. Although fully equal to the Father and Son in deity, he seeks to manifest himself through mortal and imperfect human beings. He is both the key to unity in the church and the reason for our glorious diversity. He embraces our differences, and instead of causing us to suppress them, he utilizes those differences to mature us and to reach the most with the gospel. Any time the church seeks too zealously to manufacture an artificial unity, we tend to squelch the Holy Spirit's work. He is too big to fit within our carefully constructed labels.

The Holy Spirit works within each believer individually and wants to manifest his power through each believer "for the common good."⁷⁰ He makes each believer a gift to the group as a whole, by ministering his spiritual gifts and manifesting his spiritual fruit. He is the author of supernatural miracles, transformed character and church growth. Church traditions tend to push cooperation with him in one area or the other, but he seeks all three at the same time. To put it negatively, a believer has not yielded to the Holy Spirit unless he or she is willing to let him manifest his power in his or her life through miracles, renewed holiness and outreach.

The Spirit and the Word

The Word of God is the Spirit's weapon — the sword of the Spirit.⁷¹ Those who hear and believe the Word are sealed with the

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:7.

⁷¹ Ephesians 6:17.

Holy Spirit.⁷² He uses the written and spoken Word to accomplish his purposes in and with the church. He uses the Scriptures to catch us, change us, turn us into evangelists and give us faith to receive his miracles. Theoretically, one might say that the Word alone is powerless to do anything. For example, demons laugh when unbelievers attempt, apart from the Holy Spirit, to use texts from the Bible as some sort of animistic charm to ward off evil. In the church's hands, however, the Word is backed by the power of the Holy Spirit. In that case, it is anything but powerless.

Prayer and the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is also the key person in the prayer ministry of the church. Paul encouraged believers to pray at all times, but added the explanatory phrase “in the Spirit.”⁷³ The prayers of unbelievers are always heard by God, but the church's prayers are actually sponsored by God. When we pray in the Spirit, we are praying words that are not just intended to reach the throne, but words that actually originate there. Prayer by believers is cooperation with God and affirmation of what he is doing and wants to do.

Refusing to pray leads to powerless people, limited growth and hardened hearts in the church. A church can have all the right theology of the Holy Spirit in their creeds, but if they do not pray, those words are empty. The act of prayer substantiates what a person or group believes about the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Holy Spirit is so eager to touch this world with manifestations of himself that he often uses praying people who have seriously defective theologies. This happens to the shame of many more “orthodox” churches, because they do not pray as they ought.

Worship and the Holy Spirit

One of the ways that the Holy Spirit speaks to believers, and through them, is the act of corporate worship. He is the means

⁷³ Ephesians 1:13.

⁷⁴ Ephesians 6:18.

by which we manifest authentic worship: it is by the Spirit.⁷⁴ The apostle Paul taught that the true circumcision — that which really matters — is that which is done by the Holy Spirit, and it results in praise from God.⁷⁵ The text is a bit ambiguous about whether that praise is being received by the true Jew or given by him. It could be interpreted either way, because God honors authenticity, and authentic people give authentic worship.

One of the Old Testament predictions about life under the new covenant is that believers would be characterized by gladness and joy instead of sadness and sorrow.⁷⁶ When we worship, we celebrate the reality of this age of grace and our new status as part of that reality. Worship flows from who we are, who Christ is and what our future is because of what Christ did. The Holy Spirit within us serves as our guarantee of this future inheritance.⁷⁷ No matter what might distract us in the present, he helps us remember what we were made for: glorifying, enjoying and worshipping God throughout eternity. While we are worshipping, we are more in touch with who we truly are and will be than at any other time.

Recognizing the Holy Spirit

Jesus is the only person of the Holy Trinity who can be seen in bodily form because he is the only one who has taken on flesh. If one wants to look for the Holy Spirit, one has to look for the evidence. If you want to see the wind, you look for open sails and fast moving sailboats. If you want to see the Holy Spirit, you look for growing, maturing, gift-manifesting churches. The transformed church is his calling-card.

The Gathered

After Israel was scattered throughout the nations as part of their punishment for rejecting the Lord, the prophets began to

⁷⁴ Philippians 3:3.

⁷⁵ Romans 2:29.

⁷⁶ Isaiah 61:3.

⁷⁷ 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14.

predict that God would restore them to himself. The scattered people would become the gathered people. God would redeem them and would call on the nations to restore them to himself:

“I will say to the north, ‘Hand them over!’ and to the south, ‘Don’t hold any back!’ Bring my sons from distant lands, and my daughters from the remote regions of the earth, everyone who belongs to me, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed — yes, whom I made!”⁷⁸

From that time on, the people of God began to see themselves not as a people *planted* (in Israel) but as a people *harvested* from the nations. When the New Testament era dawned, the word chosen to identify Jesus’ disciples as a group was *ἐκκλησία*,⁷⁹ which had been a general term for assembly. The church is God’s gathered community, harvested from among the nations.

Harvest

Jesus used the analogy of harvest to explain the work of building his church. He told his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”⁸⁰ The analogy is an excellent one, because it shows both the value that Christ puts on the souls harvested and the hard work and cooperation it will take to bring them in.

After a short discussion with Jesus, a Samaritan woman went into her village and proceeded to bring them to him. Commenting on the event, Jesus said to his disciples:

“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the

⁷⁸ Isaiah 43:6–7, NET.

⁷⁹ Often those who analyze the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* draw the wrong conclusion from the analysis. While it is composed of the words for “out” (*ἐκ*) and “call” (*καλέω*), the idea is not that it is a group separated from others, but an assembly of those gathered from among others.

⁸⁰ Matthew 9:37–38.

fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."⁸¹

The "others" who had sown probably implies John the Baptist, those who had brought the Scriptures to the Samaritans and the Samaritan woman herself. They had done the preliminary work so that, when Jesus appeared, the crowds could recognize him and accept him as the Messiah.

Often that passage is used to encourage people to do missions, but there is a potential problem with using it for that purpose. There are still "fields" all around the world where the hard work of planting the seeds has not yet been done. Those fields are not ripe for harvest. For some of them, it might take many more years and much more spilled blood before they move from resistant to receptive. Of course, this is not to discourage missions but to prepare those who are called to resistant areas for the difficulties that calling may entail.

Pentecost can properly be called the first Christian gathering. From that time on, it became typical for believers to gather together at various places, some public, others private.⁸² Each gathering is a kind of foretaste of the greater gathering, when all believers will be "gathered together to" Christ at his second coming.⁸³ Living believers are, according to James, "a kind of firstfruits,"⁸⁴ a preliminary harvest with a promise of that greater harvest to come. As such, we are expected to begin showing some of the awesomeness of that future harvest. That is why James transitions from the idea of firstfruits to that of demonstrating godly character.⁸⁵ If we are part of God's harvest, we will radiate his glory.

⁸¹ John 4:35–38.

⁸² Acts 12:12; 13:44; 14:27; 15:30; 20:7–8.

⁸³ 2 Thessalonians 2:1.

⁸⁴ James 1:18.

⁸⁵ James 1:19–27.

Worship

The church is God's gathered community, designed to radiate his glory through (among other things) worship. When his people honor his person and praise him for his works, they help the creation to reboot. Somewhere along the line, this planet has lost its purpose. Worship is our way of revisiting that purpose.

When Jesus was clip-clopping into Jerusalem at his triumphal entry, some Pharisees (who did not have a clue what was going on) demanded that Jesus stop his disciples from worshiping him. Not only did Jesus refuse to stop them, he told the Pharisees that if they were silenced, "the very stones would cry out."⁸⁶ Now that our Savior has come, his worship is imperative. We all do it poorly compared to how we will do it, but we try anyway. It is as natural as breathing for us.

Worship is supposed to be "in spirit and truth,"⁸⁷ which is simply a hendiadys for "authentically." Its opposite would be worshiping in the flesh without a true feeling of awe or gratitude. Perhaps you remember the last time you attended a service that just seemed to be going through the motions? That is not worship. Authentic worship is a reaction to God's felt presence and God's manifested works. It is not an expression of our "worthship" but his. The worshiper does not get carried away with herself, but caught up in him. That is why the fruit of the Spirit — self control — must manifest in worship as well. Much damage has been done by confusing self-honoring frenzy with God-honoring worship.

Yet, there is something to the process of worship that at times may seem like loss of control. Paul told the formerly pagan Ephesians not to get drunk on wine, but to be filled with the Spirit.⁸⁸ They were to replace one kind of intoxication for another. Instead of wine causing them to abuse one another, they were to drink deeply of the Holy Spirit, which would influence them. It would

⁸⁶ Luke 19:40.

⁸⁷ John 4:23–24.

⁸⁸ Ephesians 5:18.

result in “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”⁸⁹

When the Holy Spirit is manifested in our gatherings, he causes us to do things that outsiders may not understand and may attribute to the wrong cause. At Pentecost, Peter had to remind the crowd that those who were receiving manifestations were not drunk; it was (after all) only nine o’clock in the morning.⁹⁰ From that time on, “praising God” was a description of what believers constantly did.⁹¹

Worship is always to be directed God-ward, but there is a side effect benefit that we who are gathered can gain from it. The author of Hebrews insisted that his readers keep gathering together for the purpose of “encouraging one another.”⁹² It is an encouragement to see what God is doing in the lives of other Christians, and we can see the Holy Spirit at work within them as they worship. While worship is not a show that we put together for one another’s benefit, there are aspects of the Christian life that are only seen in the community context. That is why the New Testament contains so many reciprocal commands: love one another, care for one another, submit to one another, etc.

Instruction

The church is God’s gathered community, designed to proclaim and explain God’s Word through instruction. Jesus commanded us to make disciples by teaching each other to obey his commands. There is actual content to the commands of Christ. It is impossible to be a mere worshipping church. A true church is

⁸⁹ Ephesians 5:19–21.

⁹⁰ Acts 2:15.

⁹¹ Acts 2:47; 4:21.

⁹² Hebrews 10:25.

a discipling church, and a discipling church is a teaching church. One of the earliest criticisms that unbelieving authorities hurled at the early church was that they were teaching in Christ's name.⁹³ The apostles arose at daybreak, and started teaching.⁹⁴

As previously mentioned the content of Christ's commands can be summarized thus:

1. Make your choices based on God's permanent realities, rather than the world's temporary ones. *Invest your life in eternity.*
2. Put Christ and his kingdom first in your life. *Be devoted to him.*
3. Be genuine. Don't pretend to be something you are not, and don't forget who you are in Christ. *Be what you claim to be.*
4. Trust your heavenly Father to take care of your needs and to win your battles. *Rely on God to do what you cannot do.*
5. *Keep in contact and communication* with God through prayer.
6. *Concentrate on learning, living and proclaiming the truth.*
7. Expect the power of the Holy Spirit to make up for your weaknesses and insufficiencies. *Be used by God to fulfill his will.*
8. *Live in expectancy* because the king is coming! Be alert, and ready for his arrival.

Discipling consists of bringing people to the point of commitment to Christ (baptizing) and then nurturing that commitment through a lifelong process of teaching. The gathered church is a teaching church.

The means of the church's teaching ministry is not a creed or a set of church traditions — it is the Holy Spirit, who is continuing the discipling ministry of Jesus Christ among us. The medium he uses is the Bible, the Word of God.

... they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.⁹⁵

⁹³ Acts 4:18; 5:28.

⁹⁴ Acts 5:21.

⁹⁵ Acts 13:5.

He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.⁹⁶

[T]he Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also ...⁹⁷

[Paul] stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.⁹⁸

I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known ...⁹⁹

[W]hen you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.¹⁰⁰

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you ...¹⁰¹

Believers with the Holy Spirit inside them and the Word of God coming out of them are a strong force for change in the world. Jesus intends for his gathered church to not simply sit by and wait until his return. He has commanded us to “engage in business” until he comes.¹⁰² As Paul wrote, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”¹⁰³ The gathered church is a teaching church.

⁹⁶ Acts 13:7.

⁹⁷ Acts 17:13.

⁹⁸ Acts 18:11.

⁹⁹ Colossians 1:25.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

¹⁰¹ 1 John 2:14.

¹⁰² Luke 19:13.

¹⁰³ 1 Timothy 4:13.

Fellowship

The church is God’s gathered community designed to radiate his glory by growing closer together and demonstrating our unity. This is done through fellowship. The act of gathering us together was intentional — God did not mean for us to be spiritual lone rangers. He does not have one church of doers and another church of viewers. He has one body, with many members.¹⁰⁴ Fellowship is the way we show our unity among ourselves and to the watching world.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.¹⁰⁵

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?¹⁰⁶

[T]hat which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁷

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another ...¹⁰⁸

The gathered church is not a saved soul here and a saved soul there. We are a collected crop. We are gathered sheaves, prepared to be harvested for our Master on the last day. The gathered church is a fellowshiping church.

¹⁰⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

¹⁰⁵ Acts 2:42.

¹⁰⁶ 2 Corinthians 6:14.

¹⁰⁷ 1 John 1:3.

¹⁰⁸ 1 John 1:7.

Evangelism

The church is God's gathered community designed to radiate his glory by snatching people from among the doomed and bringing them to eternal life in Christ. We do this through dynamic witness. Jesus told us that we would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."¹⁰⁹ We are witnesses to the fact that there is now hope because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Peter told the first gathered community that they were all witnesses of this fact: God raised Jesus from the dead!¹¹⁰

We are to witness to two facts: 1) that the risen Christ is coming again to judge the world and 2) that forgiveness of sins is available to all who believe in Christ.¹¹¹ These two facts must not be separated. A gospel that only emphasizes God's love and forgiveness misses the first fact. It ignores the bad news, without which people cannot understand the good news. Attempting to evangelize without pointing out why we need forgiveness is only half a witness.

The world is used to Christians telling them that God wants them to join them in heaven. He wants no such thing. The gospel is about a risen Christ who is coming back to conquer the earth. The early Christians did mention heaven. They spoke of Christ, "whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."¹¹² Heaven was only mentioned because that is where Christ is now, and where he is coming from when he returns. True evangelism is not an offer of a new location — it is an offer of life.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Acts 1:8.

¹¹⁰ Acts 2:32; 3:15.

¹¹¹ Acts 10:40–43.

¹¹² Acts 3:21.

¹¹³ John 3:16.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life ...¹¹⁴

“Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life ...”¹¹⁵

“[W]hoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.”¹¹⁶

“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”¹¹⁷

[T]o those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life ...”¹¹⁸

... so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹¹⁹

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called ...¹²⁰

... in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began ...¹²¹

And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.¹²²

¹¹⁴ John 3:36.

¹¹⁵ John 4:36.

¹¹⁶ John 5:24.

¹¹⁷ John 12:25.

¹¹⁸ Romans 2:7.

¹¹⁹ Romans 5:21.

¹²⁰ 1 Timothy 6:12.

¹²¹ Titus 1:2.

¹²² 1 John 5:11.

The church needs to be done with this “good people go to heaven when they die” gospel because it is not the biblical gospel. A church that wants to truly be the church will testify to what the Bible says. It will hold out the hope that the Bible calls “the blessed hope,” which is “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹²³ Any hope that replaces this hope is a false hope.

Any “evangelism” that sidesteps the centrality of Jesus Christ raised from the dead is too sanitized by human philosophy. If all we have to say to people is that Jesus died for them, we are telling the truth, but it is not the whole truth. The whole truth includes the fact that this same Jesus who died for them was raised to rule them. He is coming back, and any gospel that does not take that fact into account is too truncated. Much of modern evangelicalism has missed this point. For that reason, what has passed for evangelism has failed to capture people’s loyalty to Christ. Its recipients are interested only in what Jesus can do for them because that is the only gospel they know. The church who truly evangelizes leads people from accepting Christ’s gift of forgiveness to embracing Christ’s authority and his coming kingdom. The church is God’s gathered community designed to radiate his glory by bringing others into his kingdom through dynamic witness.

The Voice

John’s Revelation describes (among other things) the conflict that believers will have in this age before Christ’s return. He depicts that conflict as a battle between them and a great dragon, representing Satan. John reveals that the battle will be won by Christ. Christ will return and depose the great dragon from his usurped place in heaven.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has

¹²³ Titus 2:13.

been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ...”¹²⁴

Here, John explains that there will be three key elements to the church’s endurance, which will overcome the dragon. Those key elements can be described this way: 1) the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, 2) the things proclaimed by the church as Christ’s voice on the earth, and 3) the courage and selfless devotion of the church in the face of demonic opposition.

The first of these three key elements is what Christ did for us on Calvary’s cross. It cannot be changed, and its results are ours to enjoy. We know that whatever happens to us in this life, another awaits us at Christ’s return, because the sin that would keep us from eternal life has been atoned for. The tree of life is once again available for redeemed humanity to partake in. What’s more, any victory we might experience over the devil in this life is contingent on that victory already accomplished.

The latter two elements in the success of the church in enduring Satan’s attacks are conditional. Believers must have the courage to deny themselves and follow Christ wherever he leads, even if we too must go to our deaths. Believers must also take up the task of testifying to the existence and significance of Christ. We overcome the enemy by testifying of Christ. We, the church, must be the current earthly voice of our risen Lord.

The church has not exhibited an unbroken succession of centuries dedicated to the high ideals established for her in Scripture. Rather, the current earthly voice of God has often struggled with Satanically orchestrated political antagonism from without and religious apostasy from within. The marks of the true church have not always been evident, but have never been completely hidden. One place where the Bible shows that reality is Jesus’ letters to the seven churches in the second and third chapters of Revelation.

¹²⁴ Revelation 12:10–11.

Letters from Jesus

John was the last of the apostles who had trained under Jesus and witnessed his resurrection. He had been instrumental in establishing a number of churches throughout the Roman province of Asia Minor. The Roman emperor had banished John to the island of Patmos, but allowed people to visit him. These visitors could bring messages from the churches to their elder, John, and receive messages that they could bring back to the churches. The Greek word for messenger is ἄγγελος, so our English Bibles usually refer to these messengers as “angels.”¹²⁵ But, they were not. They were human messengers, and often Jesus condemned their sins as well as those of the churches they served. These letters to the churches described the state of the church in general in the late first century, but they also serve as a pretty good description of the church in general down through the ages.

A survey of these letters can give believers a good glimpse at the kind of struggles that await us as we seek to be Christ’s earthly voice in this age of conflict. Jesus has some very high praise to give to some who were victorious in the conflict (in the first century), and some severe warnings to those who did not quite measure up to that aspiration. Readers today are left to determine which category they should be placed in.

Ephesus — the orthodox voice

The letter to Ephesus begins, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’”¹²⁶

The salutation reflects back on the vision of Jesus revealed in 1:12–16, where our Lord is pictured holding stars in his hand, and walking among seven lampstands. Revelation 1:20 leaves no question as to what these images stand for: “As for the mystery

¹²⁵ Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14.

¹²⁶ Revelation 2:1.

of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels [messengers] of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Both lampstands and stars are images that suggest the shedding of light, which is often used in the Bible for the passing on of knowledge.¹²⁷ As believers, the messengers were responsible to take the message of Jesus, the light of the world,¹²⁸ to the world. The churches they represented had the same responsibility, because all believers are also the light of the world.¹²⁹ Jesus stands amid the lamp-stands, ready to remove any church that refuses to remain lit with the knowledge of the gospel.

It can be reasonably assumed that Ephesus had remained orthodox. They were continuing to teach the gospel message, unadulterated, in spite of challenges they had faced. This is actually encouraging news, because the city of Ephesus was known for its paganism, and Paul warned Timothy that he would have to confront false teachers as he ministered there.¹³⁰ Jesus commended them for their endurance under this pressure to paganize. He told them, “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.”¹³¹ He also commended them because they “hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which [he] also” hated.¹³² It is not clear whether this refers back to those who falsely claimed apostleship or another group. Regardless, it is clear that Ephesus had a reputation of remaining orthodox in spite of the challenge of false teachings.

¹²⁷ Psalm 43:3; Daniel 2:22; John 12:35.

¹²⁸ John 8:12; 9:5–6.

¹²⁹ Matthew 5:14.

¹³⁰ 1 Timothy 1:7; 2 Timothy 4:3.

¹³¹ Revelation 2:2–3.

¹³² Revelation 2:6.

But, Jesus did have a warning for these stalwarts of orthodoxy. He told them:

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ...”¹³³

His complaint was not that the church in Ephesus had abandoned the truth, but that they had abandoned the work. They were theologically accurate but missiologically flawed. They had stopped doing the things that they were still teaching. Jesus warned them that if they did not turn back and do the things that they had originally done — their first love — they were in danger of being replaced.

Love does more than just say “I love you.” Love proves itself by works. Faith that does not work is dead faith.¹³⁴

If Ephesus passes this test and goes back to practicing what it preaches, Jesus promises them this: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”¹³⁵ Readers will remember that the Garden of Eden had two prominent trees in its midst — one forbidden, one not. The forbidden tree was that of the knowledge of good and evil. After eating of this tree, our ancestors were banished from the garden so that they would not have the opportunity to partake of the tree of life and live forever.¹³⁶ God prevented humanity from having immortality because immortality would be a curse in our fallen, sinful condition. Jesus promises the Ephesians that if they continued to do the works of the gospel, as well as proclaim its truth, they would have access to the tree of eternal life. In the final vision of Revelation, we discover that this tree will be present in the New Jerusalem.¹³⁷

¹³³ Revelation 2:4–5.

¹³⁴ James 2:17, 26.

¹³⁵ Revelation 2:7.

¹³⁶ Genesis 3:22.

¹³⁷ Revelation 22:2, 14, 19.

At many times throughout its history, the church of Jesus Christ has resembled the church at Ephesus. We have often gone to war with ourselves over doctrine rather than obey his teachings about loving one another. We have acted like the Pharisees, whom Jesus said would “travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, [they] make him twice as much a child of hell as [themselves].”¹³⁸ Good theology is important, but it can never be the only goal. We were commanded to make disciples, not merely converts. A convert knows, a disciple does.

Smyrna — the tested voice

Jesus introduces himself to the church at Smyrna as “the first and the last, who died and came to life.”¹³⁹ He is the first of the children of Adam who would be raised from the dead, and the last of the children of Adam who would ever need to fear death, because now he has the keys to death and Hades (the grave).¹⁴⁰ Death is a prison that we all await, but we need not fear it because Christ came before us, conquered death and has a set of shiny keys dangling from his belt. No one need ever fear death again because he can rescue us from it. He will do that by raising us from the dead when he returns.

If anyone needed to keep that picture before them, it was the believers in Smyrna. Notice how what Jesus says to them is sandwiched by the word “tribulation.” He says:

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Matthew 23:15.

¹³⁹ Revelation 2:8.

¹⁴⁰ Revelation 1:17–18.

¹⁴¹ Revelation 2:9–10.

Believers in Smyrna were about to undergo severe trial, persecution, accusation, imprisonment and would be threatened with death itself.

As a missionary, I have at times struggled with just what to say to people who are putting their lives on the line by preaching the gospel in a hostile culture. I want to encourage believers to keep being salt and light in their contexts. At the same time, I have questioned my own motives, wondering how vocal I would be if I lived in a nation that forcefully opposed that voice.

Jesus told the believers in Smyrna to be “faithful unto death” and promised to “give [them] the crown of life.”¹⁴² Their ordeal of testing was likened to an Olympic game, in which the winning contestants would have undergone great testing, but would emerge from it victorious, wearing a crown. The crown would be the same thing that Jesus had promised the victorious church at Ephesus: life itself. To wear the crown of life is the same thing as taking from the tree of life: it is to be raised from the dead when Christ returns. In the end, that is the only victory that matters.

The believers at Smyrna could also take solace in the fact that Jesus promised their time of testing to be limited. What those ten days of testing were, we can only speculate. We do know that at least some would pass the test. Some would live to see the time of testing completed and gain victory over the apostate Jewish community by surviving their attacks. Others would gain victory by martyrdom, as all of the other apostles besides John had already done. In either case, Jesus warned that this time of testing was coming, and urged the believers in Smyrna to be like their brothers in Ephesus, who had been famous for their endurance.¹⁴³

The church of Jesus Christ has never known a time when not put to the test. Although some speak of “the tribulation” as if it is some special event that will happen in history, Jesus told his disciples that in the world they (and we who follow them) would

¹⁴² Revelation 2:10.

¹⁴³ Revelation 2:2–3.

have tribulation.¹⁴⁴ He spoke of some professing Christians whose lives have no root, who fall away in time of testing.¹⁴⁵ The sad fact is, many who claim to trust in Christ will give in to the temptation to abandon that faith if it is challenged. The voice becomes the voice of the accused and incarcerated. It is then that we need to hear the encouragement of the apostle Paul:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁴⁶

A voice that keeps proclaiming the gospel of life in the midst of threats of its own death is an authentic voice. There can be no suggestion that this voice is being sounded out of ulterior motives. The gallows and chopping block have a way of purifying the church. It is no wonder that history records many of these times of testing. While it is improper for Christians to pray for persecution, it is quite possible that without it, the earthly voice of Christ might have been muted.

Pergamum — the compromised voice

Jesus introduces himself to the messenger from Pergamum by again referring back to the vision that John had just seen of him. He describes himself as “him who has the sharp two-edged sword.”¹⁴⁷ In the vision, Jesus is not holding that sword. It is coming out of his mouth.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ John 16:33.

¹⁴⁵ Luke 8:13.

¹⁴⁶ Romans 8:35–39.

¹⁴⁷ Revelation 2:12.

¹⁴⁸ Revelation 1:16.

In the Old Testament, God's people were pictured as wielding two-edged swords, executing his vengeance on his enemies.¹⁴⁹ Fathers warned their sons to stay away from forbidden women because, although their lips seemed to drip honey and their speech was as smooth as oil, in the end they would prove to be as bitter as wormwood and as "sharp as a two-edged sword."¹⁵⁰ The common denominator in these two references is that of impending judgment.

In the New Testament, apart from the two references in Revelation, the two-edged sword appears in a passage from Hebrews:

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.¹⁵¹

The church at Pergamum is in danger of some kind of heresy — some kind of compromise. They live in a place so well-known for its evil that Satan himself is said to live there. A church living in such a place is bound to be tempted to contextualize a bit too much.

Jesus identifies two different teachings that were prevalent in Pergamum. First, he spoke of the "the teaching of Balaam, who

¹⁴⁹ Psalm 149:6.

¹⁵⁰ Proverbs 5:3–4.

¹⁵¹ Hebrews 4:9–16.

taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.”¹⁵² Most of us remember this prophet for his tendency to speak to animals. Jesus reminds his readers of another incident in Balaam’s life, when he tricked the Israelites into sinning. Pergamum apparently had some prophets who were leading the church astray.

The second group Jesus refers to as “some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”¹⁵³ Jesus had commended the Ephesians for hating the works of the Nicolaitans, but did not explain what those works were. Both the Ephesians and the believers in Pergamum knew full well what the Nicolaitans were teaching. While the Ephesian Christians had been able to resist their influence, the church at Pergamum had not. They had been compromised by, not one, but two heresies.

It is possible that the reference to the two-edged sword is a clue to the nature of the problem at Pergamum. The author of Hebrews spoke of the grace of God as a new Sabbath rest for the people of God. Believers can trust in God’s completed work through Christ and rest in his grace, with no need to prove their worthiness by works of their own. Christ is our high priest, interceding for us, and because of his atonement, we can now enter into God’s presence by his merit, not our own. Probably the heresies being propagated in Pergamum were adding some kind of works for personal merit to grace.

Jesus commands the church at Pergamum to repent. This is significant because Jesus has not charged the entire church of heresy. He had merely stated that some within the church were holding the teaching of Balaam, and some (others) the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Yet, Jesus warns that he is coming soon and will actively “war against” those heretics “with the sword of [his] mouth.”¹⁵⁴ He promises to actively intervene in the affairs of this

¹⁵² Revelation 2:14.

¹⁵³ Revelation 2:15.

¹⁵⁴ Revelation 2:16.

congregation and execute his vengeance on those who have fallen away from grace. The implication is that if the whole church does not repent and rid itself of these heresies, the whole church is in danger of losing its lampstand.

The church in history has — at times — sought to eradicate itself of heretics. Many have turned away from religion altogether because of stories of hangings, drowning, torture, burnings and beheadings in the name of eradicating heretics. It sickens people to know that such things have been done in the name of Christ, and rightfully so. Jesus has never commanded such action. His one command in the face of heresy — so evident here — can be summed up in one word: repent. The problem is not that such teachings exist. The problem in Pergamum was that the congregation was allowing them to exist within it. A church that repents of false teachings, disassociating herself from them, is a church that overcomes this test.

Jesus promises that those who overcome this test will be given some of the hidden manna, and “a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”¹⁵⁵ These references probably also identified the particular teachings Jesus was warning against. He wanted the believers to realize that the promises of these false teachers were false. Throughout its history, the church has been inundated by esoteric teachings which promised some secret blessing to their adherents. By speaking out against this kind of thing at Pergamum, Jesus is warning us all against falling for that kind of deception. The true gospel is not a secret. It is a message for everyone.

Thyatira — the seduced voice

The problems in Thyatira are very similar to those in Pergamum. False teachings have entered into the congregation and threaten to cause the church to lose its identity as a source of the gospel. In Thyatira, however, the false teachings appear to come

¹⁵⁵ Revelation 2:17.

from a leader within the church itself. Jesus names her “that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants.”¹⁵⁶ This woman has apparently gained some kind of position of authority within the group of churches and is passing her false teachings on to other leaders within the congregations. In the Old Testament, Jezebel was the queen of King Ahab and a powerful woman who forced her pagan religion upon the Israelites. She took advantage of her position of authority to introduce syncretism and impurity into Israel. The New Testament Jezebel was doing the same thing.

Jesus introduces himself to the messenger from Thyatira as “the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.”¹⁵⁷ Unlike Jezebel, whose power was in her impurity and her ability to make others impure, Christ’s power is in his purity. He will invade the churches at Thyatira, first throwing Jezebel onto a sickbed and giving her followers tribulation, unless they repent of her works. He will then strike her children dead, so that “all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.”¹⁵⁸

The members of the churches at Thyatira were, in one way, opposite of those at Ephesus. Ephesus had been commended for defending the truth, but criticized for not following their orthodoxy through with appropriate works. Jesus told the believers at Thyatira, “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.”¹⁵⁹ He does not call on this church to repent. He did call on Jezebel to repent, and she refuses to do so. He will visit those who have been seduced by her. To the rest, he simply encourages them to “hold fast” what they have.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Revelation 2:20.

¹⁵⁷ Revelation 2:18.

¹⁵⁸ Revelation 2:23.

¹⁵⁹ Revelation 2:19.

¹⁶⁰ Revelation 2:25.

Sardis — the sleeping voice

Jesus told the messenger from Sardis that he was a dead man. He said, “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”¹⁶¹ This was a church that was going through the motions, but was asleep to its own existence and calling. Jesus commands them to wake up, and warns that if they do not, he will come against them suddenly, like a thief.¹⁶²

Philadelphia — the faithful voice

The only church that Jesus has no criticism for is that at Philadelphia. Instead, he tells them, “Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.”¹⁶³ The churches and believers who remain faithful in spite of the challenges they face will become pillars in the temple of God, residents of the New Jerusalem.¹⁶⁴

Laodicea — the lukewarm voice

Jesus condemned the seventh church because they were like lukewarm water, neither cold nor hot.¹⁶⁵ Since they had the things they needed in life, they felt no compulsion to be radical with their religion. They were just there. It is to this group that Jesus presents himself as a visitor, knocking at the door. That relationship that the church in Laodicea assumed they had was possible, but they had to pursue it. Taking it for granted was producing a tepid faith, and remaining in that lukewarm state would be disastrous.

¹⁶¹ Revelation 3:1.

¹⁶² Revelation 3:2-3.

¹⁶³ Revelation 3:10.

¹⁶⁴ Revelation 3:12.

¹⁶⁵ Revelation 3:16.

Ears and shoes

To each messenger and church Jesus repeated this same advice: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”¹⁶⁶ The advice is similar to the common expression “if the shoe fits, wear it.” Jesus challenges all churches and all believers of all ages to consider the plight of these seven churches in first century Asia Minor. The challenges they faced as they attempted to be Christ’s earthly voice are the same challenges we face. The church must not be distracted or sidetracked. The testimony must continue. The voice must not be allowed to be silenced.

The Body

The church confuses many people. Viewed as a worldwide reality, she seems too complex and diverse. Compared to Christ, who is often portrayed as a simple preacher from Galilee, the church is too many things all at once. Liturgically, she is high, low and no. She has members who seem to live in the atmosphere of the miraculous, and other members who can apparently get along without the supernatural. She has members who reflect their socio-economic and political background almost identically to their non-Christian neighbors, and members who rebel against their culture at every point.

Granted, there are some individuals who consider themselves part of the church of Christ who are not. Some extremists are either deluded or hypocritical. Some “churches” are missing vital elements that put them outside the parameters as well. But given that, there is still a staggering amount of difference within the churches who claim allegiance to Christ.

Tradition

This complexity within the church and churches of Christ is sometimes explained by reference to various traditions that have

¹⁶⁶Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

emerged through her long history. A denomination, for example, can be traced back to a movement where some believers adopted a fellowship among themselves based on shared beliefs, standards and experiences. In most cases, the denomination formed does not seek to deny the validity of other traditions and other churches. Instead, the urgency of the perceived mandate from the Lord encourages the believers to form into a distinct unity amid the diversity.

In the case of the Advent Christian denomination, that mandate was to preach the imminent return — the second advent of Christ. We were products of several diverse traditions who came together as Adventists because we believed that Jesus was going to literally return to this planet, and soon. In the mid-19th century, many of the mainline churches considered the Adventists fanatics and would disassociate from them. This resulted in more denominations forming: Adventist denominations. This, of course, added to the complexity of Christendom as well.

Evolution

Some see a parallel between the changes taking place in the churches and those that evolutionary theory suggests happens in biology. Over time, minute differences become more prominent and eventually result in the creation of new species. At any given time, there are strains of DNA that are in the process of mutating and hold promise for the emergence of some new variety or species. In evolutionary biology, there are two major factors at work in these mutations: the coding within the DNA itself and the environment with its various promptings acting on it. One does not have to be an atheist or secularist to see that something similar to that happens to churches.

Pragmatism

Another way that people try to explain why churches emerge and change, thrive or die, unite or divide, is pragmatism. Things

change because the way things are does not seem to work well. When the dissatisfaction over perceived uselessness reaches critical mass, churches split, people relocate, new organizations form. When the present structure is no longer serving its intended function, the usual solution is to form new structures, or stay the same and eventually cease to exist.

Explaining diversity

Neither of these comparisons explain fully all of the dynamics of ecclesiastical diversity, but each is a component to the explanation. There is within each individual believer an impulse to rebel and a separate impulse to preserve. There is a fierce drive to preserve the code, and an urge to mutate. There is comfort amid similarity, and a desire to try something different — something that might work better.

In the church cosmos, we use different terms for these realities. We talk about orthodoxy and heresy, traditional and conservative, radical and old-school, and use a host of other labels. Whatever terminology we avail ourselves of, it is clear that we are describing a complex and diverse corpus, which is undergoing a constant process of change.

Here, then, is the puzzle. How can we reconcile this picture of what the church is with all of the other descriptions of the church revealed in the Scriptures? The church is one body, chosen from among the nations, saved from among the lost, transformed into a new unity by one Holy Spirit, gathered into a unified fellowship and purpose, calling out to the world with one voice, proclaiming the one gospel. With all of these emphases of unity, how do we explain biblically the constant splitting, forming and reforming that has characterized our history?

For some, the only explanation is that we (at present) are right and they (in the past) are wrong. The current rediscovered tradition is biblical, while all that came before are unbiblical, and all current challenges to change are of the Devil. They spend their lives defending the code against mutations. They know what works

and will not listen to evidence to the contrary. Others are equally convinced that the old traditions are what is killing the church. They see a fresh start as the only way to preserve the species. They see themselves in a congregation of Pharisees, and seek rescue in change. The conflict among these two polar opposites within the church often repels people.

Church government

The competing methods used for church government has long been an example of how this polarization has affected us. Some of the major movements that have produced large and long-lasting denominational entities have focused on a particular method of church government. The Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches emphasize a structure where each local assembly is under the guidance and control of leaders in a military-like chain of command. The Presbyterian denominations have championed a leadership of delegated elders who lead by consensus and cooperation. Congregationalist churches have stressed the need for democracy and the protection of the rights of individuals against their potential abuse by those in power.

The tendency has been for these major ecclesiastical movements to attack the others and defend themselves on the grounds that only one method of church government can be the biblical method. Behind that argument is the assumption that the early church had only one method of governance. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Evidence from the New Testament suggests that there were many methods of governance used simultaneously among local fellowships and in the body as a whole.

Pentecost

Already, at the very genesis of the New Testament church, there was an overlapping combination of governance systems in place for believers. The eleven apostles who had been appointed by Christ himself added to their number in order to replace the betrayer. These appointed missionaries continued to serve as

leaders throughout the early church, and other apostles appear to have been appointed by the Holy Spirit in that role as well.¹⁶⁷

But, the Pentecost saints were Jewish believers who were used to being represented by elders within their communities and in the synagogues. It is clear from the book of Acts that elder rule continued to play an important role throughout the early church.¹⁶⁸ So, already there are at least two systems, with no clear chain of command among them. The elders of the Jewish/Christian communities were not forced to denounce their role, nor were they gathered together and burned at the stake. The more complicated dual method of governance was allowed to exist, with no need for correction implied.

The diaconate

Within a matter of days, the rapidly growing church, reaching out to the Hellenist communities, felt the need to further expand its leader structure.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole gathering,

¹⁶⁷ Acts 1:2, 26; 2:37, 43; 4:33, 36; 5:12, 18, 29, 40; 6:6; 8:1, 14; 9:27; 11:1; 14:4, 14; 15:2, 4, 6, 22f; 16:4; Rom. 1:1; 11:13; 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:1; 4:9; 9:1f, 5; 12:28f; 15:7, 9; 2 Cor. 1:1; 11:13; 12:12; Gal. 1:1, 17, 19; Eph. 1:1; 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:6; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:1, 11; Titus 1:1; Heb. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; 3:2; Jude 1:17; Rev. 2:2; 18:20; 21:14.

¹⁶⁸ Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 6:12; 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22f; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 22:5; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15.

and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.¹⁶⁹

The leadership dynamics revealed in this incident are very telling. The apostles were seen as spokesmen for the body as a whole, but there was already a group of godly, Spirit-filled men who were serving as heads of the bodies within the body. Although not mentioned by name here, it seems clear that these were the elders. But, the influx of an entirely different group of believers from a different cultural context has led to a need for a different kind of leadership, or at least a modification of the existing system.

It appears that the people are suggesting that the apostles take over the role of overseeing the distribution of funds/food. They were not willing to do this, since it would involve less time preaching and teaching — work within the original parameters of their call. The better response to the people’s appeal was to establish a new leadership structure.

Now, the apostles could have responded to this appeal for reform by rejecting it. They could have told the complainers that they have elders and that is all they are going to get. Instead, they saw the current crisis as an opportunity to improve on the system by making it more complex, thereby more flexible. They appear to have been more motivated to meet the needs of their people rather than to preserve their standard operating procedures.

These new leaders are not given titles in the text. While some see this as the beginning of the office of “deacon,” the new leaders are not specifically titled as such. More likely, they were called elders. Yet, it is obvious that the role of deacons, which would become more prominent later in the New Testament, has its beginning here. These early deacons were elders, but had a specific administrative role. At least one New Testament text indicates that this

¹⁶⁹ Acts 6:1–6.

became the case for other churches in the New Testament period: Paul addresses his letter to the Philippians, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.”¹⁷⁰ There is no mention of elders, presumably because, by that time, the position had divided into two roles: overseers (with spiritual authority) and deacons (with practical administrative authority).

Acts chapter six shows a kind of evolutionary process occurring in church government. As the needs develop, the church is allowed to adjust itself to meet those needs. There is an interplay between several different types of authority structure here. There are appointed apostles, delegate elders, appointed administrative elders/deacons and the congregation as a whole, or “the whole gathering,” which is allowed to have its say as well.

Council

A few chapters later, another example of this multi-faceted leadership displays itself. A council convenes in Jerusalem to decide how Jewish one has to be to qualify as a Christian. When the decision is made, it is announced as the result of a collaborative effort from three groups of leaders: “the apostles and the elders, with the whole church.”¹⁷¹ So, although the apostles are appealed to, the leadership roles of the community elders are not side-stepped, nor is the will of the entire body. Throughout history, there will be many councils convened. Sadly, some of them will not seek the kind of consensus that was evidenced at the one recorded in Acts 15.

Complexity breeds confusion

The evolution toward more complex leadership structures has resulted in some negatives. The original meaning and purpose behind some of the early titles has been lost or replaced. Elders

¹⁷⁰ Philippians 1:1.

¹⁷¹ Acts 15:22.

(πρεσβύτεροι) were not merely lay leaders whose responsibility was to keep the clergy honest. Bishops (i.e., overseers: ἐπίσκοποι) were not originally one level above local church leadership, but had oversight of local congregations. Deacons (διάκονοι) were not one rank below elders, but elders with a different function from that of overseers (ἐπίσκοποι). Both deacons and bishops were elders. Apostles (in the generic sense, roughly equivalent to the modern term “missionary”) were not limited to the twelve. Yet, in each of these cases, the meaning of the term has become obscured or changed as new leadership structures emerged, and roles changed for those who took on the titles.

The “biblical” pattern

As a result of this evolution and the confusion that exists about the meaning of leadership titles, it is a very dangerous thing to argue for only one kind of leadership structure on the grounds that it is the biblical pattern. Vast amounts of time and effort have been wasted attempting to do just that. The assumption that the Lord wants us to return to some original design for leadership as depicted in the New Testament churches is flawed for two reasons: 1) there is no monolithic leadership structure ever revealed in the New Testament as a whole and 2) the New Testament reflects a pattern of change within its leadership to respond to the needs of the churches’ members, and to reach the world with the gospel.

The body

The best explanation of this reality is found in a metaphor the New Testament uses to describe the church. She is “the body of Christ.”¹⁷² A body has one head, but it is also a combination of inter-related systems, with different purposes and functions. The church government puzzle cannot best be solved by means of tradition, evolutionary theory or pragmatism. The best answers to

¹⁷² 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:12

the puzzle come when believers take the body of Christ metaphor seriously and see themselves as a combination of interrelated systems designed not to have dominion over each other, but to equally submit to the head. When we ask the question of who among the members is in charge, we risk belittling someone's role and function.

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.¹⁷³

The multi-systemic approach, allowing for multiple different types of church government (operating simultaneously) best preserves the body analogy. It also allows for all-important checks and balances against tyranny and spiritual abuse. It also allows different church organizations, missions and conferences to emerge which function within their cultural norms, instead of being forced to operate the way their parent church or mission did.

There will be dangers in such an approach. A church which is constantly redefining herself can be distracted from her primary mission. A multi-systemic approach can lead to fighting for prominence among the various types of leaders. Confusion can occur as to who is responsible to whom. Yet, all of these problems existed in the early church, and still she was remarkably successful at her mission. The genius of a multi-systemic approach is that it is flexible enough to adjust to the needs of the present, instead of being trapped in outdated structures inherited from the past.

¹⁷³ 1 Corinthians 12:14-20.

A body changes over time. At certain phases in a body's development, certain functions become more important, more protected. When those phases are over, other functions take the lead. This fluidity and flexibility is what makes growth possible. It preserves the organism and prevents stagnation and decay. It allows the body to continue to be what it is. A flexible approach to governing the church will ensure that she continues to be the Lord's chosen, saved, transformed, gathered body, speaking with his voice.

SIX OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES **(Looking ahead to issue XLIV/3)**

A special winter issue will feature an article by Justin Nash on the theology of the Pentateuch. It will also feature five Hebrew word study articles on the Old Testament's teaching about the intermediate state and the final state of the lost by Jefferson Vann.

THE END AND THE BEGINNING **(Looking ahead to issue XLV/1)**

- The theme for the Spring 2019 issue will be Eschatology, looking at the doctrines of the last things.
- If you find anything written on eschatology, feel free to review it, pro and/or con.
- Letters to the editor are welcomed.
- Reviews of Advent Christian or conditionalist writings are always welcomed.
- Any biblical or theological papers (regardless of topic) are also encouraged.

PLEASE SUBMIT ALL LETTERS, ARTICLES OR REVIEWS
BY EMAIL TO jeffersonvann@yahoo.com AND SPECIFY
WHICH ISSUE THE ARTICLE IS INTENDED FOR OR
WHICH ARTICLE THE LETTER IS RESPONDING TO.