

GOSPEL DYNAMICS 5: THE CHURCH, UNION WITH THE BODY OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION: THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS, AND OUR NEED, FOR COMMUNITY

We have been emphasizing that union with Christ, a lifestyle of repentance, and obedience in faith, which comes as a result of being freed by the Gospel from one's idolatries as well as religiosity, leads us inevitably to grow in community; in other words, we begin to grow organically in the church.¹ In other words, if you want to grow in the faith (which comes from hearing the word, repenting of idolatries, and "turning" to Christ), and grow in grace – if you are serious about living a life that is justified in Christ, and sanctified in Christ as well, then you will firmly relate with the resources that God has provided for your progressive growth: the community of the Kingdom, that is, the church. God gives us the word of God (Scripture) to point us to Christ's Person and Work as the center of our salvation and spiritual maturity (again, the "centrality" of the Gospel). However, consider this: as you are being humbled and empowered by the life-changing Spirit that dwells within to point you to Jesus and free you from the power and pollution of sin, as the Spirit applies the Person and Work of Jesus to you, you will inevitably grow into union with Jesus' Body, the church. Another way of saying that is this: **the closer you come to Jesus in faith (the more you become like Jesus), the more united you are to His church.**

Today, we don't live in an era that prizes community for our deepest hopes of change; we want to believe that change happens within, and that it is intended to be kept private. We live in an age of "internet churches" and a private faith of prayer, meditation, and personal change. However, this is not how the Lord intended for change to take place in our lives. Throughout Scripture, throughout the ministry of Christ, and throughout the history of the church (beginning with the Book of Acts and consistently throughout the New Testament epistles), **it is evident that we were never called as individuals, but into God's Kingdom community.** Redemptive history, and the progressive revelation of God's covenant relationship with man, unfolds, not as individuals alone called by grace, but a people, to a nation, to a kingdom of priests and kings.

How do we know that God intended us to reside in the context of community? Two reasons:

- (1) **First of all, we know this because God Himself is a community!** Beginning with the design of man in the book of Genesis, what do you see? Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." Who was God referring to when He mentions "us" in this passage? He was discussing the design of man's creation (and ultimately, fall, and redemption) with His community: the Triune God of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a unique attribute of God; no one other faith or religion in the world claims to have a God that resides, acts, and exists in community. However, our God is a dynamic community; His joy is wrapped up in the community, the loving partnership, of His being.

¹ David Powlison, in the Dynamics of Biblical Change (Part 2) series for CTP, notes that "Godly people" and "Christian community/culture" are two of the various contexts in which God counsels a believer.

- (2) Secondly, and this is equally relevant, what else do we see with regards to the creation of man in Genesis? God says, in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” In other words, **even in paradise, before sin ever entered the world, the fact that man was alone was not a good thing**; this was the very first malediction (up until this point, everything was said to be “good” in paradise) in the Bible. This means that community was etched into the very fabric of God’s original design.

Man was created in God’s image. In essence, we are the very “image-bearers” of God, meaning that we were created, in many ways, to be like God. **As God’s “image-bearers”, we were made to be in community with one another.** What does this mean? If you are lonely, or hurting, or desiring companionship, or complaining about your fellowship, or are in one of those weak moments in your life, when you desire a specific kind of companionship, this is evidence of the fact that you are more like God in some ways than not; we are all designed to enjoy and live in dynamic community, and as a result, there will always be a yearning for the satisfaction and fulfillment of relationship. Similarly, if you are not maturing, or if you are not changing, or if you are not transforming, or if you can be honest with yourself and recognize that you are not as humble, or not as repentant in your life, then this may also be an indication that you have lost sight of the Gospel (you have lost a sense of intimacy with the Father in the Gospel), which means that you probably also lost sight of the purpose of community and true fellowship in your life (which also indicates that you are either not part of a healthy community, or not plugged into your community in such a way that you have allowed their positive and negative influences to point you towards change in the Gospel).

The Fall of man (Genesis 3) corrupted this design; **we are created as God’s “image-bearers”, but the design model became flawed in sin.** As a result, our desire for community has often been used to exploit others for our own pursuits (money, power, and sex, for instance). **Sin has distorted the way we view community, and the way we live out community.** Sin also attempts to convince us that we don’t need community; our sin tries to turn us inward, to keep us from ever experiencing the grace of God to its fullest extent.

However, the amazing thing about the Gospel is this: because of the Gospel, we can now entrust ourselves to restore God’s original intention for our lives – to be in community with others. We can genuinely love others because of the Gospel; we no longer seek to find acceptance or fulfillment in one another since, in Jesus, we have such acceptance. As a result, we can wholly love and commit to one another without a need to exploit them for something in return; our love is sincere. **Our commitment to one another comes from our pure reliance on the fact that God intends community for our transformation (our sanctification).** With all of our flaws, there is a deep possibility to find a genuine community in our world again, and this is what God uses to transform the world around us. Just as it takes a community to change an individual, it takes a community to pray and live out “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” This Kingdom is the Kingdom of God, embodied in the church today.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

When people say “church”, they usually mean the local church, the local body. Some larger contexts will view things denominationally, or attempt to sectionalize the church according to liberal or conservative movements. **Although there is validity to looking at the church according to its distinctives, we often segment the church for valid, and**

yet, unhealthy, reasons as well. Many times our personal idols cause us to segment the church even more: those who are more liberal-minded tend to justify their segment with their works of justice and their open-acceptance of those who are marginalized; similarly, those who are more conservative tend to justify their social chastity and their traditional values. Although we must all the more return to Scripture to embrace what Christ's Body really is, we must also (regardless of our tendencies to alienate ourselves from those who do not adhere to our liberal or conservative agendas) embrace the way the Lord (our Head) sees His church.

Wayne Grudem, in his version of *Systematic Theology*, writes:

We may conclude that the group of God's people considered at any level from local to universal may rightly be called 'a church'. We should not make the mistake of saying that only a church meeting in houses expresses the true nature of the church, or only a church considered at a city-wide level can rightly be called a church, or only the church universal can rightly be called by the name 'church'. Rather, the community of God's people considered at any level can be rightly called a church.

In other words, Grudem, as well as most scholars, defines the church as God's people in any community context. **When we think "church", we think of the official, local institution, and rightly so. However, Scripture calls us to broaden our vision: we are to see the church as broader than just our local body; we are to see the church as a dynamic Body of Christ, working and serving, and demonstrating the Gospel in its context.**

This struck a huge chord for me; for many years, Pioneers For Christ, a "**para-church**" **ministry** (meaning, that we are a local organization supporting the church, but not intending to act as a local church) was criticized for establishing a Camp for Korean-Americans. For years, we have endured the complaints of our neighbors that youth were drawn to our Camp, and yet not as drawn to their own fellowship activities (such as their local summer retreats). It wasn't until very recently that I realized that what I was dealing with was a traditional mindset of the church, versus a more Gospel and Kingdom-based mindset. The traditional mindset is territorial, and is very sensitive when a member of their local body leaves, or even compares his community to another community; the traditional mindset neglects the broader view of Christ's church in a given community context.

Of course, what I am not endorsing is that we can all abandon our churches altogether, and just "hang out" with Christian friends as our local "church" entity; this would be the more liberal-minded view that has spawned "internet church" movements, as well as the notion that we may not need a local context at all, so long as we have good Christian relationships. **Various "para-church" movements have come under fire because they had substituted their model as a replacement for the local body; what they forget is that there are ministries of the church (such as the Sacraments), and the consistency church, as well as the presence of the church that makes it a critical part of the whole of the church. The Gospel teaches that, on one hand, we need an inter-dependent community in which we grow and change together in one local context; this calls for consistency, sacrifice, and transparency in deep, inter-dependent relationships and worship within the local context** (after all, we participate in communion and baptism as a community, with community conviction, compulsion, and responsibility); this is for our own spiritual maturity, and our focus on our immediate contextual relationships (our works of service in the community around us). **On the**

other hand, the purpose of the church is the Kingdom of God manifest on earth; to reduce that to one local entity would be to diminish the power and authority, which Jesus had given us, in the Great Commission. We are called to extend out, then, as one church, so that by our community (our counter-intuitive love in our respective context) presence, we can demonstrate God's renewing favor and work of redemption on earth. This calls churches in any given community context to partner with one another, as well as with other groups (especially the "para-church") to reach their community; we do this for the sake of Gospel renewal in our communities.²

This somewhat ties into two ways of viewing the church: invisible and visible. The invisible church is, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

In essence, the invisible church is the church as God sees it, the believing body of Christ in accordance with God's plan. We do not know all of the breadth and size of this church; there are many who profess yet are deceiving and self-deceived. There are also many who are of the elect, who have not yet come to the Lord. What we see is the visible church, "The church as Christians on earth see it. In this sense the visible church includes all who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives (Grudem)." The visible church comprises much of our local churches.

All this to say: we need community in the context of both the local church, as well as in the context of partnerships in the community. In humility and with courage, we can perform works of tremendous service to our communities. In the local church, this impacts the local body (and as our relationships with people deepen, this impacts our own spiritual maturity); in the community, our partnerships will teach us the fuller extent of God's grace and work, both in us and in our community.

THE BEAUTY, POWER, AND CHALLENGE OF LIVING IN CHRIST'S CHURCH

In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus asks His disciples about His identity:

¹³When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

¹⁸**And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build**

² Dr. Steve Smallman, in the late Spring of 2006, corrected my view of the "para-church" by teaching me that ministries such as Pioneers For Christ are a vital part of the whole church; I find his argument credible (and a relief), as he literally wrote the book *What is a Reformed Church?* In addition, we see examples of communities of churches, such as the presbytery (a group of local PCA churches in one city working together for the city), and in para-church organizations such as CityNet and our own ministry. If anything, these ministries are intended to be partnering more together for the renewal of the city; it's not that we are looking too broad in our contexts, we are not looking broadly enough.

my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

This is an astounding praise given by Jesus to Peter, but the lesson in this passage is all-the-more uniquely astounding, as it applies to us today. In this passage, we see the first use of the word "church" in the entire New Testament. The church is known as God's assembly (the very word for church, *ekklesia*, means to "call out in assembly"), God's dwelling (where God tabernacled, or tented, or dwelled among His people, Exodus 25:8), and God's chosen.³ **From a redemptive historical perspective (summaried in your notes for Gospel Dynamics 3), the church began as a family (as we see in the case of Adam's household), then progresses throughout history to become a people (God's promise to Abraham), then as a nation (thus, the law was given to Moses), and then as a kingdom (thus, the significance of David).**

Under Jesus, the High King, the Kingdom of God was at hand, and His church is to be a family of nations. In John 1, it was written that Jesus dwelled, or "tabernacled", among us – that is, we are His living temple. Post-moderners today entitle themselves to a private spirituality; we emphasize coming to the Gospel as individuals. However, if you study the Scripture (and you don't even have to study it too carefully to recognize this), you'll see that Christ's dwelling is among His people (plural), His church. His love is a covenantal love for His *people*. His sanctifying love is a transforming grace for His *people*. His work is a renewing work in the world among His *people*. Look at Ephesians 2, which emphasizes such a vision for the church:

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with **God's people and members of God's household**,²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹**In him the whole building is joined together** and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²**And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling** in which God lives by his Spirit.

What is the Apostle Paul saying here? The **church** is the temple of the living God! Now, let's go back to the Matthew 16 passage, particularly this sentence, "and on this rock I will build my church." If we are to dissect this phrase, we learn several amazing things:

- "on this rock [Peter]" this church is built; whole faiths have been built on how they interpret this phrase. Did Jesus specifically mean Peter, the person, or Peter's confession, when He meant "on this rock"? In truth, the Greek uses the word to mean "Petros" or "Petra", meaning He was actually referring to Peter Himself. Peter, thus, is often regarded as the first Pope of the church (in some doctrines). However, although Jesus was referring to Peter, the person, it is Peter who later makes Jesus' promise clearer: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—**you also, like living stones**, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4-5)." In other words, **Jesus will build His church on a people who will be built together as one community**, to be a "holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices...through Christ." We will live a sacrificial, counter-intuitive life in a

³ Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, pp.30-36.

- world that has been marred by sin—together, this world will come to know Him by our dwelling among them as one people.
- “I will build my church.” His church will be built by Him. How? For one, by His power and authority, not by our abilities and strengths. In essence, we are not called to the Lord because we have individual skills and talents that Jesus needs; this is inconsistent with the whole teaching of the Bible. Rather, the Scriptures are consistent in teaching that **God’s work is done in spite of our sinfulness, and His work is most greatly embodied in us when we are humbled to see our utter helplessness without Him** (look at Isaiah 6, and what leads Isaiah to proclaim, “Here am I.”). Second, **the church is built by Jesus’ finished work: His emptying Himself of glory, His incarnation, His submission to the will of the Father and to the earthly laws, His earthly life and ministry, His death on the cross, His resurrection, His ascension, and His gift to the church of the Holy Spirit, the “empowerer”**. Finally, He builds the church by His command for us to go and make disciples, combined with His promise to be with us always; **the Great Commission is an empowerment as well as a promise of Jesus’ ongoing presence which emboldens us to live faithfully** (Matthew 28:18-20).
 - “I will build my church.” Notice Jesus says that the gates of Hades will not overcome the church. Satan cannot stop the advance of the Gospel. In essence, Jesus promises triumph. Jesus promises victory. However, we often have a defensive view of the church; we are so afraid of offending others with our faith that we have tipped the scales to appear as though we are shrinking back. Obviously, as we have stated previously (Gospel Methods, Part I) that we need to be missional, incarnational, and contextualized. However, we forget that we should not be standing still; **the text does not read that Satan will advance on our gates. Jesus promises that the gates of Satan will not be able to overcome our advance!**
 - “I will build *my* church.” **We are a people “belonging to God** (1 Peter 2:9) because Jesus, as He later predicts in the same Matthew 16 passage, will be killed (to be forsaken by God) and raised to life. This new people (which already existed throughout biblical history) would have the ongoing presence of Christ, the dwelling of Jesus in them (as we revisit in our Sacraments).

We (like Peter) have been given the “keys of the kingdom” to open the door to the Father with grace and forgiveness in Christ. Our ministry of words and deeds in the context of our community, will demonstrate that the kingdom has come and is restoring the world, that Satan has lost. **There is much to be said about how this is to take place, but for the context of our training, we need be convinced of the fact that our very love for the Gospel, love for one another, love for team-based ministry, love for campers, and embrace of the renewing work of Christ rests in Jesus’ finished work on the cross that calls us to do all of these things as one community;** the core value in our ministry, which focuses on team and community, rests on this command and the promise that Jesus is with us in our ministry, doing the very work that He has called us to.

Do you trust this? **Will you be willing to relinquish your independence, and submit to the truth that your very transformation resides in your love for your community?** How does change happen in community? **In your community, God teaches us how to love, and how to live out the Gospel.** However, we also have difficult experiences: suffering, as well as factors that lead to disunity. These triggers bring out the very character in us that is not like Christ; if we were not near these types of people or personalities, we would not see the sin that lies within (our sin would remain hidden). Similarly, our first inclination, when we meet people that we don’t think we’ll get along with, is to

withdraw from these people (we judge them). It is natural, in our weakness and sinfulness, to not desire a community if we are not fulfilled by it. However, **the Gospel calls us to work and live in the whole of our community, so that we can help others grow, but moreso that we ourselves can mature in the faith and all of its dimensions: we learn to practice grace among sinners. We learn about Jesus' sacrifice, His unselfishness, His character, and how much we need Him because we are not like Him.** We need to go back to the Gospel and see His love for us (our sinfulness), so that we can actually loosen our judgment (because we no longer have to prove ourselves to be worthy before God on our own) and love others.

For many years, when I speak to nonbelievers, it is inevitable that one of the first criticisms I hear about the church is that "it is full of hypocrites". Thank God, I say! If the church wasn't full of hypocrites, I would not be able to see my own malice and judging selfishness; I would not see the need to change. Second, if the church was full of completely redeemed people, I would never change; I would either live in fear of others' judgment (and take my eyes off of Christ, who justifies me), or I would live in hopelessness because of the lack of change in my own life (and thus, take my eyes off of Christ as I compare myself with others). Because of the various types of people in our lives, we see God's work in His people: how they are being directed for growth. The Gospel is a healing, redeeming Gospel that transforms us in the context of one another's sins, sufferings, as well as gifts.

Isn't it amazing to know that God uses all of these people to draw out your selfishness and sin, to make you more like Jesus? Only in Christ's work can we, again, die to ourselves; only in Jesus, who bled and died for those who were at war with God, can we even consider reconciling and loving others genuinely.

A VISUAL REMINDER OF THE GOSPEL IN THE CHURCH: WORSHIP

In the local church, we gather weekly in the corporate context, as weak sinners, to continually re-experience the Gospel as God's Kingdom on earth. Partaking consistently in the local church, and partnering with other Gospel-centered groups (churches and organizations that desire to see the Kingdom manifest on earth) is our practical demonstration of three things:

- (1) **That our faith, though an individual calling, is a calling into a community of believers** (that Gospel transformation happens in the context of a community). **This calls us to partner with others in an inter-dependent manner** (no one perfectly demonstrates all gifts – we are all parts of the Body); partaking in a local church holds us to the truth that we need to live outwardly: for our own spiritual maturity as well as for the work of renewal that the Lord performs in others. God uses the church for our transformation, and He uses us in the church for the transformation of others; both are marks of a church that desires to live out the Kingdom on earth. **As sinners saved by grace, we cannot rely on ourselves; we need one another** to help us to see our sins, and yet, practice grace.
- (2) **That Christ's love and the fullness of His grace is manifest through His church; no one person is a redeemer.** We are called as a community to love and embrace the world as Christ did. This defeats the natural inclination to "go at it alone"; it is far more difficult to partner with others to do the Lord's will, but it is also far more sanctifying, relational, and covenantal. In essence, by being in

community, we learn what Jesus endured, and we see the power of grace that flows from the cross. We get to experience that grace.

- (3) **That we need to preach the Gospel to ourselves**, since our growth reveals much more of our sin and idolatry than when we first came to Christ.

Worship is one of the ways in which we live out the Gospel corporately in a local context. Worship in our world today has become a selfish exercise; we sing songs that we like, and look for preachers that appeal to our style. Of course, praise, hymns, and preaching are significant aspects of worship that contribute to our growth immensely, thus, we should always seek “healthy, biblical, Gospel-renewing” worship. However, let’s not forget what worship is: it is the people of God ascribing to God His worth; we are able to commune with God as our Father corporately. The very essence of true worship is a giving and a receiving; they go hand-in-hand. On one hand, we give worship because of the character and love of God. Our freedom sets us free to exalt the Father, not just because of His works on our behalf, and the blessings of our week, but because of who He is – His character. We, as spiritual beings, are built naturally to worship those that are worthy of praise.

However, in our worship, we are able to see God for who He is, and also our idolatries for what they are. Our hearts are restored in faith because of the Gospel, which wholly reconciles us to the Father. The more we connect with this, the more we long to worship the Father, and the more our idolatries are repented of. True worship comes from our experience of the Gospel, which renews us, compels us to repent, and restores us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

John Calvin saw this as the primary difference between the Protestant church and the Catholic church. The core differences of a sixteenth century church that was compelled by Calvin’s form of worship, compared to that of a Catholic church can be described as follows:

First, we would notice how much *simpler* Calvin’s service was...Second, we would notice how much the *Bible was read and preached* in Calvin’s liturgy...Third, we would notice the *increased participation of Calvin’s congregation in singing, praying together, reading, and listening*...the *conception of grace as the central difference*...⁴

In agreement with the Dr. Keller’s and D.A. Carson’s thesis of what makes biblical, Gospel-focused (and Christ-centered) worship, the following descriptive elements must exist in our worship:

- **Worship must be simple.** The “simplicity of form and language,” almost mimicking the perspicuity of Scripture, in my mind, so that any ‘hearer’ can hear, and so that all the elements appeal to all participants of worship for the sake of worshipful response to the Lord;
- **Worship must be transcendent.** “Transcendence,” a ‘face to face’ meeting with God in the Most Holy Place, which entails being amazed by the Person and Work of Christ as the center of our corporate, and individual, redemption; this happens through the teaching of the Word as connected to the whole of worship; and

⁴ Timothy J. Keller, referring to Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘The Reformed Liturgy’ in D.A. Carson’s *Worship By The Book*, 2002, Zondervan, pp.207-214.

- **Worship must be renewing.** Gospel re-enactment, mimicking the worshipper's reception of the Gospel through the preaching/hearing of the Word (a 'passive' reception of the Gospel, which results in inward counseling, an inward response of worship), otherwise known as the responsive worship (an 'active' reception of the Gospel, which results in joyful singing, prayer, communion, confession, etc.).

This all, then, progresses, in movements, in a cycle of Calvin's "hearing-repentance-renewal in grace"⁵ concept, which results in the "Isaianic cycle (reflective of Isaiah 6)": the reading of the Word, a confession of sin, a word of pardon, and the joyful and thankful singing of a hymn, the "Mosaic cycle": prayer, the reading of the Word, and the preaching of the Word, for the knowledge of His glory, which results in offering and prayers of intercession, and the "Emmaus cycle": God's address to His people, and our response, the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper (an embodiment of Christ's work). All of these entail cycles of deeper repentance, leading to deeper grace, and deeper freedom and joy, almost in a rhythm of a heartbeat.

Entering the presence of the Lord in these cycles enables us to (a) not be distracted by the outward 'presences' and 'voices' that seek to control/deceive us, (b) allow us to approach the throne of grace as king-priests (a royal priesthood) in the Most Holy Place to commune with the Father, and (c) freely confess in repentance, freely receive the Gospel in our re-enactment of it in the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word of grace, and freely respond to Christ's Person and Work, and thus, commune with the Father (and freely respond to His love and sacrifice).

Of course, a traditional Anglo worship may look a bit different than a 'contemporary' Anglo worship, or an African-American worship, or an Asian-American worship, and although these cultural flavors may exist, the same cycles of repentance, grace, and response must exist to worship the true God of our redemption as His people. There is something to be said about the people-focused character of much of our contemporary worship styles today, and we should be cognizant of this to the extent that we remain focused on its simplicity for the sake of focus on our Father, its transcendence, so that we are amazed by the Father and His Son, and our Gospel reception, so that we gratefully and joyfully respond in the midst of our Father, Son, and Spirit for their work of redemption in our lives.

All of this is a natural overflow of our transformation in the Gospel. Our character becomes meshed with believers around us, and we come together to worship corporately as God's Kingdom, not just as individuals worshipping in private, only (we must remember God's words that it was not good for man to be alone even in paradise). **We can live out the Gospel in our worship of the Father corporately, re-enacting the cycle of creation-fall-redemption, and hearing-repentance-renewal, in a consistent manner** (because if you know yourself, you need to experience this outward form of grace all the time).

ANOTHER VISUAL REMINDER OF THE GOSPEL IN THE CHURCH: MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH

However, as one Body, we also demonstrate the presence of God with power. The early church grew rapidly because of those who had been called, working as one, not just preaching the Gospel, but seeking to embrace and renew the community around them, out of genuine love (not as a trade-off so that those people would come to church).

⁵ Ibid, pp.215-216.

We, as the Body, can absorb the pains of rejection together when we sacrifice on behalf our community, and give to others in a way that one person cannot give.

The Gospel shows us how to properly view other ministries of the church (refer to Gospel Methods, Part 1, or the latter portions of this session):

- (1) **Fellowship with God's People**: Looking outside of yourself, a practice of “dying to oneself”, as in a marriage, deep, personal relationships, and in membership to the local community context;
- (2) **Missions (Evangelism, Mercy, Community-Connectedness), and an Outward-faced Church Life**: Seeking to build the Kingdom on earth, in our contexts. This involves the preaching of the Gospel, the deeds of the Gospel (what some may call mercy, or works of service, or diaconal ministry, or missional/incarnational ministry). This is the call of the Great Commission to “go”; a truly missional person will never be satisfied with a “comfortable” community, since they will always be thinking about the Kingdom advancing on the gates of Hades. This leads us to partnerships and the Body of gifts that are present in the church (read further below);
- (3) **Making Disciples**, which is really increasing the Body in number and in faith, as the call of the Great Commission. **This is the servant mission and ministry of the church**, the other part of the Great Commission: to empower and equip others for missional ministry, as well as to partner with others, to increase the church.
- (4) **Partaking in the Sacraments of Gospel Grace: baptism and communion**, as instituted elements of the covenant relationship we have with the Father. If you refer back to Gospel Dynamics, Part 3, there is a section that explains the biblical theological importance of the Sacraments. Both are signs and seals of being in God's family, His covenant-Kingdom.

In short, baptism is the church's sign and seal of covenant relationship, much like circumcision was in the Old Testament. Gentiles in the old order were baptized frequently for cleansing, as a taste of the covenant life that Jews enjoyed. However, when John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, he called even the Jews to be baptized (though they were ceremonially clean, they needed the true cleansing of the Spirit of the Gospel, who applies Christ's Person and Work to us). **Our sins are washed away, and Christ's righteousness, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, cleanses us.**

What is communion? **Communion is an act of covenant renewal** (refer to Gospel Dynamics, Part 3, for a more thorough perspective); the Old Testament “church”, the people of Israel, were called to renew the covenant as one leader gave way to another (Moses □ Joshua, etc.). Jesus, in the New Testament, performs this same act of teaching His followers to renew the covenant by taking the bread and the cup. Every time we partake in communion, we are acknowledging our sinfulness and helplessness without the power of Jesus' righteousness and blood to cover over our sins; this is our assurance of grace, power, empowerment, and freedom to love others genuinely (to be a part of the community). **We are literally re-enacting the Gospel experience in the context of community when we partake in communion, or experience one another being baptized.**

The Protestant church saw a distinct difference with the Catholic church even in the way the Sacraments were viewed. The Catholic church was Jesus literally in the elements; as a result, the elements are revered; the priest places the elements at the head of the sanctuary, before himself and the mass congregation. In addition, the Catholic church sees power in the elements themselves, regardless who is giving or receiving the elements (since the elements are literally Jesus' body). However, the Protestant church sees the elements as a covenant renewal – that Jesus is present in the church among those at the “table”; thus, these churches tend to place the elements between the pastor and the congregation, as the elements are dispensed, so as to represent a “circle” or a “table” at which all believers who have been baptized can partake. Christians see no power in the elements themselves; we see power in the renewal of the Spirit of Christ that resides within and among us as we partake together, as we respond in the Spirit, to the grace demonstrated to us in Christ. The elements are more than a reminder, or a representation; they are a covenant renewing means of grace given to us by the Savior Himself. We are called to remember that we eat of Jesus' broken body, rather than experiencing the consumption of our own because of our sin, and we drink of Jesus' blood, rather than experiencing the spilling of our own due to sin. We get to personally, and corporately, renew our relationship with the Father frequently in our partaking of the elements.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF A MATURING CHURCH: SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND PARTNERSHIPS IN THE BODY

I mentioned earlier in this session, “The Gospel is a healing, redeeming Gospel that transforms us in the context of one another's sins, sufferings, as well as gifts.” We focused a bit on the presence of God in our church (in defining what the church is) and the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God in our church (why the church is made of sinners and hypocrites). This is precisely how God's power is manifest – in our weakness, God's grace is sufficient, and God's work is revealed. If you truly come to grips with your own spiritual weakness, then this presents a tremendous challenge: how does a church manifest the presence of the Kingdom if it is composed of weak, humble people? We now turn our focus to how we are matured in Christ, through the Body, and in our gifts. As individuals, we may be gifted, but these gifts are incomplete, almost useless, without the partnerships that God has called us to (this has tremendous implications for our ministry).

Ephesians 4:11-16 provides insight into God's sovereign administration of grace through the life of the church; in essence, the passage teaches us the foundations of what it means to grow in union *with* the body of Christ, as well as grow in union *as* the body of Christ:

¹¹It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The Apostle Paul preaches for the growth and maturity of the church in Ephesus, in their knowledge of the Gospel, of the incredible richness that God's people had received through the divine transaction of Christ's righteousness for our sins. The foundations of such maturity can be found in Paul's treatise about the maturing church in Ephesians 4:11-16. There are three things that we can personalize in this lesson about the church; if we personalize these things into our church, then we will mature as a local church in the Gospel that we received. The three truths are as follows: (1) the what, (2) the why, and (3) the how. *What* are the foundations of a maturing church? *Why* do we need these foundations? *How* can we receive this foundation?

WHAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF A MATURING CHURCH? EQUIPPING AND EXECUTION

The Apostle Paul teaches that the foundations of a maturing church consist of people, with varied calling and gifts. One set of gifts **performs works of service**, and the other set of gifts **prepares God's people for works of service**: "It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service (4:11-12)." As Christians, we are called to both perform works of service, and to prepare one another for works of service, to renew the city until the coming of the city of God. However, although we are called to contribute to both, the Lord has given members in our body specific gifts that

- (a) lead us to particular growth-areas within the church (because of our strengths), **and**
- (b) force us to partner with those entirely different from us (because of our weaknesses).

Paul teaches that the foundation of a maturing church lies within this understanding: **some** [are called] to be apostles, **some** to be prophets, **some** to be evangelists, and **some** to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare** God's people for works of service, the renewal of the cultural "centers" of the world, the city (Ephesus was the cultural "center", or hub, of the Roman Empire). In other words, as we are all called to works of service to renew the city, the cultural "center" of the world, such as the City of Philadelphia, we would be called to particular means of preparing one another for such works.

The particular means by which we prepare one another are as such: apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral, and teaching.⁶ The *apostolic* elder is one who is a vision-setter. The *prophetic* elder is one who is able to convey strategies to align with the vision of the church (one who can "correct", or align, the body with the vision/purpose of the body). The *evangelist* is one who has a passion to bring new people into the body, which has always been the fuel that invigorates the body (keeps it fresh and vibrant, since new believers always bring vitality to the body). One with a *pastoral* quality desires to shepherd and care for the body. Finally, one with a *teaching* gift desires to draw the Gospel out of each passage in Scripture, to make Christ central to the body, so that the body can be renewed in Him.

Therefore, on one hand, Paul preaches that a maturing church is an active church in the city and its surrounding areas (deeds, mercy, and service ministry), equipped for works of service, and training one another for works of service. This may sound a lot like

⁶ Mark Sarracino, CityNet Leadership Development Program, "Orientation to Ministry 1 and II," Fall, 2005.

militant religiosity or the formation of a conservative social regime, building skills so that Christians can advance today's society. However, Paul isn't trying to convince us to become polemic about our faith, people who have a 'we-versus-them' mentality (acting as moral superiors to the liberalism of our city).

Why do we know this? **Paul uses the word love as the underlying basis by which we do our work.** If Paul was preaching religion, he would teach about service, duty, or our performance as ends in themselves; however, Paul doesn't do that. Instead, he teaches that the church must speak "the truth **in love**," and "build itself up **in love**, as each part does its work (4:15-16)." In essence, the maturity of Jesus' church aligns itself with its advance of Gospel truth, counter-intuitive to "every wind of teaching and...the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (4:14-15)," and the growth and strengthening of the church as its objectives, with love as the underlying motivation ("in love") in which Jesus' church will mature, as Jesus is love. Therefore, the body of Christ, more than any other corporate group, is to **embody** this environment of grace (in the way it lives out forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy-restoration, love, faithfulness, generosity, and kindness). It is in this community where we manifest Christ's love and goodness; therefore, without the body of Christ, we actually experience less grace.

It is evident that Paul is teaching about something utterly different than religion. Religion, or fundamentalism, or legalism teaches this: "I obey in order to be loved." In essence, duty, obedience, and works (what we are being prepared for according to this text) would all be means by which one earns the acceptance of God; religion is an outward work to gain inward approval and sense of self-worth. However, the Gospel is inside-out: "I am utterly loved by the Father in Christ; thus, I can genuinely love others, and as a result, genuinely help to build up the church." The Gospel teaches that, since we are already accepted by God, we don't have to exploit our gifts, and exploit others, to feel a sense of self-worth; we can actually use our gifts to look outside of ourselves. Whereas religion teaches us to build up our own name, a people that have been transformed by the truth of the Gospel, we can genuinely love others (not for selfish gain), and live interdependently with others (because they see that, alone, we are prone to error), and subsequently, build up the church with our gifts (advancing others at our own cost).

We can love one another as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (advancing the visible church at one's own cost), while performing works of service in the cultural centers of the world (advancing the Gospel for the sake of the invisible church at the cost of the body); this inevitably calls us to look at our weaknesses and inevitably desire **organic partnership (interdependence)**, a partnership that roots itself in acceptance as primary, and equipping, training, and works as secondary. We can love each other genuinely, with the purpose and agenda to transform one another for the advance of the Gospel in the cultural centers of the world. Such an organic partnership calls one to be interdependent within the body, since together, as a church, the body is made strong, with the Gospel as its motivational center.

What this inherently teaches is obvious: we are to surrender many of the values that we once held as absolute in ourselves. Cultural distinctives must be relinquished, for example, since **the Gospel transcends culture**, and since the cultural centers of the world are composed of diverse groups of people; similarly, we are to abandon traditions that make it difficult for the 'Gentiles' to come to the Lord (we see this teaching in Acts 15). Culture, race, and tradition often segregate diverse people, making one people group feel superior to its neighbors (advancing the 'we-versus-them' mentality). The same goes for gender distinctives and roles in many occasions, as well as age/experience

distinctives. In addition, knowing that we are limited in our gifts as individuals, we must be open to the diverse array of gifts possessed by people utterly different from ourselves, as well as the personalities that embody them. An organic body dynamically embodies all of these gifts as one, without a particular emphasis on a single entity; we are not called to be an 'evangelistic' church, or a 'worship' church, or a 'teaching-centered' church, or a 'shepherding' church, or a 'visioning' church. Rather, we are called to be all of those things as one body, centered around the work of Christ in our people, and for Kingdom renewal of the city. Thus, the foundation of the church is an ever-growing, organic, movement of God's people, working dynamically as an accepted body of Christ, genuinely loving, accepting, and needing one another in the body, for maturity and correction, and for preparation for works of service.

WHY DO WE NEED THE ABOVE FOUNDATIONS? THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S GRACE ON EARTH

We need the above foundation of a mature church because the church is often confronted with "every wind of teaching," and "the cunning and craftiness of men in deceitful scheming (4:14)." We are often "tossed back and forth by the waves," as infants (4:14). Maturity in the midst of the ebb-and-flow of worldly teaching is the following: "unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God...attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (4:13)." An infant is someone who is utterly dependent on someone else for knowledge and fullness; they ask question after question about everything in life. However, crafty teachings and deceitful people can easily lead an infant astray; the wrong truths will not make a person stable and growing in the church, but rather instable and un-rooted (they are tossed back and forth, as a result). Infants, by nature, are unstable; they are, by nature, confused, unknowledgeable, and incapable of doing any work.

What is Paul saying here? As individuals, we are infants. **However, as we organically grow into Christ by growing into one another (speaking truth to correct one another in love, and to build one another up in our gifts), we will experience the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. In other words, the only way we can truly experience the wholeness of the Gospel, and the fullness of Christ's likeness, is to partner with each other into organic growth in the church.** Another way of articulating the above is this: if you feel like you haven't been growing in Christ, and if you feel confused by the tension between worldly values and the values of the Kingdom, then there is a good chance that you haven't been rooted in one another towards organic growth.

What is organic growth? Religion does not promote organic growth; legalists do not wish to partner with people unless they have similar interests, culture, race, ideals, or principles. Thus, they hold tightly to their own values at the cost of intimate growth and transformation; in essence, they never fully experience the whole measure of the fullness of Christ: change that comes through grace. **Hedonists also do not root themselves in organic growth;** hedonists accept everyone regardless of culture, race, or creed, but in such a way that all are equal; this kind of acceptance also does not promote change or transformation, either. Paul is teaching this: in order to build itself up, the church must be composed of people of varying gifts, who accept one another ("in love"), but with the agenda for mutual change and transformation, so that as a church, the whole measure of the fullness of Christ can be manifest. **As we experience the true meaning of grace, redemption, genuine love, sacrificial service, etc., we will be able to live counter-intuitively in a world that values building up the self at the cost of others, rather than building up the church at the cost of selfish ambition** (church advancement at my cost). As we practice such building up, we will be able to prepare people to renew the

city (city advancement at the cost of the church), while anchored on truth (not being tossed about by worldly values and beliefs that are counter to the truths of the Gospel).

HOW CAN WE HAVE THIS FOUNDATION IN OUR CHURCH? THE GOSPEL

It can be concluded so far that a church is an organic unit, a body, as opposed to a mere collection of individuals with similar interests or goals. Within the body, members serve one another, in various ways and forms, to prepare one another for works of service; it is in these ministries of preparation and deeds that we experience the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Our words of love, and works of love (collectively defined as acceptance with the agenda to strengthen, build, and align one another unto maturity), build up the church so that the body will not ebb-and-flow with the tides of theological (worldly) controversy, nor flawed practical understanding of the Gospel (religiosity or hedonism).

Do sheer will, determination, commitment, and human reason lead us to these conclusions? Absolutely not, according to Paul; after all, he was writing to a church in a city of wide cultural dimensions, where diverse array of people groups (cultural Jews and diverse Gentiles in a port city with wide dimensions) were coming to the Lord. The Apostle Paul wrote of the divine richness that we, as Christians, receive as a result of the Gospel, which, when personalized among its members, will drive a church to maturity. This type of maturity is not natural, since in our sinfulness, man is always driven to set selfish agendas and accomplish them. In fact, only the irony of the Gospel can lead such a diverse group of people to reside as members of one body.

What is the Gospel? Paul teaches the following: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." It appears here, that Paul is calling the church to look upon Jesus as a moral example, as a model for sacrifice for one another in the church. However, that is contrary to everything Paul ever wrote in his epistles. Paul isn't calling us to look at Jesus as our example, but to look upon Jesus as our Substitute (Savior/Messiah). Paul doesn't refer to Jesus, our "Head, that is, leader," or Jesus, our "Head, that is, Rabbi." Rather, the Apostle Paul refers to Jesus, our "Head, that is, Christ." Our Head is the Messiah, the centerpiece of God's redemptive plan, who was called into the world from eternity to die. **Who is Jesus, and how did He accomplish the building up of His church?** In John 2, Jesus cleared the outer courts of the temple in Jerusalem (incidentally where the Gentiles were permitted) of all of the selfish distractions of the moneychangers and sacrifices. When He was asked, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days (John 2:18-19)." From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus' mission was to be torn down and destroyed, so that the church would grow in Him, in His death, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, growing and building itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16), as branches are attached to the vine (John 15).

Jesus died, so that when He died, His chosen people died in Him; that is, on the cross, our sins were placed on Jesus, and His righteousness was imputed to us. The Sacraments in the church are mandated for this purpose: to enable the renewal of the covenant in Jesus, and not in ourselves. It's either our body broken, or Christ's. It's either our blood spilt, or Christ's. The Gospel teaches us that Jesus sacrificed His body, in love, for our sakes, so that we can live in Him, and thus, become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). If we were to look at Jesus as a mere teacher, we would regard and

define each other by our sins and weaknesses (our failures to live up to His teachings to attain maturity by our will). There would be no purpose in submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (the following chapter in Ephesians). Our sins would be greater than we could ever imagine, and there would be no 'good news' to bind us together. Our partnerships would be selfish relationships that last only as long as our tolerance, will, loyalties, and performance last.

However, when we look to Jesus as our Substitute, that He was torn down so that the church could be built up, that He became sin, so that we could become the righteousness of God, that He was broken, so that we could become a whole body, then we, in faith, can trust that God is actively working in His body, and continually redeeming His body through the church. The cross assures us of this. Rather than looking at others' flaws, we would be able to look more closely at our own, since Jesus removed our fear of losing acceptance; He bore our sins in love.

This is incredibly powerful for the church: we can see one another as flawed, but accepted. We can see ourselves as flawed, but redeemed, not just by ourselves, but into a community, a body. We are plugged into the organic growth of the church. **Our flaws make it evident to us that we cannot sustain growth on our own; we must remain in the vine (John 15), and thus, we are in the body.** Our sins and weaknesses reveal our need for one another, to partner with one another, not just for deeds of service, but for training, for correction, for aligning ourselves in the Headship of Christ. The only way that organic growth is possible is if we see our need for more of Jesus, not just for salvation, but for sanctification, and for good deeds of genuine love. When Jesus is our Substitute, we can die to ourselves so as to grow into the Head; our lives are in Christ, and thus, our union in Him leads us to union with the body for continual growth, joy, transformation, and works of service (the renewal of our world as God had commissioned us).

GENERAL APPLICATION OF THE EPHESIANS MODEL OF UNION WITH THE BODY

Practically speaking, Ephesians 4:11-16 challenges us in multiple ways. We have to consider **the calling of the Lord to serve** as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers; we must use our gifts to serve one another, but also partner with those whom are strong in areas where we are weak. This calls for us to repent of our self-sufficiency and agenda-driven lives so that we become members of the body, and die to our desire to serve as the Head. Our mindset of the church, and its mission, must be aligned to the Head (we are not the Head).

Second, we are called to **accept one another in love**, but with the agenda for mutual growth, maturity, transformation, and sanctification. The Gospel transcends culture, race, ethnicity, socio-economic strata, educational background, and family pedigree, etc. In our cultural centers, the city, we must desire to accept others who are very different from ourselves. We must not place conditions on people to 'live up' to standards in order for us to partner with them (religiosity), and we must not just accept all ideologies and theologies (irreligiosity, which leads us to live as "infants"), but must accept each other with the agenda to align one another to the Head through repentance and faith. This makes the church an advancing and accepting figure in an age of tolerance, yet does not compromise its values.

Third, we must acknowledge that **we are not just called for preparing and equipping, or just works of service; we are called to both.** We must engage in supporting the work of the elders, as well as supporting diaconal ministries in the church.

Our mercy ministries and small groups, our Christian education and finance committees, etc., must be seen as equally valuable ministries in the church, rather than a system of blue-and-white-collar duties. As an **organic community**, each entity feeds into the life of the church.

Individually, one has certain gifts. But as each one is given a gift for the sanctification of others in the body, together we form a more perfect “union with Christ.” **Together as the body of Christ are we fully equipped to be like Christ.** It should not be a surprise that when we do not participate fully in the body of Christ, we will see less of our sinfulness (for sinfulness is made apparent in relationships and community as they reflect the reality of our sin back to ourselves). Since character and values are learned and grown in community with others, individuals not participating in community will tend to be more immature, not as humble (thinking that one is fine by oneself), not prone to kindness, gentleness, etc. So many of these character values are learned while in relationship to a larger community.

A GOSPEL LESSON: CASE STUDY REGARDING UNION WITH THE BODY: FROM ACTS 18:18-28

What’s God calling us to do as Christians in the world? Look throughout the text, and you’ll see common themes: for example, in 18:18, it says that Paul stayed in Corinth before being accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila on route to Ephesus; second, in verse 19, he, meaning, most likely Paul, “had his hair cut off...because of a vow he had taken.” Finally, Paul lived as a resident wherever he was, but never stayed too long in any given place.

What does this mean? **First, it means we need to reside in the community.** Second, because of the many dimensions and faces we encounter in the world, it means **we need to be sensitive toward the people we serve**; we’re not sure exactly what type of vow this passage is referring to, but we know this: In 18:19, Paul was probably trying to connect to the community he was about to face. Third, it means **we connect with the world [the cities of the world], but without buying into its values, or in other words, we live as resident aliens of the world, and finally, we must partner with others to form an alternate community in the world. Another way of saying that is this: we are called to be attached to others, remain unattached to their values, and be attached to one another.**

Now, what do I mean by that? Here’s what I mean: **it takes a certain kind of person to be able to embrace life in the world, without being attached to its demands. Scripture teaches that you can’t do this alone; you need partners.** In the text, what do you see? Verse 18, Paul is in Corinth, and he resides there, but then he leaves. Verse 19, they arrive at Ephesus, and Paul cuts his hair most likely to be sensitive to the religious community (to “reason with the Jews”), but in verses 20-21, “When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined...he set sail from Ephesus.” Verse 22, “He landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.” Verse 23, “He spent some time in Antioch, then Paul set out from there and traveled...” Verse 24, we see the arrival of another missionary Apollos, meeting up with Priscilla and Aquila. In each case, relationships are built, but the relationships are not the end goal; there’s more to the mission.

What is the concept of a resident alien? I live and hope for the prosperity of the city in which I live, but I don’t hold my citizenship to that city. I love the world, I am sensitive to its needs, but it does not have full control over me. I am there intentionally, living and

residing there, but I am driven by other values, ultimately causing me to partner with people of have gifts that I do not have, for the sake of the kingdom values I uphold (the mission of Gospel advancement, the demonstration of love and truth in a world that does not know God).

Look at 18:24-26: We see this with Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos. Look at their character. Apollos was a very passionate, bold, and gifted teacher of the Word. He was full of truth. However, what does the text say? "He knew only the baptism of John." In essence, Apollos taught about Jesus accurately, but his knowledge was incomplete.

Priscilla and Aquila, on the other hand, were inviting and gracious; they had the warmth of the Gospel. In 18:26, it says, "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately." They saw that Apollos had the gifts to address his audience, but they also noticed that his content, although accurate, was not complete. So they invited him to their home; being called into one's home in the ancient times was a sign of intimacy.

The religious or the fundamentalist says this: "I cannot partner with you unless you accept my ideology." In essence, a fundamentalist is someone who may be bold and passionate about the Word, but is not receptive to correction. Religion causes you to alienate yourself from God's strategy for the world because the people of the world do not hold to the same values as you, but it also alienate you from God's calling for you in the world: to see one another as partners, to become more dependent on the whole of God's work in and for each other.

Another way of saying that is this: religion says, "I can't invite people into my house who share different values or ideologies than me." What is lacking then is a sense of joy in community, a sense of triumph in partnership, and a sense of intimacy, true fellowship, because you refuse to be influenced by one another. There is no joy, because there is no change.

On the other hand, liberals or hedonists ask, "Why can't we all just accept each other?" Can't we just all get along? In essence, liberals are willing to invite *anybody* to their house. But, there is no lasting intimacy here either, because this kind of acceptance does not cost you.

Do you know why love in marriage is beautiful? Because it is the kind of intimacy that develops out of tremendous cost. The Gospel says this, "I will invite you over, and then in relationship, I will show you the way of God more accurately." In other words, the Gospel says, "You are already my partner; you're already accepted; you don't have to do any spiritual dance for me to accept you. However, God has an agenda for us; we are to be receptive to one another." None of us have been built worthy; we've all been called by grace. At the same time, we all have different gifts that the Spirit uses. The Gospel says, you are flawed in your thinking, but you are accepted, and when we come together, the humility of our partnership will enable correction and transformation, all in the context of a meal, in each other's homes, in intimacy as resident aliens in community.

Look at Priscilla and Aquila, plugged into their community as great hosts: they were knowledgeable enough to enlighten Apollos, but they were humble, gentle, inviting, welcoming, and accepting. They shared the warmth of the Gospel. Look at Apollos, plugged into his community as a teacher: passionate, but humble; educated, but teachable; bold, but receptive. He shared the depth and truth of the Gospel.

When we come together to form a community in the Gospel, we become an alternate community, demonstrating love and truth to each other. This calls for us to die to our agendas so that we can be more teachable, so that we do not buy into the values of the world, but at the same time can be influenced by those we partner with. Now, how in the world can a stubborn man like me do that?

How can we do this? [ACTS 18:20-21, 25-26]

We have to see Jesus: we have to see Him accurately, and we have to see Him completely, fully. It says in the passage in 18:25 that Apollos “taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.” In other words, what Apollos knew about Jesus was accurate, but his knowledge wasn’t complete; Priscilla and Aquila had to explain the way of God more accurately (18:26).

Who is Jesus, and what was His mission? We need to understand this more completely, in order to grasp God’s strategy and calling. Jesus loved the world, *and* He also preached against it. He acknowledged its evil, but He still had tremendous compassion on it.

On the one hand, Jesus preached against the world, and showed sharp dissonance between Himself and the world. In John 7, Jesus’ brothers, after witnessing the miracle of the bread (feeding the 5000), tried to convince Jesus to go to the city, into Judea to display His gift, to make a name for Himself. Jesus replied, in 7:7, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil.” **On the other hand, Jesus also had tremendous compassion for the world [over the city].** In Luke 19, what do you see? Starting with verse 41: “As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.’”

You see, if you focus on Jesus as a moral leader, you will never be able to reconcile the two; you’ll ultimately find yourself out of balance, and you’ll side with one part of Jesus, or the other. You’ll either hate the world, and justify why you don’t need to partner with others, at the cost of intimate relationship and partnership, OR you’ll love the world as an end in itself, and substantiate your desires, and will form partnerships but they will never change you.

You have to see the full Jesus by looking at the whole of His mission. Well, who is Jesus? Jesus emptied Himself of all His glory, and when He was born, He was born in weakness. Beginning with His birth, Jesus taught what it means to die to Himself. The baptism of John was preparatory; but in the beginning of Christ’s ministry, what do we see? He is being baptized by John. He was perfect. He had no sin. He was the greatest man that ever walked on the face of the earth. He came and lived the life that we should live, that we couldn’t live. He is the only man who ever deserved the honor of God, but why did He need cleansing? His baptism marked the beginning of the end of His life; He was preparing to die to Himself.

He preached love for the world and preached against the world at the same time, and when He finally entered into the city, He wound up carrying His own cross out of the city, and was crucified. John 1:11, “He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.” On the cross, Jesus was not only rejected by men and cast out of the earthly city, but He was also cast out of the cosmic city. “My God, My God, why have you...” He was completely alienated from the heavenly city. Why?

Jesus was cast out of the great worldly city, and the great heavenly city, so that we could be ushered in. He was cast out by the Father, so we could be brought back to the Father. On the cross, Jesus took upon our flaws, our sin, like a cosmic sponge, and transferred His righteousness to us. Jesus was cast out like a criminal. What type of people do you let into your city? Your homes? What type of people do you invite? Criminals are not invited into the city; they are not invited into your home. Jesus became sin, He became a criminal so that we can become the righteousness of God, 2 Cor. 5:21.

The Gospel is this: “I am made clean in Jesus, who became unclean on my behalf.” We who are immersed in a sea of sin, can emerge clean. On the cross, Jesus didn’t just immerse himself in our sea of sin, however, He was drowned in it. Why? For the world. So that His heart and mission for the world could be accomplished; He did it, not by accepting people without truth, and not by correcting it without love. He was cast out completely, so that we could be accepted completely, just as we are.

When you trust in this, when you believe this, you will have a fuller understanding of Jesus, and you can get rid of your agenda, abandon, loosen your grip on your agenda for your life. You no longer have to exploit the world to gain a sense of self-worth. People are no longer a means for you to increase your feeling of being right. You are already acceptable, clean, and righteous. This becomes very powerful in your life. On the one hand, you can now enter into the commercial, cultural, and religious hubs and love the people there without being influenced because you already have what everyone in the world is seeking: a sense of worth.

You can actually let go of your driven-ness for money, degrees, sex, religiosity, culture, and plug yourself into the whole of the world. In other words, you can love it genuinely. Then, you then have all the power within to grasp God’s strategy and God’s calling for you: to empty yourself for the world, and also partner with others in the world who embrace the world, people who may be wholly different than yourself.

In other words, for those of us who are like Apollos, who love truth, we can become gracious, gentle, more inviting, more relational, because we have fuller truth! For those of us who are accepting and gentle, we can become more bold, and use that welcoming heart to develop relationships with the agenda to transform and correct. Why? Because we have experienced a greater warmth, one that drives out fear.

INWARD APPLICATION: OBEDIENCE, AND COMMUNITY

Acts 18: Think about your complaints toward one another; most of our complaints are based on personal agendas: our way regarding how things should be done in the world. **What results is there are lots of Apollos-types out there who do not understand the complete truth about Jesus;** they focus on the truth, but lack intimacy. **There are also lots of Priscilla and Aquila-types who are warm, but lack Gospel truth;** they also lack true intimacy, an intimacy that changes. What do they both need? A Gospel that is not a product of their agendas, but a Gospel that is utterly unchanging, that they themselves have to align with.

When you see how Jesus, who had no needs, completely emptied himself and submitted to the laws of nature and of man, what was He doing? He came, He resided, He got plugged in, and He loved a city that would never love Him back, to the point where he was ultimately kicked out within His own community. He emptied Himself so much, and He became so unlike Himself, he was forsaken by His most intimate community, His Father, so that we could become members of that community.

Verse 18+, Paul stayed in Corinth...he stayed in Ephesus...he left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus...get plugged in. **Don't just visit, reside**. Seek the growth and prosperity of the city; pray for the peace of the city. Work to renew it; plant gardens. Build houses. **Enjoy and embrace the city and its people**. Teach your children to love the city.

Verse 19, Second, Paul made vows to the people he was with; this means he not only got plugged in, **but he got close**. He was able to make promises with people, enough for it to change parts of his lifestyle, as a part of being sensitive.

Third, **actively seek partnerships with people who are strong in areas where you are weak**, and serving with them; **this is what small groups are**, as well as diaconal ministry. If you think about it, **nothing gets you more plugged in, and intimate, in partnership, like diaconal ministry**.

Fourth, we are called to be the Paul's, Priscillas, Aquilas, and Apollos of the world. We can reside in the city, and impact the city with both truth *and* love. **Practice receiving criticism** by **taking in** the person who is criticizing you; go to their home, and befriend them. Understand them. Even criticism that you are sure is not warranted. Receive it, and consider it. It's not natural. **Practice giving criticism, but not without hospitality and invitation for deeper, meaningful relationship first**. Notice P&A invited Apollos over first, then corrected him. Develop a relationship closely, but do not forget the agenda – growing in a more complete knowledge of Jesus.

APPENDIX: "ONE ANOTHERING" PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT⁷

1. Be at peace with each other (Mark 9:50).
2. Wash one another's feet (John 13:14).
3. Love one another...(John 13:34).
4. Love one another (John 13:34).
5. Love one another (John 13:35).
6. Love each other (John 15:12).
7. Love each other (John 15:17).
8. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12: 10).
9. ...Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10).
10. Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16).
11. Love one another (Romans 13:8).
12. ...Stop passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13).
13. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you...(Romans 15:7).
14. ...Instruct one another (Romans 15:14).
15. Greet one another with a holy kiss...(Romans 16:16).
16. When you come together to eat, wait for each other (I Corinthians 11:33).
17. ...Have equal concern for each other (I Corinthians 12:25).
18. ...Greet one another with a holy kiss (I Corinthians 16:20).
19. Greet one another with a holy kiss (II Corinthians 13:12).
20. ...Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13).
21. If you keep on biting and devouring each other...you will be destroyed by each other (Galatians 5:15).
22. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:26).

⁷ Refer to Simon Schrock's *One Anothering*.

23. Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2).
24. ...Be patient, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2).
25. Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32).
26. ...Forgiving each other (Ephesians 4:32).
27. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).
28. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).
29. ...In humility consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2:3).
30. Do not lie to each other (Colossians 3:9).
31. Bear with each other (Colossians 3:13).
32. ...Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another (Colossians 3:13).
33. Teach. . .one another (Colossians 3:16).
34. Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16).
35. Make your love increase and overflow for each other (I Thessalonians 3:12).
36. Love each other (I Thessalonians 4:9).
37. Encourage each other...(I Thessalonians 4:18).
38. Encourage one another...(I Thessalonians 5:11).
39. Build each other up...(I Thessalonians 5:11).
40. Encourage one another daily...(Hebrews 3:13).
41. Spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).
42. Encourage one another (Hebrews 10:25).
43. Do not slander one another (James 4:11).
44. Don't grumble against each other (James 5:9).
45. Confess your sins to each other (James 5:16).
46. Pray for each other (James 5:16).
47. Love one another deeply, from the heart (I Peter 1:22).
48. Live in harmony with one another (I Peter 3:8).
49. Love each other deeply...(I Peter 4:8).
50. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (I Peter 4:9).
51. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others...(I Peter 4: 10).
52. Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another...(I Peter 5:5).
53. Greet one another with a kiss of love (I Peter 5:14).
54. Love one another (I John 3:11).
55. Love one another (I John 3:23).
56. Love one another (I John 4:7).
57. Love one another (I John 4:11).
58. Love one another (I John 4:12).
59. Love one another (II John 5).