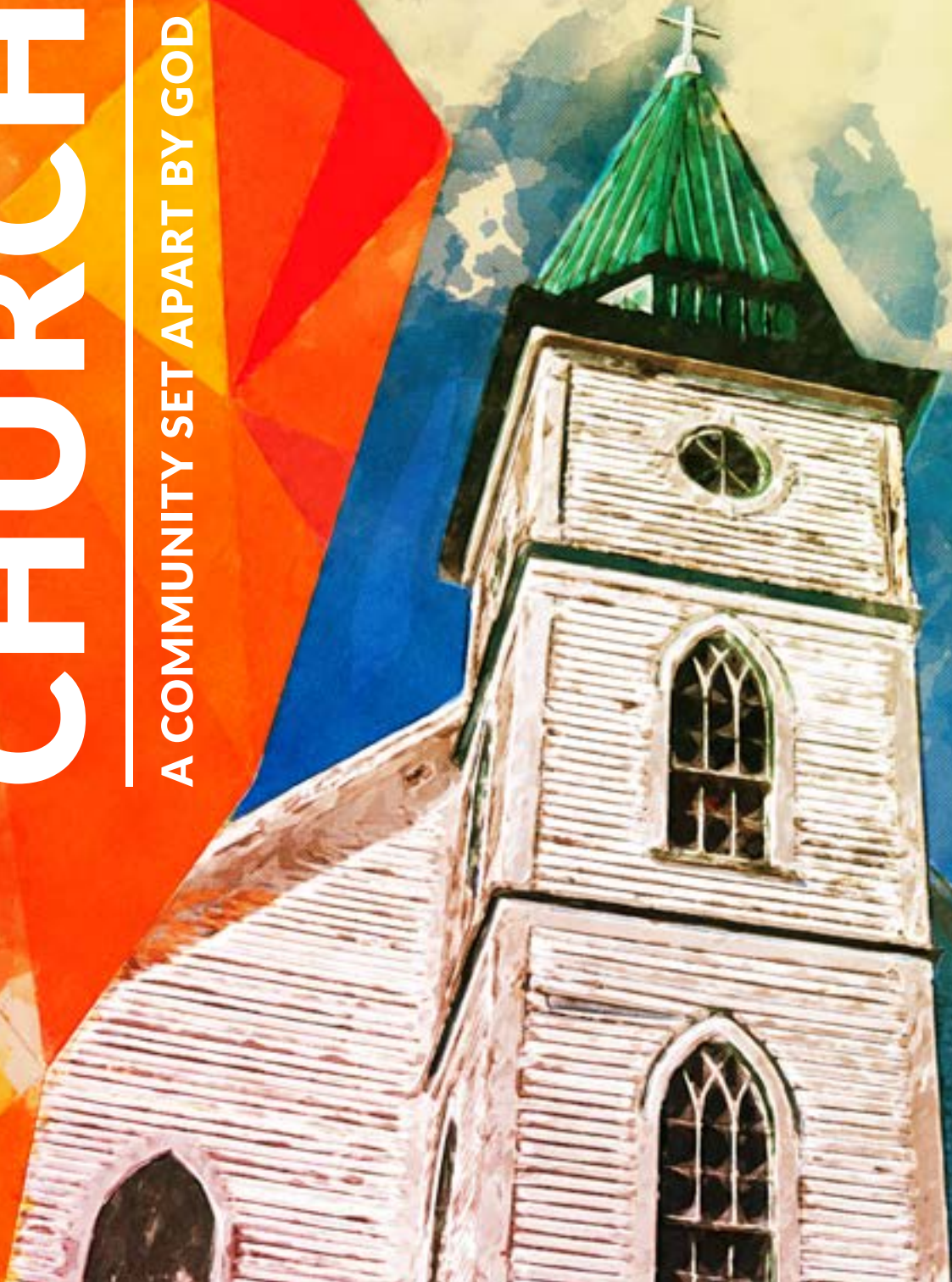


THE CHURCH

A COMMUNITY SET APART BY GOD





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LESSON ONE

WE'RE IN A CHURCH, NOW WHAT?


2 Corinthians 5:11-21

"...All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation..."

Church is just a normal part of our American culture. We're not surprised when we hear church bells ringing on Sunday morning. We're used to making extra room on Easter morning to welcome our bi-annual guests. The fact that American culture at large understands the phrase "church clothes" should tip us off that Americans know how to do church. And with countless denominations to choose from, you can find one at your fingertips that matches your personal preferences on style and involvement.

But in all this abundance of church life, many don't really understand what the church is all about. They acknowledge that church isn't a spectator sport. They understand that they're part of a community. But because church is so common, rarely do we stop and talk about why the church exists and what the church is called to do.

In the following lessons we're going to look at many foundational realities about the church. Some of the details you'll know by heart.



Other information might be things you've always wanted to ask about but never found the right opportunity. Regardless, we don't want to assume anything. We pray that you'll walk away from this study with a better understanding and appreciation for the community in which you are a member.

One of the most beautiful aspects of the church is the diversity of people that it brings together. For instance, in the church, we see a variety of church backgrounds. Some of you have always gone to the same "type" of church. Always been a Baptist. Always an independent nondenominational. Always been reformed. Others in the room may have jumped around a lot, going to a Methodist church for a while, maybe moving to a Lutheran church, and then to an Anglican church. Still more may have come from the Roman Catholic faith before converting to Protestantism. Many haven't grown up in church at all. Your background will affect how you view the church. So the best way to start this discussion is by hearing about the diversity of backgrounds that is in your group. Before launching into the study, then, take time to discuss the questions below.

One of the most beautiful aspects of the church is the diversity of people that it brings together.

QUESTIONS

The header features a blue background on the left side, transitioning into a white background on the right. A stylized globe is visible in the upper right corner, partially obscured by white clouds.

1. What is your church background in general? (Denomination and/or different religions)
2. If it applies, what have you appreciated about participating in different denominations?
3. How do you view your relationship to and involvement in the church?



LESSON TWO

NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Ephesians 2:11-22

*"...Remember that you were at that time
separated from Christ..."*

"Around here there are more steeples than gas stations." I've said this phrase more times than I'd like to admit to describe the church culture in Nashville. If we know one thing, we know how to do church. It's part of our southern heritage. If we do nothing else, we put on our "church clothes" and go to our "assigned" seats every Sunday morning. Many view church as a cultural and religious spectacle that we simply observe rather than a spiritual relationship we're called to participate in.

The meaning and understanding of "church" has largely been misunderstood and underappreciated. What is going on when we take our seats among the saints each Sunday morning? Is there really a need for us to "gather together" with such regularity? Have we lost the true sense of what is actually taking place during church? Over this study, we're going to look at these questions and more. But I believe the best place to start when discussing the church is to answer the question of "why?"

Why "church?" Why does it exist in the first place? Think about it. Historically, people have tried to persecute the church from the beginning to get rid of it. Yet despite all these attempts, it's still here. But why is it that this institution has survived against all odds?

The victory and triumph of the church is found in its author. The church was created

and is upheld by God. The church can't be thwarted because God is actively working in the lives of those whom He chose to be a part of this group. The people of God are constantly being protected and led by our God.

The church can't be thwarted because God is actively working in the lives of those whom He chose to be a part of this group.

It's also important to emphasize the word "chosen." No one stumbles into being a part of the church. This might sound confusing because we meet people all the time who randomly walk into the doors of some unsuspecting church and become a member. But the only way a person comes to be a

part of "The Church" is by God choosing them. "Called to be saints together..." as 1 Corinthians 1:2 puts it. And this choosing wasn't because you made the right steps or because you proved your worth and God found you worthy. Rather, as Paul said earlier in Ephesians, "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:3-4). Long before we could do anything to be worth saving, He determined to adopt us into His family.

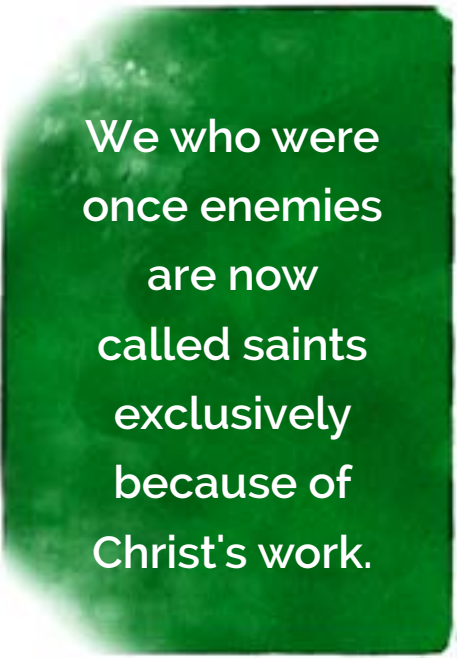
God is choosing for Himself a people—a people that will change the face of the world. A people who are chosen from every tribe, tongue, and nation. A people who are known in this world not for their great strength but for their overwhelming foolishness. Scripture makes it clear: some will see the glory of the Lord and others will remain

blind. Some will be called to be a part of God's divine plan of redemption and others will not. This divine division will have an impact that is felt everywhere and for all time. The People of God will be a blessing to some and a curse to others (Gen. 12:2-3). But regardless, God is the one choosing who is a part of this special group.

Therefore, the people of God have always been about one thing—the glory of God in the Gospel. The only reason God chose anyone is so that He might receive the glory from His saving grace. No one earned his or her spot among the people of God. It's an act of mercy that anyone is numbered among His saints. Faith has always been the means by which redemption was received. Adam had faith, Noah had faith, Abraham had faith, Moses had faith ... you get the picture. That's still true today. Ephesians 2:8-9 declares, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Notice where the power of salvation comes from, in Ephesians 2:11-22. Christ does it all. We were strangers and aliens towards God; we were on the outside looking in. Christ came and accomplished everything necessary for us to be adopted into the family of God. We who were once enemies are now called saints exclusively because of Christ's work.

Here is another interesting question to consider: When did "The Church" (as we know it today) begin? We see that the people of God have existed since the beginning, but does that mean that the church stretches all the way back to Adam or Abraham? You might be wondering why this particular question even matters. What's the difference? But it matters in how we view the commands and promises in the Old Testament directly given to the nation of Israel. Can the church assume that we inherit all that was given to Israel? Is the New



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Testament church a fulfillment of the Old Testament blessings and curses?

Short answer—no. Israel and the Church are different. The New Covenant, which was described in Jeremiah 31:31-40 and Ezekiel 36:22-38, sets apart what was happening with Israel in the Old Testament from the church of the New Testament. The age of the church looks different. God interacts with us through different means. They lived in an age of promises. We see those promises fulfilled by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Something changed with the arrival and fulfillment of Christ's life and sacrifice. As the writer of Hebrews says, "For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God." (Hebrews 7:18-19)

But we're going to get into all of that in the next lesson...

Consider the words of Michael Horton:

The New Testament maintains a consistent witness to the belief that the identity of belonging to God—in other words, the inheritance— was centered around Christ rather than Sinai. This is why the "new covenant" inaugurated by Christ's sacrifice looks back through Jeremiah 31 to David and Abraham. In Hebrews we read that it is not like the old covenant in that it coalesces around a Son rather than a servant in God's house, a better covenant, one enacted on better promises (see Hebrews 8). The writer says of Jeremiah's prophecy, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (8:13 NIV; see also 9:11–23). All attention shifts from Israel, the oath-taking party at Sinai, to Christ, the seed of Abraham and Son of David. The sacrificial system of the old covenant never did take away sins but only reminded worshipers of their transgressions, while the sacrifice of Christ is perfect and takes away sin forever, ushering all worshipers into the Holy of Holies behind the veil that separated the glory of God from the people.¹

QUESTIONS

1. Imagine you have a friend who had never been to church and knew nothing about it. If they ask you, "what is church and why do you go there?" how would you answer?
2. What are the dangers of seeing the church as only a social or cultural organization?
3. Do you see your salvation as a corporate reality? Were you saved into a community and a family or just from your personal issues? Why does this make a difference?

LESSON THREE

DESCRIPTION OF THE CHURCH


1 Peter 2:1-10

"...But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession..."

Throughout Scripture, Christians are described as "strangers and aliens." The apostles and prophets wanted to make sure we knew that we didn't belong to this world. We're different. We live here, but our hearts are set in another land. We're light shining out in darkness. We stand out. And we're definitely not at home.

Why is this? After all, aren't we all born on this earth? We are creatures just like our neighbors who might not be called by God. What has happened that makes us "strangers and aliens" while everyone else is at home in this world? Why are we out of place? Or rather, how did we become out of place?

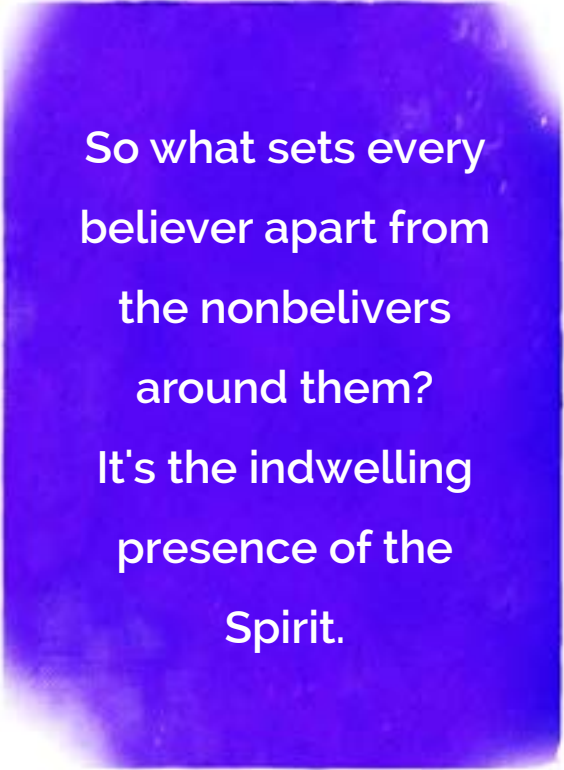
Think again about the New Covenant and Ezekiel 36:25-27. God declared to Ezekiel that with the New Covenant, the Spirit will be given to us. God promised to change our "heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." He promised, "I put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." The Spirit is God's seal, claiming as His heritage those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:11-14). So what sets every believer apart from the nonbelievers around



them? It's the indwelling presence of the Spirit. As one author wrote, "in his Spirit, God comes to make us his and to become ours." ²

Two things are true for everyone who has been chosen by God. First, God has called them and given them the gift of faith. They are regenerated because God decided to supernaturally act in their heart. Second, the Holy Spirit has indwelt them. The indwelling Spirit is something that's hard to see and comprehend. Acts 2:1-4 describes a visible representation of what happens to every believer—albeit not exact since we don't see "tongues of fire" or start speaking in foreign languages. But the Holy Spirit is no less real in our life than it was in theirs.

When I was in school at a Christian Bible college I had a professor that always referred to his class as "saints." "Saints we have a test on Thursday, and I'm praying for your souls..." It caught me off guard. Many words have been used to describe me, but "saint" was never one of them. But once he explained why he called us "saints," I cherished it every time he said it.



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**The Gospel changes
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Each and every class, I needed to be reminded of who I was in Christ. It didn't matter how my day was going, or what grade I just received, or how fearful I was for the coming test, I was always a saint in the eyes of God.

The Gospel changes our description. We are no longer enemies against God. Rather, we are now "saints who have been called out of darkness into His glorious light." Both individually and corporately, we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession."

Saints, next time you're sitting in church, look around. God personally chose each and every believer in your midst. You are sitting among a special community—a community

of saints. Think about that whenever you're frustrated with a particular member of the church. It's easy to say, "Why is this person a part of our community?" or "I wouldn't have picked them to join this church, they should move on already." You may not have chosen them, but God did. God specifically and divinely ordained your community of saints. In the body of Christ, everyone is connected because everyone has been chosen by God.

Moreover, this community doesn't just stop at the walls of our individual churches. The universal church, or the "one holy catholic church" as the Apostles' Creed calls it, is intrinsically linked together. Everyone in the church, regardless of time or place, is a part of the communion of the saints. The unity of believers is more than just the individuals within our local congregation; our membership transcends time as we know it. Hebrews calls this phenomenon the "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1).

Consider these words from Ligonier Ministries:

Paul reveals in 1 Corinthians 6:17 that believers are joined so closely to Christ Jesus that we become "one spirit with him." The idea here is not that we are joined to Jesus in such a way that we lose our identities. Paul is comparing our union with Christ to the one-flesh union that takes place in marriage as part of his critique of illicit sexual relationships in the Corinthian church. In marriage, we retain our individual identities even while we are united as one flesh. A similar thing happens in our union with Christ, although He never conforms to us. Instead, we conform to Him. In fact, our union with Jesus is far deeper than a human marriage, and it produces eternal results. John Calvin comments that Paul speaks of our union with Christ the way he does in 1 Corinthians 6:17 "to show that our connection with Christ is closer than that of a husband and wife, and that the former, accordingly ... must be maintained with the utmost chastity and fidelity."

In any case, our union with Christ means that we share in Christ and, consequently, are united to everyone else who is also united to Christ Jesus our Head. There is a deep, eternal fellowship between all those who believe in the Savior. This fellowship even extends past our time, for we worship alongside the saints of all ages (Heb. 12:22–24). As such, our true family is our Christian family, the community with whom we will dwell with God for all eternity.³

QUESTIONS

1. How do you determine when someone is a part of the universal church?
What (if any) identifying characteristics need to be present?
2. How does knowing that each member of our congregation (including you) was specifically chosen to be here change how you view our church?
3. How can you best interact with friends from other churches and denominations?
How can you discuss differences while still remaining friends?



LESSON FOUR

CALL OF THE CHURCH

Ephesians 4:1-16

"...To equip the saints for the work of ministry..."

I hate to admit it, but the church in America has way more in common with Baskin-Robbins than it should. They each offer 31 flavors to choose from. Walk through the doors of the closest 31 churches, and you'll most likely get a different feel and emphasis from each of them. Some churches emphasize humanitarianism. Others focus on "soul winning." Still more promote theological and doctrinal acumen. There are churches that are proudly seeker-sensitive, and those that are opposed to anything of the sort.

In light of all the different flavors, it's helpful to be reminded where the church came from. What was the original call for Christ's Body? What purpose did God institute for it from the beginning?

When it comes to identifying the purpose of the church, there are two main perspectives put forth. The first holds that the purpose is evangelism. Pointing to passages like the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20, they see evangelism and the propagation of the gospel as the primary emphasis for the local church. The second embraces "equipping the saints" as the primary role. In this view, the growth of the believer should be the main focus of church.

The corporate purpose of the church...is to equip the saints in order to spread the good news.

Obviously both of these are great missions, and we can see both emphasized in Scripture. But what is the proper balance between the two? Should the main service on Sundays be for the unbeliever, therefore emphasizing evangelism, or for the believer, emphasizing equipping?

To be fair, the answer is both. Looking at our passage in Ephesians, we can see Paul describes the purpose as “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the

body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). This is a perfect combination of both evangelism and equipping. The church is equipped in order to better evangelize those we come in contact with. We learn theology and doctrine so that our knowledge can be translated to love for our lost neighbor.

The corporate purpose of the church, regardless of where you might live, what culture you're from, and what point in history you look at, is to equip the saints in order to spread the good news. That is what God called His people to do. Learn about Him and be a light to a dark world.

But notice that the Lord placed structure around His body. Giving specific characteristics to the individual members, the Lord equipped the church to carry out this purpose by establishing various roles—“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers...” (Eph. 4:13).

Another passage that emphasizes the variety of roles in the church is 1 Corinthians 12. There Paul gives a lengthy illustration about the one body with many parts. While each might look different and have a different function, they all participate to bring about the ultimate goal of the one body. A foot doesn't look or function as a hand, but they are both vital parts of the body. As Paul says,

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another." (1 Cor. 12:21-25)

Consider what Edmund Clowney has to say:

Full maturity in Christ brings stability in faith; mature Christians are no longer 'blown here and there by every wind of teaching', but 'speak the truth in love' (Eph. 4:13-15). Christians who have matured in faith have 'knowledge of the son of God' (4:13), and are 'built up in love' (4:16). They build each other up; they do not tear each other down (4:13, 16). Such growth is a process: growing into Christ the head continues until he returns. It is growth together. The church does not aim at producing a few certifiable saints for the media. It seeks the growth of the whole body through the function of 'every supporting ligament'. Every Christian has a part to play in the maturing of Christ's Church.

Yet participation by every Christian does not mean an egalitarianism of gifts. Some gifts are needed more than others; some, to be effective, require community recognition. The very difference in gifts enables the church to grow as an organism. Paul would have the church respect the functional priority of gifts for leadership, but show even greater love and honour to those whose gifts are more humble, recognizing the role of weaker members (1 Cor. 12). After all, we take our livers for granted, but we fuss over our hair so that its minor role will be recognized.⁴

QUESTIONS



1. Why is unity so important to The Body? Unity obviously does not equal uniformity as all its members are very different. How can people who are so different become unified?
2. What talents and gifts has God given you? How can they be or are they being used in the church? Can you serve in areas where you don't feel gifted?
3. In what ways have we/you wrongfully treated spiritual gifts in the church?



LESSON FIVE

PARTICIPATING IN THE CHURCH

Acts 2:42-47

"...And all who believed had all things in common..."

What does the church expect of me? What is the standard for a healthy church member? Does everyone do the same amount? These questions are often asked within the local church, and rightly so. It's important to understand what is expected of you before participating in any organization or group. But if you survey an average group of church members, it would seem that the church is an exception. Many don't know what's expected of them and their fellow members in church.

Now obviously grace needs to be given on the matter, because we didn't decide to join the body of Christ, God chose us instead. But it is necessary to consider the question, what is the standard for a healthy church member? What should our participation look like in our local church?

As we've discussed before, Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost marks the start of the New Testament church. This is when the Holy Spirit indwelt those who believed in Christ, and the message of the Gospel spread like a wildfire. But this scene also gives us the first description of the church. In its infancy, we can see the immediate reaction of those who have been redeemed by Christ. It's helpful to see how the church operated

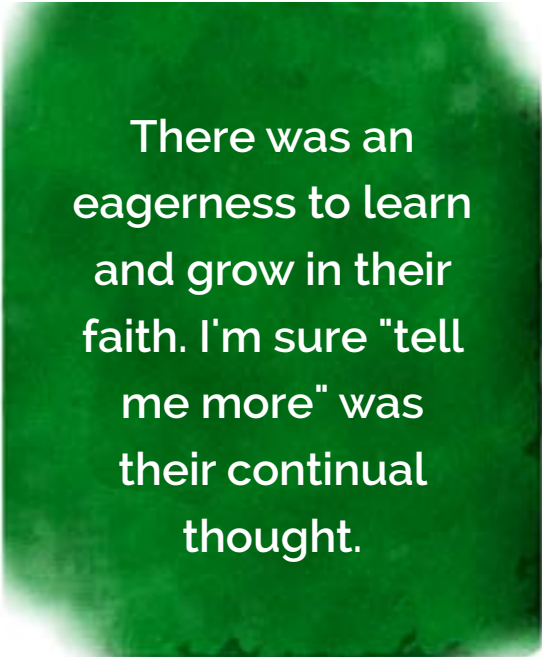
in its simplest form, and so I want to walk through the passage and point out several details.

The **first** description we see is that believers were "devoted to the apostles' teaching." They learned the theology and doctrine of their newly held faith from those who walked with Christ. There was an eagerness to learn and grow in their faith. I'm sure "tell me more" was their continual thought. The stories and information that the disciples shared was a breath of fresh air to all those who believed.

The **second** description is "they devoted themselves to ... the fellowship." From the beginning, the Christian faith is not one to be lived out alone. God is saving a people. They need each other for help, support, encouragement, exhortation, and love. Even before anyone was sent out, the community of the saints was established and protected. They needed each other!

Third, we see "they devoted themselves to ... the breaking of bread." Imagine how sweet this had to be for the disciples. Days earlier they were in the upper room with Christ eating together. They had received the command, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:18-20). Now they were together in the communion of the saints, eating and remembering what our Savior accomplished on our behalf.

Finally, we see that the church "devoted themselves to ... prayer." The disciples had been doing a lot of praying in the days surrounding Pentecost. Acts 1:14 states that as they awaited the promised Holy Spirit, they were in the upper room praying. Now



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we see that even after the gift of the Holy Spirit, with their numbers growing by the thousands, they were still praying. The earliest engagement in prayer by Christians is so strong that it could only be called "devotion." They knew they needed Christ and therefore clung to him in prayer.

The reputation and description we see here of the church is clear and altogether quite simple—love God and love His people. A few verses later we see a great summary of the times: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."

They sold their personal possessions to help others in need. They all sacrificed to help the collective group. You might be thinking, "How could they do such a thing? This level of sacrifice seems extreme and something I would never consider doing. If this is the standard that I'm held to, then I want nothing to do with it."

But this is what Christians are called to do in the church—love God and love our neighbor. For them that meant selling their possessions in order to financially support those in need. Today, the response to loving God and fellow church members might look different, but the heart is still the same.

What those early Christians knew better than ever was "we're in this together." I serve

you and you serve me. We have all been redeemed by Christ, and therefore we get to worship Him together and spread that love indiscriminately through any means available.

So what does it mean to be a healthy church member? It means that you have devotion to God and devotion to His people. You are willing and ready to sacrifice for the greater good. We are God's people and will stand before Him together.

Consider the words of Thabiti Anyabwile:

Not surprisingly, then, a healthy Christian is one who is committed to expressing this kind of love toward other Christians. And the best place for Christians to love this way is in the assembly of God's people called the local church. Is it no wonder then that the author of Hebrews instructs us to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works," and then right away says "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" (Heb. 10:24-25)? Faithful church attendance is associated tightly with stirring each other to love and good deeds. The local church is the place where love is most visibly and compellingly displayed among God's people. It's where the "body of Christ" is most plainly represented in the world. ⁵

QUESTIONS

1. How does our church measure up to the four descriptions given in the passage?
2. What are ways you can help foster these attributes in our church? What are ways you may be hindering them?
3. How do these four descriptions look different in the modern church? How do/should they look the same?
4. Is there such a thing as "good" or "bad" church members?



LESSON SIX

UNITY & DIVERSITY


1 Corinthians 3:1-9, 4:1-7

*"That you may learn by us not to go beyond
what is written..."*

In Galatians 3 Paul declares, "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." Thanks be to God, all have been made one in Christ. Regardless of who you are, where you came from, or what your background was, we are ALL adopted into the singular body of Christ.

This stands opposed to a world that is full of divisions and disagreements. We are constantly positioning ourselves to separate from what we disagree with. Some disagreements are critical while others are not. But regardless, given the chance, we are quick to let our disagreements be known. Sadly, disagreements are not isolated to outside the church only. Just because we have union in Christ doesn't mean that our preferences and differing perspectives cease to exist.

Which leads us to the question, how can we cultivate unity and handle diversity, while properly working through our preferences and conflicting perspectives? One might say, "let's just all agree on what the Bible says and believe that." But let's be honest, that's a little naïve. So many different groups use Bible verses to "prove" opposing



views. Calvinists and Arminians, Premillennialist and Amillennialist, even Catholics and Christians all look to the same 66 books to validate their beliefs. So saying "Let's just believe the Bible" is insufficient to unify the church. On top of that, the Bible is silent on many of our favorite disagreements: political parties, Christian schooling choices, the reach of government, how to handle the environment, etc. There are so many different perspectives that Christians have a passion for arguing for or against. And the Bible seems like it's often stuck in the middle.


Many of these arguments are completely necessary. If we are going to be united in Christ, we need to agree on particularly important aspects. Other disagreements carry a lesser weight, thus it's okay to differ on these positions and still find unity in Christ. Finally, there are some issues that don't matter at all! I know it's hard to believe, but some disagreements aren't worth fighting over and breaking unity. The color of the sanctuary walls might matter to you, but it shouldn't matter enough to reject your fellow brother or sister in Christ.

These types of arguments unfortunately cause so many divisions in the church. Even those who have tasted the grace and mercy of Christ can be blinded into thinking we are better than others saved by Christ because of what we believe. The church has a tendency to be more against each other than they are for each other. We are regularly creating dividing lines and divisions of fellowship. This shouldn't be the case.

What might be missing in your doctrine of the church is the understanding of what's primary, secondary, and tertiary in the church. It's a really helpful exercise. Have you taken the time to determine what fits into these categories? Do you understand where the appropriate dividing lines should be for the church and its people? What should you fight for and what can you "agree to disagree" on while still remaining faithful to Christ?

With this in mind, consider 1 Corinthians 3 & 4. Paul was dealing with a church that loved to point out the divisions among them. Instead of unity, they wanted to stand opposed to each other. "For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human?" (1 Cor. 3:3). What's Paul saying? Divisions are normal ... for mere humans, those not redeemed by Christ. If we're going to be so concerned with standing opposed to each other, we are acting no better than the sinful and broken world.

Paul calls the church to remember the unity they have in Christ. As servants and followers of God, we are united in the Gospel. Look how he concludes his thoughts: "I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another." (1 Cor. 4:6)



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There are some disagreements that matter greatly and Scripture is quick to point those out. Those black and white realities fit into the "primary" category we discussed earlier. Many other disagreements fall within the secondary and tertiary categories and are used to puff ourselves up against one another. The hard work we must do as Christians is to know what falls into each category and live accordingly. Eliminating the perspectives and differing preferences is impossible, but approaching each other in love by focusing on what truly matters (the Gospel) is possible.

Consider the words of Paul:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:9-21)

QUESTIONS

1. What are primary truths that we need to stand our ground for in the church?
How do you decide what goes in that category? What is the criteria?
2. What damage can be done in the church when we miscategorize the issues we are facing?
3. What does it actually look like to put aside our preferences for secondary and tertiary issues and seek unity? Whose responsibility is it to lay down their preferences?



LESSON SEVEN

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Matthew 18:15-20 & 1 Corinthians 5

"...If he listens to you, you have gained your brother..."

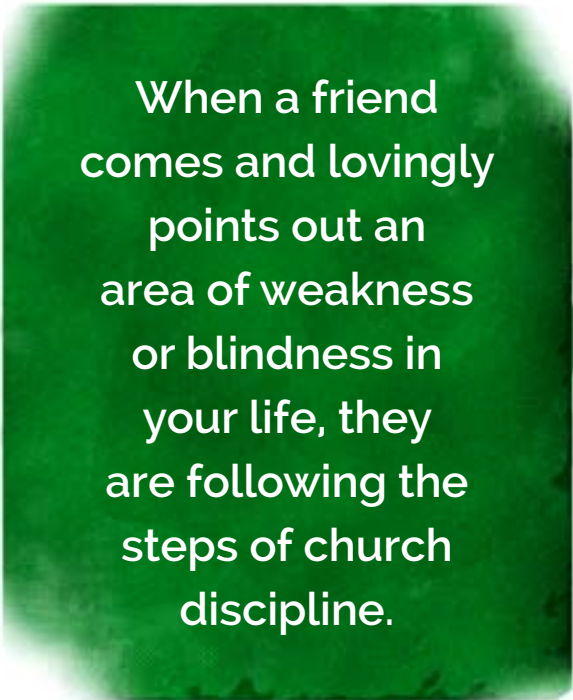
People can be caught off-guard when the subject of church discipline is raised. After emphasizing the grace of the Gospel, it's jolting to hear about people being "put out of the church." It seems opposed to our message. One moment we're gracious and the next we're judgmental. How can church discipline exist in a gospel-centered community? In order to reconcile these two seemingly contrasting ideas, we need to consider several realities of the church and its message.

The church is the gathering and community of God's people. Ephesians 5:7-9 describes us as "children of light." We are representatives of God and His grace. In the family of God, there are clear expectations for us as His children. He tells us what He wants us to do and not to do. Like any good parent, He is training His children how to act as a member of His family. The apostle Peter discusses these expectations in 1 Peter 4. He begins the chapter with, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God" (4:1-2).

When we were "children of darkness," the expectation was for us to act in darkness. We were simply acting according to the family we were in. But now that we've been transferred into the family of God, those expectations have appropriately changed. As Peter continues, "For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does." As a child of God there are actions directly opposed to the Gospel and therefore we are called to no longer commit those actions.

But what should happen when a Christian acts in a way contrary to God's desires? This is our primary focus when we discuss church discipline. What should happen when a person is caught in sin? Matthew 18:15-20 offers a very clear picture of how we should call a person to repentance. There is a clear process that Jesus gave His disciples. First, go privately and plead with the person to repent. If there is no repentance, go with another person and beseech them together to repent. If there is still no change in character or pursuit, tell the church in order for the whole body to call them to repentance. Finally, if even after the whole church implores them to turn and repent from their actions and they do not, treat them like an unbeliever.

A few thoughts on this process:



When a friend comes and lovingly points out an area of weakness or blindness in your life, they are following the steps of church discipline.

First, church discipline happens all the time. When a friend comes and lovingly points out an area of weakness or blindness in your life, they are following the steps of church discipline. This process is designed to provide accountability for the

believer. As I previously stated, in the family of God there are divine expectations for how the children of God are to live and act. Sin is blinding. We need each other's help in order to see areas where we are not living in an honoring way towards our God.

Second, the process of church discipline was given to protect the sinner from the church. Grace and love are required throughout the process. These guidelines provide safety for the one caught in sin and for the counselor. The second person brought in for "step two" is there to provide accountability for all parties. It's also common for church leadership to be brought into the conversation at this point. The Elder board offers great insight and leadership during these difficult times in individual lives. Instead of resting on the insight of just one or two people, the board can draw from the collective wisdom found among them.

Third, church discipline does not end in banishment. It's easy to read, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" and conclude that we're avoiding the person if it reaches this point. But let's consider how Jesus told us to treat those living in darkness. He was a friend to sinners and tax collectors. We are to love those who are blinded by sin. This process does make a public separation between the "sinner" and the church. But it's only so that the sinner and the world are not confused on their status. It's to

...let's consider how Jesus told us to treat those living in darkness. He was a friend to sinners and tax collectors. We are to love those who are blinded by sin.

protect the purity of the church and the gospel. But in no way does this process give us the freedom to hate and scorn the "sinner."

Finally, if you look at Paul's rebuke in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 you can see the hope that exists even if the ultimate decision to "put them out of the church" takes place. Paul declares, "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." This seems rather harsh, does it not? But continue reading and you see the purpose in it all: "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

Consider what Thabiti Anyabwile has to say:

Perhaps nothing is quite as sweet as seeing a person who is deceived and being destroyed by sin break free from sin's merciless grip and discover afresh the freedom and forgiveness of our merciful Savior. As healthy church members endeavoring to strengthen our churches, we can participate in the discipline of the church with joy and faith, knowing that our loving Father graciously and faithfully corrects those whom He loves. It's our delight to see the tracings of God's handiwork displayed in the growth, repentance, and restoration of those who receive the grace of discipline.⁶

QUESTIONS



1. What does repentance look like? Is there a clear-cut evaluation tool we can use to determine where repentance has taken place?
2. How should we treat a person who repents? Should there be a process where their repentance is "proven"?
3. When confronted about sin in our lives, we know we should be receptive and softhearted. Why is this so hard to do? How can we seek to have better responses?
4. Do you regularly participate in friend-to-friend church discipline? If not, what does this indicate about your relationships and involvement with the church?

LESSON EIGHT

BEING A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST


Matthew 28:16-20

“...Go and make disciples...”

“What do you want?” This is the fundamental question for Christian discipleship, and the starting point for anyone following Christ. It’s where Jesus began when He called His first disciples. After hearing John the Baptist proclaim Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” two of John’s disciples started following Jesus—literally started to follow Him around as He walked. Jesus, seeing that they were following Him, stopped and asked, “What are you seeking?” (John 1:38).

The question is surprising. Jesus doesn’t ask “What do you know?” or “What do you believe?” or even, “What can you offer?” Instead, He is concerned with what they want. Our wants and desires are at the core of our being and identity. Proverbs counsels us accordingly; “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). Our wants reverberate from our hearts, the epicenter of the human person.

Generally speaking, discipleship can be defined “as a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.”⁷ Therefore, when Jesus tells His disciples to “come and follow him” it is a command to align their loves and longings



with His. It's a call to want what Christ wants, desire what God desires, hunger and thirst after God, and to place God above every other thing.

We can see the lack of discipleship in the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is loving something more than God, giving something more importance than our Creator. Christian discipleship is the reversal of that idolatry. It's where we are attentive and intentional about our love for God and His glory.

Too often, we approach the subject of discipleship as a purely educational endeavor. We are more concerned with what we know than what we love. The impression we give is that the more we know about God, the better disciple we are. We turn being a disciple for Christ into a largely intellectual project.

What then is the difference between teaching someone how to love Christ, and teaching them "about" Christ? I believe it comes down to what ultimately is most important. When we only focus on the head, we can know all the facts possible for us to know. We can memorize entire books of Scripture. We can read all the theological books that exist and yet still not

...when Jesus tells His disciples to "come and follow him" it is a command to align their loves and longings with His.

believe and love Christ. Some of the greatest biblical scholars, who know all the details, have no love for God. This is because the head is only one part of the equation. (And I dare say, it's the lesser part of the equation.) We cannot think our way into holiness. Our heart needs to be transformed. We follow what we love. We mimic what we love. We sacrifice for what we love. We live for what we love.

The Gospel is always focused on the heart first. Paul speaks to this in Ephesians 3:17-19, "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." The grounding of the gospel's realities took place first and foremost in our hearts.



When the subject of discipleship is discussed in church, the concern of moralism is often brought up. How can we promote discipleship and avoid creating a moralistic society that says, "if you are a child of God you must..."? If discipleship aims at the heart level, the morality required can't simply be surface level. "Want" focuses on motivation. Instead of the "head" compelling us to act, the "heart" is creating the desire. We read, memorize, change, work, struggle, and sacrifice all because we love. But where does this heart-deep desire to love come from? The key lies in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." Our desires change as we realize how much He has loved us. His love powers our love! Why do we strive to be a better disciple? Because we love Him. Why do we love Him? Because He loved us! Why do we struggle and strive to understand hard theological realities? Because we desire to know our Redeemer better. Why do we fight against our sin? Because we want to please our Savior, who loved us and gave Himself up for us (Galatians 2:20).

Consider the words of James K. A. Smith:

Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love. So discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing. Jesus's command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longings with his – to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all...

And yet we often approach discipleship as primarily a didactic endeavor – as if becoming a disciple of Jesus is largely an intellectual project, a matter of acquiring knowledge...

This hit home for me in a tangible way several years ago. While paging through an issue of a noted Christian magazine, I was struck by a full-color advertisement for a Bible verse memory program. At the center of the ad was a man's face, and emblazoned across his forehead was a startling claim: "YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK." That is a very explicit way to state what many of us implicitly assume. In ways that are more "modern" than biblical, we have been taught to assume that human beings are fundamentally thinking things. While we might never have read—or even heard of—seventeenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes, many of us unwittingly share his definition of the essence of the human person as *res cogitans*, a "thinking thing." Like Descartes, we view our bodies as (at best!) extraneous, temporary vehicles for trucking around our souls or "minds," which are where all the real action takes place. In other words, we imagine human beings as giant bobblehead dolls: with humongous heads and itty-bitty, unimportant bodies. It's the mind that we picture as "mission control" of the human person; it's thinking that defines who we are. "You are what you think" is a motto that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick. Ironically, such thinking-thingism assumes that the "heart" of a person is the mind. "I think, therefore I am," Descartes said, and most of our approaches to discipleship end up parroting his idea.⁸

QUESTIONS

1. What do you want in life? It's not a trick question. It's ok to want things; house, car, job, spouse, kids, etc. How do you balance wanting those things and making them idols in your life?
2. What does it look like to be a disciple? What activities have we confused for being a disciple in the modern church?
3. Why do we as humans tend to lean toward moralism and legalistic structures? What is the remedy for this inclination?
4. What is the difference between loving Christ and knowing about Christ? Does this change how you approach church and faith?



LESSON NINE

THE WORSHIP SERVICE

Hebrews 10:19-25

*“...encouraging one another, and all the more
as you see the Day drawing near.”*

The “gathering together” of the Body is a central idea seen throughout the New Testament. Whenever the church is discussed, there is a command to gather together and worship Christ in community. (Heb. 10:24-25; Matt. 18:20; Acts 2:1-47; Eph. 4:1-16; Acts 20:28; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:11; 1 Cor. 14:23-26; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; Eph. 5:19; Gal 6:2, etc.) While Scripture is full of references emphasizing the church service, it’s easy to underestimate the importance of this weekly gathering. Many also misunderstand what is going on during the service and assume it’s not necessary for Christian life. However, there is no substitute for the God-ordained worship service.

Let’s assume for a moment you’ve never been to a Christian worship service. You would understandably have a lot of questions about what’s going on. Why do you have a main gathering once a week? Why do you open in prayer? Why do you sing songs? Why do you take an offering? Why do you listen to a sermon? What is the point of the sermon? Why do you read scripture? Why do you take communion? Does it have to look a particular way?

Many of us never considered these questions because we grew up in church, and these things have always been there, or we just assumed they are functional or pragmatic and not divinely inspired. But each and every one of these aspects of the worship service finds their root in Scripture. God not only desires for us to meet regularly, but

also to follow a specific process when we do. Below, I want to highlight two aspects so that we might better appreciate and understand why we do what we do.

THE WORD OF GOD

Paul's command to Timothy still stands true today, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13). As the people of God, we are to be dedicated to God's word. We need to cling first and foremost to what He says. We live in a world filled with words. Opposing thoughts and notions are all around us. Monday through Saturday we are thrust towards the ideas of mere men. But on Sunday, when the body of Christ is gathered, we all turn our attention to the divine and powerful Word of God. The Bible is ultimately authoritative. It is always true. There is nothing above it. It is what we all need.

The "main event" in the worship service is the sermon. Not because the preacher is the wisest man in the room or because he's the ultimate authority. It is because the sermon is (or should be) the offering and explanation of God's word. The pastor is a vessel used by God to administer the Word to his people. The pastor, who sits under the authority of Scripture himself, points out the truths found in the Bible. Consider another of Paul's exhortations to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

CORPORATE WORSHIP (SINGING)

Again Paul gives the church a command, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (Eph. 5:19). Psalm 150 makes no mistake that we should "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" (Ps. 150:6)

While corporate worship is not isolated to just the singing on Sunday morning, there is an important aspect to this corporate singing. Consider how we teach children their ABCs. We have a song. It's a tune we all know and, even as adults, we catch ourselves singing it to remember where you find "U" in the alphabet. The same is true for why we use songs to memorize and proclaim truths to God. We not only proclaim to God who He is through our songs, but we also sing so we can remember throughout the

week who God is and what He has done. Make no mistake, we don't have to be natural singers to benefit from singing. We remember what we hear, and so we can catch a tune and hum it for hours and hours.

We gather together to sing so we can be reminded that we're not crazy, nor are we alone, in believing and trusting in the finished work of Christ.

There is also a declarative action that happens while singing. There are days when we come to church but we don't want to be there. We are tired, lonely, and maybe even doubting the goodness of God. We think we're all alone and perhaps have made a mistake believing that God is good. But then we stand in the gathering of believers and hear from the lips of our family members in Christ that He is "A Mighty Fortress." Or we hear of "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" is. Or that it's "In Christ Alone" that we have

hope. We are comforted by the thought that "It Is Well" even if it's not. We gather together to sing so we can be reminded that we're not crazy, nor are we alone, in believing and trusting in the finished work of Christ.

One of the reasons people stop coming to church is because they assume their presence doesn't matter; they're insignificant and merely a bystander. "No one will notice if I'm not there." This couldn't be further from the truth. There are no insignificant bystanders in the church. Yes, there are different roles (which we've already talked about in a previous lesson), but everyone is needed. You are a part of the great cloud of witnesses proclaiming the glory of Christ. Your presence encourages the fainthearted, your voice exhorts the unbelieving, and your hands can support the weary. Being a part of the family of God is a precious gift.

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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." (Heb. 10:23-25)

QUESTIONS

1. Can you judge whether a church service was good or bad? What should you be looking for in a “good” worship service?
2. How can thinking about the universality of The Church clarify the necessities of a worship service? Is it wrong to have non-essential, but culturally significant elements as part of our services?
3. There can be a tendency in some churches to shy away from overly emotional worship experiences and in others they lean into it. Why is this? What appropriate role can/should emotion play in a worship service?



LESSON TEN

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

1 Peter 5:1-5

*“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility
toward one another...”*

We are not ashamed to point out that the church is full of sinners. The truth that the entirety of our salvation relies on the work of Christ on our behalf is at the very heart of the gospel. The leadership of the church, pastors included, are no exception to this rule. No mere man stands on a higher plane than another in his total need for the finished work of Christ. In this fellowship of sinner-saints, God has chosen to use sinful people as He has ordered the government of His local churches. (Eph. 4:11-16)

Fortunately for us, God has organized church leadership with no mere man as the Chief Shepherd. Christ Jesus is the Head of the body, the church. Christ is the ultimate authority in the church and all of us must submit in everything to Him. His yoke is easy and His burden is light. His rule is one of love. In this love, He humbled Himself by obeying His Father to the point of a shameful death on the cross, ransoming the church through His own blood. In Him we are held together. He has reconciled us in order to present us holy and blameless and above reproach. (Col. 1:15-23; Eph. 5:22-32)

It is through Scripture and the illumination of the Holy Spirit that the mind of Christ is made known to us. God has revealed the great mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ

through His Word. As the revelation of the mind of Christ, and therefore the mind of God in Christ, Scripture is the whole counsel of God concerning His glory, our salvation, faith and life. God has given Scripture to conform and equip His church in all spiritual matters. (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 2 Tim. 3:14-16)

It's under the authority of Christ and Scripture that mere men are appointed as leaders in the church. Understanding their own weaknesses and shortcomings, elders should humbly place themselves under the authority of Christ first and foremost. Although they are called to exercise authority among the congregation they have been entrusted with, they must not lord it over them. They should strive to be examples, viewing themselves as the chief servants in the church. Their love and care is born out of the love and care Christ has for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood. (1 Pet. 5:1-5; Acts 20:28)

The first deacons were established because the apostles were wearing themselves thin in service to the body. The early church sold property and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. The apostles would then distribute these resources to all who had need. Some were neglected in this daily distribution as the church grew too big for the twelve apostles to keep up. Deacons were selected to pick up the slack. Serving the church in this way wasn't below the apostles, they simply no longer had the time to both preach and serve in this daily distribution. Humility is first exemplified

**Understanding
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foremost.**

A faithful leader serves his congregation in weakness and reverence for the task he has been entrusted with – to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

in Christ, the Head of the church. Being partakers in the finished work of Christ, the apostles also served in humility. We too, elders, deacons, and congregants, should serve one another in humility. (Acts 4:32-35; 6:1-6; Mark 10:42-45)

With sinful men placed in positions of authority, Scripture gives clear qualifications for both elders and deacons to protect the church. Many of the qualifications given are characteristics that should be true of all believers. In many ways, they are a baseline standard, and in that sense should be clearly evident in those called to serve in these offices. Elders must hold firm to the Word of God that they may give instruction in sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it. This responsibility is placed upon them because they are charged with watching over the souls in their care. Elders are not exempt from caring for the physical needs of the church, but their primary focus should be on the spiritual well-being of the congregation. Deacons' primary focus is on the physical needs of the body, but they certainly also care for spiritual needs. The care they are entrusted with also requires them to hold fast to the faith, having great confidence in Christ Jesus. The opposite is revealed if they are greedy or dishonest and seeking their own gain. (1 Tim. 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, Heb. 13:17)

Should church leadership fail to submit to the authority of Christ, they wreak havoc in

the unity of the church. Rather than building the body up, their abuse dishonors Christ and injures the congregation. Leaders abuse the congregation by requiring from them a blind or implicit obedience. Paul praised the Bereans for their eagerness in receiving the gospel and examining the Scriptures themselves to see if it was true. He saw himself simply as a messenger, a servant of Christ. Abuse also occurs when leaders go beyond the scope of their office. The authority given to church leadership pertains only to the things contained in or contrary to Scripture. They are to be ministers of the gospel. Church leaders are not put in place to instruct you as to what type of schooling you should use, what sort of diet or healthcare program to follow, who you should vote for, a certain financial system to use, etc. The conscience of the weary saint should not be pricked by any doctrines or commandments of men. A faithful leader serves his congregation in weakness and reverence for the task he has been entrusted with—to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (Acts 17:11; Col. 2:20-23; 1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Consider the words of Jonathan Leeman:

Godly Christian authority recognizes that it's utterly and pathetically dependent upon God the Spirit to give true freedom, true love, and true light to the sinner's eyes. It also recognizes that every law, command, truth claim, or piece of good news that it places before people is, therefore, an imposition upon their fallen flesh, and their flesh will resist it. That's the ubiquitous risk of Christian ministry. The right use of Christian authority, therefore, requires a church or individual to recognize its utter helplessness and futility apart from the Spirit of God. It's an act of faith, not an act of the flesh. Preaching, discipling, and evangelism, which are indeed authoritative actions, must therefore always be performed by faith.⁹

QUESTIONS



1. What does it mean to be submissive to church leadership? Where does their authority in your life begin and end? Do you seek to be submissive or do you grumble and complain about their decisions?
2. Why is it important to have church leadership that both guards AND shepherds the church?
3. Have you ever nominated someone for church leadership? Did you consider the weight of the responsibilities before recommending them?
4. As stated in the lesson, all church leaders are sinful and do not get their leadership perfect. Where is the line between having grace for their inevitable failures and overlooking abuse? How as a congregant should you work through perceived abuses (hint: see Lesson 7 – 1 Timothy 5:19)?

LESSON ELEVEN

BAPTISM

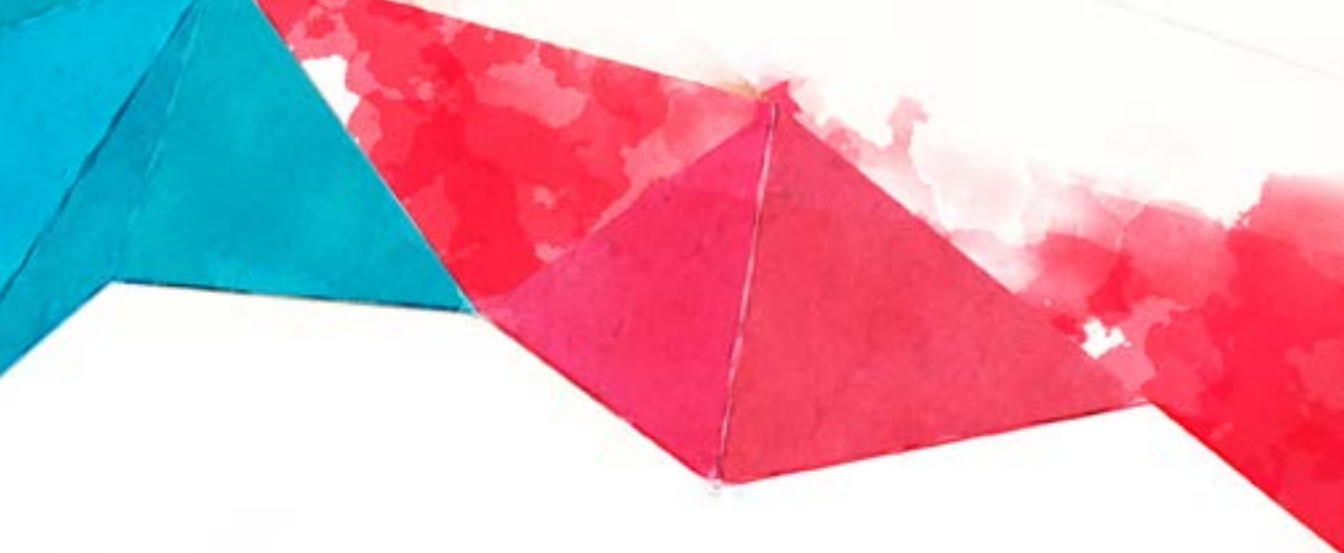
Colossians 2:8-15

"...having been buried with him in baptism..."

What is the purpose of baptism? How should baptism be administered? What are the qualifications of baptism? What role does the observer have in baptism?

From the ministry of John the Baptist stretching all the way into our present context, baptism has been a clear part of our message. The sacrament of baptism was ordained by Christ in Matthew 28:19, "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." It is clear that followers of Christ should undergo this act. While the command for baptism is clear and believed by all protestant denominations, the effect and means of baptism is widely debated.

While most denominations hold to believer's baptism if you come to Christ later in life, it gets tricky for those born into a religious family. Some denominations believe that if a child is born into a believing family, baptism should be administered to the infant. Others believe that only those old enough to believe should undergo baptism. Some believe baptism should be by sprinkling. Others believe it must be administered by submerging. There are debates about whether a person is dunked one time, three times, backwards, forwards, only by a pastor, or by any believer. Some say baptism is the final step of salvation; others



view it as a declaration of your finished regeneration. There are those who see baptism as a necessary step in order to take communion and become a church member, still more see it merely as a suggestion. Needless to say, the subject of baptism is a heavily debated topic in the church. Hopefully the thoughts below can help clear up some of the confusion.

JOHN THE BAPTIST (LUKE 3:1-21)

John the Baptist catches people off guard. Why was he baptizing first? I've been asked this question several times and understand how John can be confusing. First, you need to view John the Baptist as an Old Testament prophet. I know he's technically seen in the first part of the New Testament. But he plays the same role as the rest of the Old Testament prophets, preparing the way for the Lord. Now consider the reason for his baptism. John was "preparing the way of the Lord" (Luke 3:4).

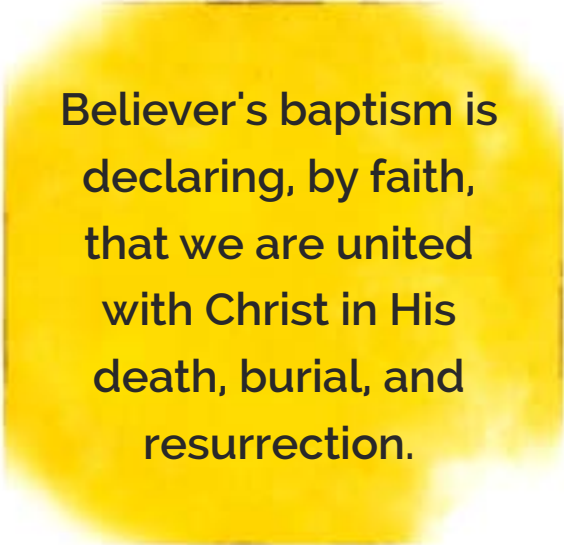
Think back to another Old Testament prophet, Moses. When Moses was given the law in Exodus, ceremonial washing was a prominent part of the process. Whatever came before the Lord had to be washed. The basin sat front and center in the Tabernacle. If you came before the Lord, you had to be cleansed. John the Baptist, in a similar manner to Moses, is preparing the vessels to go before the Lord. Repent and come before Him. Now consider why Jesus was baptized. He wasn't dirty. He was innocent, sinless, pure. But, as the perfect high priest, sacrifice, and mediator that we needed, He fulfilled the process—not for the removal of sins, but to accomplish the Law fully.

Did John the Baptist's baptisms save those whom he dunked? No! Like those who made sacrifices in the Old Testament, those baptized by John rested in something outside of themselves. It was a declaration that they needed to be cleansed and needed something outside of themselves to accomplish it.

OUR BAPTISM

Believer's baptism is declaring, by faith, that we are united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. The physical action of baptism does not cleanse us, any more than one of the millions of animals sacrificed cleansed Israel before the cross. Post cross, we are proclaiming that we needed a cleansing, and it came from Christ.

However, baptism is not merely representative or symbolic. It is living and active. God's presence is felt during the action of baptism. A "visible word" of sorts, in the same vein as preaching. Have you ever sat in a sermon and said to yourself "the Holy Spirit is working at this moment"? It's easy to assume those times are possible only when a pastor is speaking, as if the Holy Spirit can only move when a clergy member is present. But the act of baptism is the "visible word" just as much as the greatest sermon you've ever heard. Regardless of the amount of words said, it is a testimony that Christ has cleansed a life.



Believer's baptism is declaring, by faith, that we are united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

Several places in Scripture use baptism as an analogy of our conversion. Romans 6:1-11 stands out in this way. Paul says, "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." The picture of redemption is seen in the action of submerging and being raised again. It's the need to be cleansed completely (submersion), and the recognition that this cleansing is only found in Christ (resurrection).

Consider this chapter in the 1689 London Baptist Confession:

CHAPTER 29: OF BAPTISM

1. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12; Galatians 3:27; Mark 1:4; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:4)
2. Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance. (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36, 37; Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 18:8)
3. The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, wherein the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 8:38)
4. Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance. (Matthew 3:16; John 3:23)

QUESTIONS

1. If you were asked, "what is the purpose of baptism?" what would you say?
2. Are all the specifics of baptism primary issues (think back to Lesson 6) in the church? What elements are primary? What are secondary/tertiary?
3. Have you ever felt like you didn't really understand the depth of the Gospel when you were baptized? Why is this an incorrect view of baptism? Throughout the book of Acts we see new believers desire to immediately be baptized. What were the qualifications for their baptism? Do you think they fully understood all the depths of the Gospel?



LESSON TWELVE

THE LORD'S TABLE

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

"...Do this in remembrance of me..."

Everyone loves a good dinner party. There is just something about gathering a close group of friends together for food and fellowship that gets at the core of what it means to be human. Not surprisingly, then, dinner parties are actually a common thread throughout Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, we read about people eating to ratify treaties and celebrate covenants. Meals are a God-ordained means to announce that something has happened and is happening.

The fact that our church celebrates the Lord's Supper each week means that God has not stopped operating through meals! It's one of the many gifts God gives us as we journey in this life. As Michael Horton so aptly put it, "If baptism is the bath for the beginning of this journey, the Supper is the table that God spreads in the wilderness along the way."¹⁰ This is the table the Lord prepares for us, where our cups run over (Psalm 23).

Jesus himself instituted the Lord's Supper, in the Upper Room, just hours before His death. He broke the bread and raised the cup and said that they represented His body and His blood (Luke 22:14-23).

But the concept of this meal did not just fall out of the sky. The disciples were sitting

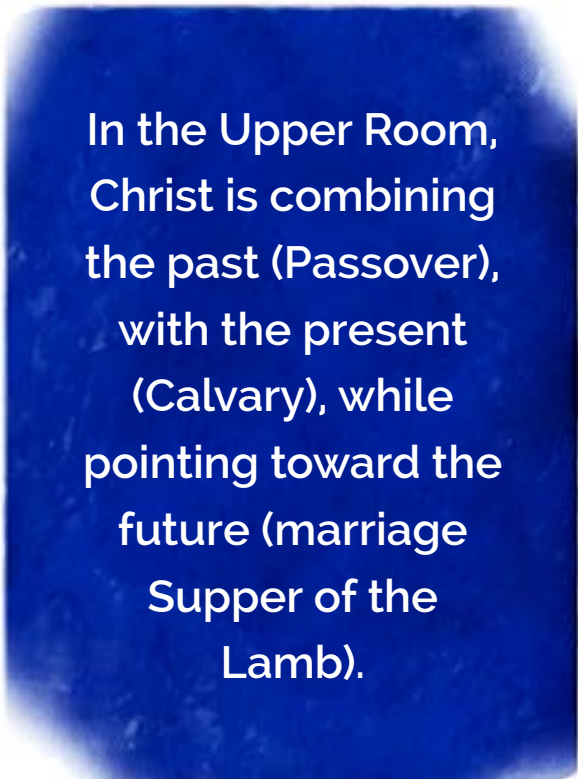
down for their annual Passover meal as they had always done their whole lives. They were remembering the faithfulness of God in saving them from Egypt. But this time something was different. Instead of just looking back, Christ was looking forward.

In the Upper Room, Christ is combining the past (Passover), with the present (Calvary), while pointing toward the future (marriage Supper of the Lamb). Echoing what Christ says in Luke 22, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Let's take a look at the Lord's Supper in terms of what it says of the past, the present, and the future, from our perspective.

THE PAST

As Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper in Luke 22, He tells them to "do this in remembrance of me." But what exactly are we called to remember? Of course, the answer is in the verse: "me" — Jesus. We are called to remember what He was going to do over the next few days — die, be buried, and be raised to life. When we take the Lord's Supper, we first remember what Christ has done for us, outside of us. The bread reminds us that His body was broken for us. The wine reminds us that His blood was shed for us. He didn't die for Himself; He loved us and gave Himself up for us (Galatians 2:20).



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On top of this, Christ tells us that "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." The Lord's Supper reminds us that a new covenant was made. When the Old Covenant was made at Sinai, blood was sprinkled on the people, signifying

that if the covenant was broken, the blood would be on their heads. But that's not how the new covenant would work. The new covenant would be established on the blood of Jesus. He spilt his blood for us.

...through the Supper, God sustains us in this life, building us up in the Spirit and increasing our faith in Christ.

THE PRESENT

Not only do we simply remember the past, but we are also strengthened by the Spirit in the Lord's Supper. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:16, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" The word for participation here is strong; it's the same word often translated "fellowship" in our Bibles. The idea here is that in some way, we are actually united to Christ during the Supper. We are being nourished. This isn't because the bread or wine becomes Christ's actual body or blood, nor is it because Jesus is somehow around the bread and the wine. Rather, by faith, we receive and feed upon Christ Himself through the Spirit (John 6:50-51; note, Jesus was saying this at the time of the Passover). In this way, through the Supper, God sustains us in this life, building us up in the Spirit and increasing our faith in Christ.

THE FUTURE

Lastly, the Lord's Supper has a lot to say about the future. Paul says that whenever we take the Supper, we are proclaiming Jesus' death "until he comes." Jesus says in John 6:53-55, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I WILL RAISE HIM UP ON THE LAST DAY. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." In other words, when we partake in the Lord's Supper, it reminds us of our solid hope of eternal life in Christ. He WILL raise us up on the last day. Not because of who we are, but because Christ is the True Bread of Heaven.

The Supper also points us forward to that great Marriage Supper of the Lamb at the end of times, at the grand opening of the New Creation. In that great celebration, Christ's bride, the universal church, will be adorned in pure white. It will not be her own robes, of course. Those were much too dirty from the millennia of evil deeds she had individually and corporately committed. No, she washed her robes in the blood of the Lamb, the blood of her husband. And now, the Husband who had laid down His life for her was to wed her. From heaven He had come and sought her, purchased her with His own blood, and loved her faithfully to the end even while she herself was faithless and unfaithful. The feast will be as lavish as the grace poured out upon her. So when the Church gathers and feasts at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we are eating the crumbs from that final feast. It is a foretaste of that celebration, and when we participate in it now, it reminds us that we will all have seats at that table, together with those whom Christ has purchased from every tribe, language, people, and nation.

And so, as Isaiah says so well:

Come, everyone who thirsts,

 come to the waters;

and he who has no money,

 come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk,

 without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,

 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,

 and delight yourselves in rich food.

Isaiah 55:1-2

QUESTIONS

1. If you were asked, "What is the purpose of the Lord's Table?" what would you say?
2. Have you misunderstood the purpose of the Lord's Table in the past? In what ways?
3. How does the Lord's Table encourage you in your faith?



END NOTES

- 1 Horton, Michael. *Introducing Covenant Theology*, p. 51.
- 2 Clowney, Edmund. *The Church*, p. 50.
- 3 Ligonier Ministries. *United to Christ and His Body*. (www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/united-to-christ-and-his-body)
- 4 Clowney, Edmund. *The Church*, p. 140-141.
- 5 Anyabwile, Thabiti. *What Is A Healthy Church Member?* p. 67.
- 6 Anyabwile, Thabiti. *What Is A Healthy Church Member?* p. 81.
- 7 Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love: the Spiritual Power of Habit*, p. 2.
- 8 Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love: the Spiritual Power of Habit*, p. 2-3.
- 9 Leeman, Jonathan. *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*, p. 332.
- 10 Horton, Michael. *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, p. 374.



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