

JOHN HENDEE

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP



DON'T WALK ALONE IN THE LIGHT: YOU HAVE A FAMILY

By Gene Rogers

**LIVING IN THE LIGHT WHILE PASSING THROUGH THIS DARKENESS
SERIES: BOOK 5**

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INTRODUCTION

I love the Lord Jesus! And because I do, I love his body, the church. In it I have seen and experienced his visible presence in this world. It has provided me the opportunity not only to see him but to love him in a very real and tangible way. And through it he has loved me in so many physical and personal ways. In the church I have found a caring, giving family that I did not previously have. It has given me mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters to love me. And it has given me a godly wife to share my life with. In it I have found true and lasting friends with whom I have entered into deep, intimate relationships. It has played a big part in developing what Christian character I possess. It has helped develop my spiritual gift and has given me the opportunity to employ it. It has trained me in how to serve Christ more effectively. It has consistently encouraged me, inspired me, challenged me, disciplined me, loved me, and led me in the truth. I love the church!

Of Course It Has Its Shortcomings.

I know that the church is made up of imperfect human beings and because of that it is less than perfect. It's flawed. It can be messy, ambiguous, beset with problems, sprinkled with hypocrites, and infested with half-hearted believers. Such is a family.

I'm aware that the family of God on earth it is made up of imperfect family members.

I realize that though it, is supposed to be the army of God, its members too often act like reserve units that show up on weekends for an occasional drill and lounging in the officers' club instead of combat troops gathering for briefing on battle strategies.

I'm aware that the church's greatest witness to the deity of Christ in the world should be its unity, but, sad to say, she is splintered, fractured, and divided into hundreds of separate groups. And though she is supposed to be the deposit of God's love, her members are too often fighting and warring with one another.

I know that the church is supposed to be a colony of heaven on earth separated from all that is foul and evil, but too often it is so compromised with the evil world about it that there is little to distinguish between the two.

I have to agree with Howard Hendricks who once said, 'The church is like Noah's ark: the stench inside would be unbearable if it wasn't for the storm outside.'

But nevertheless when I compare life in the world with that in the church. I'll take the church any day.

From time to time I'm involved in meetings with people in the world. And when I consider their attitudes, their self-centeredness and self-seeking, their worldly wisdom, their ethics, morality, and language, I have found myself saying, 'This is nothing like the church. With all her faults I'll take the church to this any day.'

I love the church!

Because I love the church I would like to help everyone else come to love her. I believe this could happen by helping others in some way to become better acquainted with her and come to see the important role that she was meant to play in the lives of believers. With that in mind, let's take a look at

the church. Will you join me in such a venture? 'Yes,' you say, 'but which church shall we look at? If indeed there are hundreds of denominations and splinter groups that make up today's church, which one of them could we possibly choose as a pattern? And what criteria would we use in making our choice?'

Well, we could spend a lifetime trying to find answers to those two questions alone. Or, we could bypass all that passes for the church today and re-examine the Biblical model.

For our consideration of the church, let's bypass the divided and denominated church of the twentieth century, which has become saddled with twenty centuries of man-made tradition, and let's return to the original pattern for the church given to us by God in the New Testament.

In doing this I want you to know that I am not so naive as to believe that one person could ever come up with all there is to know about the church revealed in New Testament scripture. But being convinced that most twentieth century believers have barely begun to understand, much less operate on the Biblical pattern, I offer what follows in the hope that a renewed appreciation for the church might be kindled.

I have made every effort to present only what can be supported by scripture and demonstrated in practical experience. My sole motive for making this presentation is to strengthen and build up the church I love in the hope that everyone who reads this could come to have a love and appreciation for the church as I do.

THE NECESSITY OF THE CHURCH

If Christianity didn't have such a thing as the church, necessity would compel that it be invented. When you consider the need believers have for being nurtured as babes in Christ, their need for being shepherded along the way, their need for having friends of like conviction with whom to share life, their need for teachers and role models, and for support and encouragement to keep them stirred and active, then you can begin to see the necessity of the church. The church is designed to meet all these needs and more.

Larry Richards says that 'as Christians, we need a social anchor for an entirely new set of attitudes, values, and behaviors. We need a community in which the Word of God is made flesh, and its authoritative message studied and obeyed together.' Lawrence O. Richards, *A New Face for the Church*, p. 156

In the earlier days of Christianity the church was considered of such importance that you weren't recognized as a Christian unless you were an active part of it. At no time was Christianity ever considered to be a solitary belief system. You will never find anyone in the New Testament attempting to make it on his own apart from the church. The church was never considered to be incidental or optional to the believer. Nor was it ever considered to be an afterthought of God.

From the beginning it was clearly God's plan that after Christ's ascension the church, as the body of Christ, would nurture and develop believers so they would be equipped to continue Christ's ministry on earth until the end of time.

It is an astounding thought to consider that after Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, he sent his Spirit to empower his body, the church, to do even greater things than he did while he was here in person.

The 'Jesus and Me' Problem

In light of this it might be difficult to understand why so many of today's professing believers have such a low view of the church. Some go so far as to say that it isn't essential to their being a Christian. For many, Christianity has become a personal and private matter between Jesus and themselves. Their Christianity has become an exclusive 'Jesus and me' relationship with no need for anyone else to be involved. They have concluded that they are perfectly capable of developing their own private faith system apart from any association with the church. They, therefore, see no purpose for the church or any need for it. They see no need of demonstrating repentance to anyone, or publicly confessing faith in Christ, being baptized, engaging in corporate worship, coming under the discipline of older and wiser leaders, or serving together with others of like faith. They believe that they are perfectly capable of making it on their own without any of these 'encumbrances'. There are great numbers of those who profess to be Christians but have little or nothing to do with the church.

How Did This Happen?

How did so many come to have such disdain for the church? There are a number of contributing factors. Many have their source in the church itself.

Its attempt to improve on the Biblical pattern and its seeking to accommodate the secular society round about it, has caused the church's life and witness to become so diluted with human tradition and secular ways of thinking that for many it has lost its power of appeal.

Its acceptance of the corporate world's concept of leadership has resulted in church leaders acting like professionals who alone are capable of administering the affairs of the church. As a result it has consigned the rest of the members to the limited, non-professional role of supporting the professionals and their programs. This has served to disenfranchise many of its members and stifle their interest and participation in the church.

The scandalous immorality of many of these church professionals, their lust for power and prestige, and their fraudulent use of church funds have soured many others on the church.

In too many instances messages on positive thinking, self-advancement, and current events have superseded the proclamation of the Word of God. This has resulted in the church losing its source of power to create new life and transform it into the image of Christ. Consequently, to many the church has become a lifeless replica of the real thing leaving few people to take it seriously.

The infamous infighting and feuding in the church has led to many splits and divisions and has carved the church up into hundreds of competing denominations. This has caused many to abandon it in disgust.

In many places the Sunday worship assembly has degenerated into a lifeless weekly ritual in which people are vaccinated with meaningless religion that leaves them unchanged. Those yearning for spiritual reality have rejected this as a worthless expenditure of time and effort and have left the 'organized church' in search of a better alternative.

When for several generations people have continually been given a 'Jesus and me' message emphasizing only the 'personal' aspect of Christianity and saying little, if anything, about the church and its importance, how can anyone be expected to attach significant importance to it?

The Church Is Not Altogether Responsible

Although the modern church is partly responsible for its own demise, there have been other contributing factors. Society has recently passed through a period of history that was characterized as the 'me generation' in which all that seemed to matter was the individual. Everyone was focused on living and getting for themselves. And in such a society there was no real place for such a self-giving, corporate idea as the church.

Then too, there has been the growing outcry for the 'separation of church and state.' In reality this has been nothing but a subtle attempt to remove the church from all public life. Add to that the 'politically correct' philosophy that faith and church are a personal, private matter that must of necessity be

excluded from all public life, and it becomes easy to see why the church has lost any significant place it might have had in society.

The Church Is Important To God

Though the church may have become unimportant and unnecessary in the thinking of many, it certainly has not become so in the mind of God. His eternal word makes it clear that when you receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, your faith must be witnessed in baptism resulting in your immediately becoming a part of a local congregation with all of the accountability that implies. In New Testament times it would have been unthinkable to consider someone a Christian who was not a part of the Church.

No Apologies for the Church

It needs to be said unapologetically, right up front, that 'in the New Testament it is a simple fact that outside the church there is no salvation.' Martin Luther put it well when he said, 'Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.' Not that the church is the Savior, Jesus is. But the saved can't fulfill what it means to be a Christian apart from the church. And being numbered among its members is an indispensable mark of salvation.

Granted that all this is true it should be easy to see that an understanding of the nature, character, and purpose of the church is indispensable to being a Christian. We shall, therefore, proceed to try to gain an understanding of these things in the remaining chapters.

THE CREATION OF THE CHURCH

The church is first mentioned in the Bible by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Only Matthew's gospel refers to the church and it only speaks of it twice. But in both instances what is said is of great importance.

The first time it speaks of the church is in Matthew 16:13-18. This was the situation: Jesus and the twelve had gone on a retreat to a place north of the Sea of Galilee called Caesarea Philippi. When they got there Jesus asked them a question: 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They named a number of people. He then asked, 'Who do you say I am?' And Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'

The answer that Peter gave, and the response that Jesus gave to his answer, contain four important, fundamental truths about the church. They tell us what the church is, who its founder and owner is, the foundation upon which it is built, and the power that it has. Let's consider each one of these four in some detail and as we do let's take note that the Devil has distorted the truth about each one of them.

What Is The Church?

First of all let's consider what the church is. To do that let's focus on the word Jesus used in referring to the

church. He used the Greek word *ekklesia* which is a compound word made up of the words *ek* and *kaleo*. *Ek* means 'out of' and *kaleo* means 'to call.' When you put them together their meaning becomes 'the called out.'

The word *ekklesia* was not a new word. It had a great history in both Greek and Hebrew cultures. In Greek thinking it went way back to the days of the Greek city-states where democracy had its beginning. The Greek city-states were governed by decisions made by all the citizens of the city when gathered in a general assembly. Whenever problems arose or decisions had to be made a town crier would go through the city calling its citizens to assemble. When they were all assembled they would then become 'the called out', the *ekklesia*.

Jesus took this common Greek word and idea and sanctified it to his own use and purpose and gave it a whole new meaning. He determined that his disciples would be known as 'the called out.' But called out of what? Called out of sin and the evil world of men. And called into what? Called into the kingdom of God to begin a new humanity which would be characterized by righteousness and holiness and would become a colony of heaven on earth.

Ekklesia was a very common word to Jews. It was their word for synagogue, meaning assembly or congregation. It appears almost 100 times in the Greek Old Testament referring to Hebrew assemblies. It is the word used to describe the people of God assembled together at the base of Mt. Sinai, cleansed and prepared to have a personal meeting with God. It is a word used throughout the Old Testament to refer to those whom God called together and called by His name.

Jesus use of the word ekklesia to refer to his disciples carries with it a number of potent implications. First, the church is not a building. There is no way it could ever be considered such. The church is first, last, and always people. It's not somewhere the people of God go, it's something they are. No one in the first century would ever have said, 'Let's go to church.' It would have been ridiculous to say such a thing.

One of the great deceptions of the devil has been to get people to believe that Christ's church is a building. If it is nothing more than architecture to be compared with other structures, who could ever be compelled to take it seriously as a God-given life-changing force?

A second important implication that arises out of Jesus' use of the word ekklesia is that the church is something much more than just another social agency or fraternal club or organization. Jesus did not create his church to be an auxiliary of the United Way, the Red Cross, or the human services department of any city. It is not just one more social or service club in the community to be numbered with all the others. In keeping with the example of Jesus its Founder, the church will of course seek to meet people's physical as well as their spiritual needs, and it will offer a social life to all who become a part of it, but its reason for existence and its mission goes far beyond that. Its prime purpose for existing is to perpetuate the saving ministry of Jesus, its Founder and Head, and to create a new humanity where all partitions separating people from one another have been broken down and love prevails.

A third implication that issues from Jesus use of the Greek word ekklesia to refer to his church is that it would be a fellowship where all members would have equal standing. It was the furthest thing from Jesus' mind that his church would ever be made up of people with varying degrees of importance, power, and prestige. In fact, on one occasion he denounced his disciples' attempt to gain positions of prestige and power in his kingdom by saying to them, 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave' (Matthew 20:26,27).

The Founder of the Church

The second thing that is revealed about the church in Matthew 16 is that Jesus himself would be its Founder and Owner. He made this clear when he said, 'I will build my church.'

To establish Jesus as the Founder and Owner of the church is to immediately make a number of things quite clear.

For one thing, the church was not founded by any man or group of men and no man or group of men own it. The church was not the invention of a group of first century seers, nor is it the creation of anyone who has lived since. The church was created and founded by Christ. Any church that claims to be Christian and claims to have been founded by anyone other than Jesus has either been led by someone that was extremely presumptuous, or it is not Christ's church at all.

Beware of any organization calling itself the church of Jesus Christ that does not attribute its beginning to Christ and does not give its allegiance to him alone. The devil began imitating the church even while the Apostles were still alive and he will continue to do so to the end.

If Jesus was the Founder of the church, there is a second implication that logically follows: He would determine the date for its beginning. And he did. Immediately after he said, 'I will build my church,' he said to Peter, 'I will give you the keys to the kingdom' (Mt. 16:19). what are keys for? For unlocking

doors. Peter was going to become the 'town crier' that would be the first to call people out of the darkness of their sin into the kingdom of light; call them from the assembly of Satan to the assembly of Christ. He was going to be the first to proclaim Christ as the resurrected living Lord and Savior of his church and he would open the door of the church to all who would ever come to believe in him. Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, in the year 33 A.D., Peter first used the keys. The account is recorded in Acts chapter two. In verse forty—one, we have the response to Peter's declaration recorded: 'Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.' From that day on, the 'number' began to be referred to as 'the church'.

If Jesus is the Founder and Owner of the church a third implication follows: the church ought to wear either his name or his title (Christ). And if the church is the 'bride' or wife of Christ, as it is often called in the letters of the New Testament, then she ought to wear her husband's name. It has been a sly and subtle working of the devil that has led men to call the church by a name or title other than that of its Founder and Owner. They have called it by the name of the type of Church leadership practiced; it has taken on the name of the ordinance of baptism; it has been named after figures in Church history; it has been named, for church methods and practices; it has been associated with ethnic and national origins; it has even been given the name of places and things —almost anything and everything except the name or title of its Founder and Owner. It is as though it has been entirely left up to man to come up with a name for the church that suits him.

Is this making much to do about nothing? Not if you're an unbeliever trying to locate a group of Christians and you can't find any that call themselves by anything that would identify them with Christ. Not if your sworn commitment is to honor and serve Jesus and live for the purpose of lifting up his holy name. Not if you consider that scripture says, 'under that name (Christian) let (us) glorify God' (1 Pet. 4:16 RSV, NASB).

Is there anything in a name? Should a case be made for naming the church after its Founder and Owner?

Biblically speaking, there is everything in a name. Names in the Bible are given to both God and man to denote their character and mission as well as their relationship to God. God's basic names of El and Jehovah are followed by a long list of hyphenated names that tell who he is and what he does. For example, he is called El-Shaddai—God Almighty, and Jehovah-Jireh—God who provides. Whenever anyone in the Bible has El in their name it is usually preceeded or followed by some expression of praise or honor to God. So there is Elijah—'Jehovah is God'; Elisha—'God is salvation'; Ezekiel—'God is strong.' When it came time for Jesus to come into the world an angel instructed Joseph to name him 'Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' (Mt. 1:21). It was all-important that he be given a name (Jesus means Savior) that would indicate what his mission would be.

Wouldn't it be much' more honoring to Christ, a stronger witness to the unity of believers, and much less confusing to unbelievers if congregations took on names that identified them with Jesus?

The fourth implication that issues from Jesus being the Founder and Owner of the church is that he alone has all authority over it. It is more than an implication; it is his own declared statement. In Matthew 28:18 he said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' This certainly extends to his church.

For him to have all authority in his church means that he determines its purpose, mission, worship, type of leadership, requirements for membership, and everything else about it.

What Is The Church's Foundation?

A third thing that the Matthew 16 text does for us is 'identify the foundation upon which the church was to be built. Jesus said, 'on this rock I will build my church.'

What rock? Some have misconstrued the rock to be Peter because his name means 'rock.' But no one reading Greek would ever draw that conclusion because Peter's name and the word 'rock' that Jesus says He will build his church on are of differing genders! Peter's name is in masculine form and the word Jesus used to identify the foundation of his church is feminine. In Greek, as in many other languages, all genders must match.

So what is the 'rock' upon which Jesus said he was going to build his church? What have twenty centuries of Christianity in the world proven it to be? Isn't it Peter's declaration 'about Jesus — 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'--rather than Peter himself? Hasn't the church been built on that fundamental truth? In speaking about the foundation of the church didn't the Apostle Paul say, 'For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ' (I Cor. 3:11)? Jesus, the Christ (anointed Savior), Son of the living God, is the foundation upon which the church must be built if it is to be his church.

What is the great implication to be gathered from this?

In the words of Paul, 'no other foundation can anyone lay ...' Any group calling itself a Christian church and claiming to have someone other than Jesus as its Founder and Foundation, does not belong to him; it is not his church. The devil raised up many false Christs and many false churches in the days of Jesus and the Apostles and the Word of God repeatedly warns about them. Is there any reason to believe Satan has changed his strategy for today?

What Power Does The Church Have?

A final thing that the Matthew 16 passage helps us to see about the church is the kind of power Jesus said it would have. He said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it' or 'not prove stronger than it' or 'not prevail against it.'

When I was younger the picture that this brought to my mind when I read it was one in which the church was like a great fortified castle with a moat around it which no enemy could penetrate. I visualized the church being able only to defend itself against an attack by the devil. But in time I came to see that Jesus was saying just about the opposite. He was saying that when the church gets on the move nothing can 'prevail against it,' not even the forces of hell. He was describing his church as a positive, aggressive power.

Jesus never intended for his church to be a weak, impotent, powerless, incapable group of followers. He never meant for his church to be a rag-tag army of cowering wimps constantly retreating from every threat of the enemy. No! He meant for his church to be a mighty army continually storming the gates of

hell and routing its enemies. The church must forever be seen as the God-ordained, Spirit-empowered and equipped Body of Christ which Jesus said would do greater things than he did when he was here in the flesh. The first century church certainly demonstrated this. It unceasingly stormed the gates of hell and freed more captives than Jesus himself did. If today's church would but trust Jesus and obey his word, it too would be able to storm the gates of hell and bring freedom to its captives.

WORD PICTURES THAT DESCRIBE THE CHURCH

In the last chapter we considered the word church (ekklesia)

as the word Jesus chose to refer to his disciples. In this chapter we will look at some of the word pictures He and the Apostles used to describe the church. They used metaphors to do so. And why not? What could better serve to make the unfamiliar familiar than a metaphor?

The Church, The Body of Christ

First and foremost, the Apostles used the human body as a metaphor to describe the church. Paul develops the metaphor most fully in I Corinthians 12:12-27 by saying: 'Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.' He uses it again in Romans 12:4, 5. 'For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.' 'We who are many are one body,' he says (I Cor. 10:17). Jew and Greek have come together in this one body (Eph. 2:16). 'There is one body and one Spirit' (Eph. 4:4). We are 'called in the one body' (Col. 3:15). He writes that the church is the full expression of Christ on earth when he says: 'God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Eph. 1:22, 23).

The body is that through which the mind works. The mind can purpose and plan but its purposes and plans cannot be translated into action without a body. And conversely, a body is uncontrollable and helpless without a mind.

Although Jesus is powerfully present in this world in Spirit, he is no longer here in actual flesh. This means that if he wants something done in this world, he must find someone through whom he can do it. Someone must consent to be his hands and feet and mouth. If he wants someone helped or taught, he is helpless until he finds a person through whom he can do these things. And unless he can find such a person, he is a head without body, able to think and plan but unable to do.

In this sense the church is quite literally the body of Christ. It is the instrument through which all his work is done on earth.

This metaphor helps us to see some very important things about the church. For one thing, it enables us to see how closely connected Jesus is to his church. The two are as closely associated as a head is to a body.

As a body, the church is a complicated and complex living organism made up of many different parts, and it can be healthy and efficient only when each part is harmoniously carrying out its assigned responsibility. This means that in the church, the many different people with their many different functions must blend together for its overall common good and purpose. No one member can at any time consider himself to be a separate functioning entity apart from the rest of the body.

This metaphor helps believers to see how closely they are bound together and that they could not possibly survive without the contribution and help each gives to the other. It also helps them to see that in their being so bound together what is done by one affects all the rest. No matter if it is done publicly

or privately. If one suffers, all suffer; if one sins, all sin and are dishonored; but if one is honored, all are honored.

It teaches us that whereas Jesus began his earthly ministry in his own human body, he now continues it in his body, the church.

And most important, as a body cannot possibly function without a head, neither can the church function without Christ. He is its brains—its control center. He must do its thinking, planning, and deciding. As his body, the church was created to be under his control.

The Church, The Family Of God

A second metaphor the Apostles used in speaking of the church was 'family.' They pictured the church as a family. Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they were 'fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household' (Eph. 2:19). He wrote Timothy instructing him to teach 'how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God . . .' (I Tim. 3:15).

The church as a family is made up of God the Father, Jesus the older brother, and believers who are children of the Father and brothers and sisters to one another. This explains why believers are often referred to in scripture as 'brothers,' 'sisters,' and 'children.'

The use of this metaphor helps us to see that God did not design the church to be a disconnected collection of disciples. He intends for it to be a fellowship of intimate family members who care for one another and are bonded together in love. Their assemblies should resemble family gatherings where the Father is honored, the Older Brother is revered, and family members seek to mutually encourage and comfort one another.

Since God has determined that the church be his earthly family, it follows that its family members should be continually attempting to make it all that a loving family should be. It should have a family life characterized by love and acceptance, support, encouragement, comfort, discipline, mutual sharing, and sacrificial living and giving.

The Church Is a Sheepfold

Jesus and the Apostles spoke of the church as a sheepfold or flock. Metaphorically, and in parables, Jesus often referred to himself as 'the good Shepherd' who had come to seek and save lost sheep, and who would ultimately lay down his life for them. 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Mt. 9:36). He said, 'the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost' (Lk. 19:10), and, 'I lay down my life for the sheep' (Jn. 10:15). He described the judgment scene at the end of time as one where 'All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats' (Mt. 25:32). Just prior to his ascension he appeared to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and gave Peter a threefold commission:

'Feed my lambs,' 'Take care of my sheep,' 'Feed my sheep' (Jn. 21:15-17).

Before the cross Jesus called himself 'the good Shepherd' (Jn. 10:14) who would lay down his life for the sheep. After his resurrection he was addressed as 'our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep' who would 'equip' his sheep 'with everything good for doing his will' (Heb. 13:20, 21). And looking forward to his second coming Peter saw him as 'the Chief Shepherd' who would reward faithful leaders with 'the crown of glory that will never fade away' (I Pet. 5:4).

Jesus made it emphatically clear that not only was he going to be the 'great Shepherd of the sheep,' but he was going to have only one flock. As he spoke of himself as the 'good Shepherd' he said, 'I have other sheep that are not of this flock. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd' (John 10: 16).

With the advent of the church, it became clear that it was the flock which Jesus would shepherd. And since he had returned to the spirit world and had taken his place at the right hand of God, he would need a human means through which to shepherd his flock. So he instituted a special corps of undershepherds to assist him and designated them elders or overseers. He assigned to them the responsibility of shepherding his flock in his behalf, and ordained that a multiplicity of these undershepherds be appointed in every congregation.

Christians are sheep who were at one time helplessly and hopelessly lost and in terrible danger, but have now been found and saved and brought under the loving, protective care of a benevolent, great Shepherd. As the Apostle Peter put it, 'You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls' (I Pet. 2:25). These rescued sheep constitute God's flock, the church. Rescued sheep need to constantly realize how indebted they are to their Shepherd for having rescued them, and how desperately they are in need of his continued protection and care. They need to hear and respond to his voice alone and be submitted to the shepherding he provides. Then he will be able to lead them through the deep, dark valleys of this life's experiences into the green pastures and still waters of eternity.

The Church Is a Building

The Apostles sometimes spoke of the church as a building. Of course they did so in a metaphorical sense because, as has already been pointed out, the church is not an edifice, but people. They described the church as a building with the Apostles as its foundation, Jesus as its chief cornerstone, and believers as stones creating the superstructure.

Paul called the church a building when he wrote to the Corinthians and said, 'You are God's field, God's building' (I Cor. 3:9). And to the Ephesians he wrote, 'You are God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord' (Eph. 2:19-21). The Apostle Peter wrote, 'like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house ...' (I Pet. 2:5 RSV).

The church as a building is made up of people. Its foundation is people--the Apostles; its chief cornerstone is a person—Jesus; and its superstructure is composed of 'living stones'—believers.

To see the church as this kind of a building is to learn some important things about it. For example, if Jesus and the Apostles are its foundation then there can never be any other foundation because a building can only have one foundation. And Christ's church must be built on this solid and secure one. To build on any other foundation is to build something other than Christ's church.

Everyone who becomes a Christian becomes a stone in this building and is cemented to every other stone. As they are bonded together they form the superstructure of the building. Each stone is dependent upon all others for support. Remove one stone and the building is weakened; add one and it is strengthened.

A cornerstone is often the first stone laid in the foundation of a building and is done so with celebration and anticipation of what is to be. The cornerstone determines the placement of the two primary walls of a building and consequently determines the lay of all other walls in the structure. So in reality, the cornerstone determines the whole layout of the building.

To say that the church is a building and Jesus is the 'chief cornerstone' is to say that He is the first and primary person in it and he should determine what it should be like. Everyone who becomes a member of it must be joined to him and be regulated by him.

The Church As a Building Is a Temple

Paul wrote that the church as a building is a temple. It 'rises to become a holy temple in the Lord ... to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Eph. 2:21, 22).

In the Old Testament the temple in Jerusalem, which was first built by Solomon and later rebuilt by Zerubbabel, was renowned as the dwelling place of God among men. His presence was manifested in the inner sanctuary of the temple in what was called the 'holy of holies.'

In 70 A.D. this earthly temple was destroyed and to this day it has not been rebuilt. Does that mean that God has not had a presence among men all this time? Has he had no temple in which to dwell? Yes, of course he has had a temple, but not a man-made one because he no longer dwells in man-made sanctuaries (Cf. Acts 7:48, 49; 17:24). The church has become his 'holy temple' in which he 'lives by his Spirit.' God now comes to dwell in the heart of every individual believer and in the church as a whole. Paul made this clear in writing to the Corinthian church when he first addressed the whole church saying, 'you yourselves are God's temple and God's spirit lives in you' (I Cor. 3:16), and then he spoke to individual members and said basically the same thing: 'your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you received from God' (I Cor. 6:19) .

Since the church—the called out—is the holy dwelling place of God, there are a number of things that consequently follow. For one thing, no man-made building on earth can now be considered a 'sanctuary' of God. No part of the church's facilities should ever be designated 'the sanctuary'. God's people don't go to the 'sanctuary,' they are the sanctuary. The only time God could be considered to be in a building is when His people are in it bringing Him with them.

And here is an awesome thought to consider: since God dwells within every believer their heart becomes the holy of holies. And when believers are assembled together as the church, it becomes the holy of holies. This being so, it follows that the heart of every believer, and believers together as the

church, should be a cleansed and holy sanctuary for the dwelling place of God. Paul declares that 'we are the temple of the living God' and that we should 'cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God' (II Cor. 6:16-7:1). He also says that the church should present itself to Christ its head 'as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Eph. 5:27).

And finally, Paul warns that since the church is 'God's temple' it is a dangerous thing to trifle with. He writes:

'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple' (I Cor. 3:16, 17).

Because the church is the dwelling place of God, to contend against it or to attack it in any way could find one actually contending against God Himself, It is all too easy to conclude that because the church is made up of people that it is a mere human organization to be criticized, maligned, attacked, and persecuted without consequence. But history has proven otherwise. The story of those who have tried to destroy the church, like those who tried to destroy Jesus, have themselves been destroyed in the process (Cf. Mt. 21:44).

The Church Is A Holy Nation

In his letter to the church at large Peter wrote, 'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God ...' (I Pet. 2:9). He was calling Christians 'a holy nation.' The church is 'a holy nation.'

The phrase 'a holy nation' is rich in meaning. It is used in the Old Testament to refer to the nation of Israel. Israel was chosen as the smallest nation in its geographical area to be a special people through whom God could demonstrate his power and glory. God set it apart from the other nations and it consequently became different from them. That is why it was called a holy nation.' To be holy is to be separate and different. That by definition is the meaning of the term 'holy.'

A number of passages in the New Testament seem to indicate that the church is the New Israel of God. Jesus made it very

clear that Israel would lose her place and privilege as His chosen and a new Israel would be created when he said to the Jews, 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit' (Mt. 21:43), William Barclay comments on this saying, 'The privileges and the responsibilities they should have had were taken away from the nation of Israel and were given to the church, which became the new and true Israel, the real people of God.' Paul actually referred to the churches of Galatia as the Israel of God when he wrote, 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:15, 16). He wrote to those in the Philippian Church, 'We are the true circumcision (synonym for Israel), who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh' (Phil. 3:3 RSV). He addressed the Colossian church with terms reserved exclusively for Israel when he wrote, 'as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves ...' (Col. 3:12). After writing to the Corinthians saying, 'we are the temple of the living God' he followed by applying to Christians a

number of Old Testament statements made directly to Israel: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.' 'Therefore come out from them and be separate.

Then, of course, there is the instance where Peter applies to the church four Old Testament phrases used exclusively to refer to Israel: 'chosen people,' 'royal priesthood,' 'holy nation,' and 'a people belonging to God' (I Pet. 2:9).

Those in the church are a 'chosen people.' Each one has been chosen and called by God in Christ. Paul affirms that God 'chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.' He continues: 'In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ...' (Eph. 1:4, 11).

Those in the church have been called by God to be a separated and different people. They have been called to be separated from sin and everything that is foul, evil and unclean, and from the present evil age in which they live. And they have been called to a life where 'the old has gone, the new has come' and all has become refreshingly different.

As citizens of the new Israel of God, those in the church are God's own special people to whom belong all the blessings and privileges of the covenants and promises that God ever made to his people. To them every promise God has made becomes "Yes' in Christ' (II Cor. 1:20).

The Church Is a Fellowship

The church is spoken of as a fellowship. The very first people to become Christians are described as having 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship ...' {Acts 2:42}.

The Greek word for fellowship (koinonia) basically means to give, to share, to be in partnership. William Barclay says that it 'is the spirit of generous sharing as contrasted with the spirit of selfish getting.' It is used to describe a business partner, a marriage partner, or one's relationship with God. In reference to the church it is used to describe that bond which binds Christians to each other and leads them to freely share their lives and possessions with one another.

In English the root for the word fellowship is 'fellow' and comes from the old Norse 'fe' which meant 'cattle' (the measure of wealth among ancients), and later 'felagi' which came to mean one's business partner or 'wealth-sharer.'

This helps us see that the church is meant to be a close knit partnership of people who share in common their possessions, the wealth of life and blessing that are theirs in Christ, and the work of Christ to which they have been called.

The importance of fellowship in the life of the first century church is emphasized in the repeated use of the phrase 'one another' which appears sixty-four times in the book of Acts and the epistles used to describe the giving and sharing relationship that believers had.

The Church Is a Colony of Heaven

In writing to the church at Philippi Paul wrote, 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil. 3:20). This was a word picture the Philippians would well understand because Philippi was a Roman colony.

Rome planted colonies all over the empire in strategic places. They were usually populated with retired Roman soldiers and their families who had been rewarded with Roman citizenship. They had one great characteristic: they were thoroughly Roman; small replicas of Rome itself. They were dominated by their pride in their Roman citizenship. Latin was their official language; Roman dress was worn at all times; Roman customs and holidays were observed; Roman leadership and government was patterned; Roman justice was administered; and Roman morals were embraced. In every way possible they were like Rome. They were each a Rome in miniature and proud of it.

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi and said, 'our citizenship is in heaven,' he was inferring that each congregation of believers was a colony of heaven and that heaven was its homeland. Each were meant to be a replica of heaven on earth. And just as Roman colonists never forgot that they belonged to Rome, members of the church were to never forget that they were citizens of heaven. Their thinking, planning, and conduct were to be in harmony with heaven reflecting a definite difference between them and the ordinary citizen of this world. And the great hope by which they were to live was that in the end they were going home to the mother country.

The Church—'The Pillar and Foundation of the Truth'

In I Timothy 3:15 Paul described the church as 'the pillar and foundation of the truth.' In using this metaphor he expressed what the main task of the church was to be in this world. It was to support and display the truth of God at all times for all to see and hear.

The idea of linking 'foundation,' 'pillar,' and 'truth' together would bring to mind a pedestal with a statue on it being raised up so that it might be prominently displayed. The church is the foundation and pedestal that holds the truth high above the ordinary so that it can be clearly seen by all. Its task, therefore, is not only to support the truth, but to display it.

To say that the task of the church is to support and display the truth of God is to imply that she is the depository and custodian of the truth and is its chief advocate. And it is to say that above all other considerations, the church is in the truth business. For the church to fail to see this and to fail to persistently uphold and proclaim the truth is for it to fail at its main task.

Paul chose a robust figure to picture the church when he cast it as a 'foundation' and 'pillar' upholding the truth, and rightly so. For the church would have to be robust to support the truth in a world that has always been known for rejecting the truth of God. The world has usually sought to silence the truth of God by silencing anyone who proclaimed it. Starting with Stephen (Acts 6, 7). History tells the story of a succession of the churches' martyrs who were eliminated by her enemies in an attempt to silence the truth.

The Church, The Bride of Christ

Finally, the church is pictured as the bride of Christ. This imagery has its roots in the Old Testament, particularly in the prophets, where the nation of Israel is often spoken of as the bride or wife of God. Hosea hears God say to Israel: 'I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion' (Hosea 2:19). Isaiah says to Judah: 'your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name ...' (Isa. 54:5); and again; 'as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you' (Isa. 62:5). Jeremiah hears God appealing to his people (3:14): 'Return, faithless people for I am your husband.'

This symbolism is carried over into the New Testament and is applied to the relationship between Christ and his church. It first appears in the gospels where Jesus takes on the self chosen title of Bridegroom. Then Paul uses it twice to refer to the union between Christ and believers. He wrote to the Corinthian church as though he was the father of the bride saying, 'I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him' (II Cor. 11:2). In the Ephesian letter he used the loving relationship between Christ and his church as an ideal for husbands to follow, as he called upon them to love their wives 'just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her 'to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Eph. 5:25-27; also Cf. vs. 32).

At the present time the bride of Christ stands cleansed and holy in God's sight by his grace. But her perfection as an accomplished fact remains yet future. It will be realized at the consummation of this age of grace when Christ and his bride are joined in perfect union. Christ enabled the Apostle John to look down the corridor of time and see the realization of that perfect union and he describes it for us: 'For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb' (Rev. 19:7-9). A little later an angel said to John, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb' (Rev. 21:9), and he saw her in all her beauty and glory, a pure virgin magnificently adorned about to be united in an indissoluble and uninterrupted bond of love with her most virtuous Husband.

The use of this metaphor sheds a flood of light upon the church and its relationship with Christ.

First, it helps us to see that the relationship between Christ and the church is an intimate love relationship. Christ loves the church and has given himself completely for her as a demonstration of his love. Recognition of his love should evoke a reciprocating love from his church.

Second, it should help us to see the deep intimacy that should exist between Christ and the church. No deeper intimacy can be experienced than that between a husband and a wife. And in a healthy marriage it will always be growing deeper. Just so the church must live in an intimate communion and fellowship with Christ drawing closer and closer to Him all the time.

Third, to have such a relationship with Christ, the church cannot even entertain the idea of dissolution. She must see herself in an unending love relationship with Christ.

Fourth, such a relationship will depend upon faithfulness. There is no question about the faithfulness of Christ. He will never be unfaithful to his bride. The bride must strive to be as faithful to her Husband. She must constantly guard against being attracted by other lovers and entering into adulterous

relationships with them. James warns that the world may become one such lover (James 4:4), and John warns against other gods (1 Jn. 5:21). There are others to guard against.

Fifth, a bride is never all that she will be when she is first married. She will forever be seeking to fulfill all that was implied when she was declared a wife at her wedding. It will take a lot of growing and maturing for her to realize the full meaning of what is involved in being a wife. And yet, with all her striving, she will never become a perfect wife. Likewise, though the church as the bride of Christ should continually strive to become all that she was meant to be, she will never attain perfection. She will become 'a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish,' and will be absolutely 'holy and blameless' when she is presented to Christ at the wedding supper of the Lamb. That is her hope. She must live in that hope.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The word pictures of the church considered in the previous chapter all witness to the unity and oneness Christ desires for his church. They help us see that Christ has only one body, one family, one sheepfold; and that his church is a single building and a single temple. It is one holy nation, one fellowship of believers, and the only colony of heaven on earth.

A person cannot seriously read the New Testament and fail to see that creating unity among believers is foundational to all that God desires to do within his people.

Unity Began With Jesus

The subject of Christian unity has its beginning with Jesus and his expressed concern for the oneness of his people. He starts speaking about it in John 10:16 by declaring that ‘there shall be one flock and one shepherd.’ The subject is taken up again in John 11:52 where John comments on Caiaphas' prophecy that Jesus' death would result in bringing the scattered children of God ‘together and make them one.’

The great desire of Jesus to have his people joined together in ‘complete unity’ is expressed most emphatically in what some have called his ‘great high-priestly prayer for the church’ which is recorded in the 17th chapter of John. In the first part of his prayer, he prayed for his immediate disciples. In the latter part he prayed for believers of every age. In 17:20, 21 he prayed that all those who would ever become believers through the message of the apostles would ‘be one,’ He prayed that their unity might be comparable to the unity in the Godhead—a trinity unity.

In 17:21 and 23 he revealed his reason for praying for unity. He prayed for the oneness of his disciples because their oneness would serve as a great witness to His own reality and to God's love for the world.

The Apostles Echoed Jesus' Call for Unity

It is obvious from what follows in the rest of the New Testament, in Acts and in the Apostolic letters, that the Apostles were greatly impressed with Jesus' concern for unity. So much so that they repeatedly called for unity in their writings.

In the Roman letter Paul called for unity and then prayed for it. In Romans 12:16 he issued the call: ‘Live in harmony with one another,’ and in Romans 15:5,6 he prayed, ‘May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

In writing to the Corinthians Paul appealed for unity twice in his first letter, and once in the second. In I Corinthians 1:10 he appealed to the Corinthians to all ‘agree with one another so that there [might] be no divisions among [them] and that [they might] be perfectly united in mind and thought.’ In characterizing the church as a human body in 12:25 he argued ‘that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.’ In the final appeal of his second letter he wrote, ‘Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace’ (II Cor. 13:11).

In his letter to the Ephesians he exhorted, 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.' Then he listed the basic components of that unity as he declared, 'There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.' (Eph. 4:3-5). Later in the letter he pointed out that God had given church leaders to equip her for service so that she might be built up 'until,' as he said, 'we all reach unity in the faith' (Eph. 4:11-13).

Unity is one of the main emphases of the Philippian letter. In 1:27 (RSV) Paul exhorts, 'let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. So that (he concludes), whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind' He continues in 2:2, 'make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.'

Paul wrote the Colossians that the purpose of his strenuous work for them was in order that they might 'be encouraged in heart and united in love ...' (Col. 2:1, 2).

Finally, in one of the conclusions of his first letter Peter wrote, 'Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers . . .' (I Pet. 3:8).

Hopefully this sampling of New Testament scripture will help us see the place of importance given to unity in the concerns of both Christ and his Apostles.

And sixth, divisiveness would be nonexistent; they would be joined together in one great harmonious, peaceful, cooperative fellowship.

Unity Doesn't Mean Uniformity

Defining unity this way doesn't mean that unity has to be equated with uniformity. To live in unity with one another doesn't mean that we must duplicate one another, either as individuals or as congregations.

No! No! The unity of Christ leaves plenty of room for diversity among believers as the metaphors previously used to describe the church made clear. For example, the church was contrasted with the human body which has many parts. It was pictured as a flock having many sheep; as a temple made of many stones; a nation with many citizens.

With human beings being what they are, there are bound to be differences in personality and expression among the 'many.' Take any human family, for example. It may have members that live in harmony with one another, have the same general aspirations and goals for life, live by the same set of convictions, and each may have a deep love for the other. But they are each individuals with their own set of genes, their own intellects, their own personalities, and their own ways of approaching things. The family can live in unity but it will have diversity.

So it is with the church. Each member of each congregation, and congregations as a whole, can live in unity with one another but at the same time be diverse entities of that unity.

When God has his way, each congregation will be made up of all kinds of people of both genders, and of varying racial, national, and ethnic backgrounds all living and serving together in harmony. It isn't his will for his church to be divided into separated, divisive groups for any reason. Christ has broken down all the barriers that in past times divided people up into factious, warring groups and has created a new

humanity. The partakers of this new humanity are meant to create a new culture, take on a new nationality, and speak a new language—the heavenly language of love.

From Ideal to Harsh Reality

So far, we have considered the ideal for unity that God has given us in his word. God always presents us with ideals and then calls upon us to pursue them. Didn't he give us Jesus as the pattern for our humanity and then call upon us to be conformed to his image and likeness? Does he expect us to pattern him perfectly? No. He knows that we are incapable of doing that because of our sinful natures. But he nevertheless issues the call. When he calls us to perfect unity does he expect us to attain it? No. For the same reason: he knows our limitation. But he nevertheless issues the call and expects us to strive after it.

The harsh reality is that we are incapable of perfectly attaining any of the ideals that God presents to us. Even though we zealously strive to reach them we will fall short. The people of the New Testament church were issued the call to unity continually, as we have already noted, and no doubt they sought to attain it. For there are wonderful demonstrations of it to be found in the record. But the Biblical account, being honest as it always is, also tells us about their disunity.

Divisiveness is pictured as being a problem not only to the worst of congregations, but also to the best. The notorious church at Corinth was riddled with divisiveness, but disunity was also a problem in the more ideal congregation at Philippi. And Paul had to address the problem in both congregations with strong words of exhortation and appeal.

The problem of disunity faced by the first century church has been a big problem that every ensuing generation of believers has had to grapple with. In fact, it has been the internal plague of the church!

Why Has Disunity Been Such A Problem?

Why has the church been forever beset with disunity? For two main reasons. For one thing, the church has experienced disunity, and always will because man by nature is divisive. Paul said so when he described the past unregenerate life of the believer to Titus. He wrote, 'We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another' (Titus 3:3). This all began when the harmony of Eden was disrupted by the introduction of sin into the human family. It was advanced when man sought to defy God by building the tower of Babel (Cf. Gen. 9:1, 7 with 11:4) which resulted in God confounding his language and scattering him 'over the face of the whole earth' (Gen. 11:9).

The selfishness and self-seeking of sin working within, coupled with the suspicion, threat, and distrust resulting from people speaking many differing languages and being of many color variations has served to divide people up into warring factions throughout the history of mankind. Though becoming a Christian results in people becoming 'partakers of the divine nature' (II Pet. 1:4 NKJV), it does not result in the eradication of their human nature. And their human nature is capable of reasserting itself and resuming the control of their lives any time it is given an opportunity. When it does, the sins of the old life reappear. It is then that the malice, envy, and hatred that Paul wrote about return to begin their work of divisiveness.

A second reason the church experiences so much disunity, is because unity is so vital to the reality of Christianity and its witness to the world. The devil seems to know this much better than most believers, and therefore concentrates on destroying it. He will do anything or use anyone that he can to destroy unity in the church or the Christian family. He will use any means to get believers to surrender to envy, jealousy, pride, selfish ambition, vain conceit--anything that will create divisiveness and disrupt the unity of the home or the congregation.

The devil's attacks on unity are not always so obvious to those who are the subject of them. But a more objective observer can usually see what he is up to.

Beware When There Is Peace and Harmony

Congregations which are being blessed in their ministries and are experiencing joyous harmony in their fellowship, need to be especially on guard against the devil's attacks, because they are subject to becoming the main focus of his attention. Their strong fellowship and its witness will have the effect of 'storming the gates of hell'—penetrating his domain. And he will not stand by passively and let that happen.

How many times have I seen a congregation being blessed by God with growth and fruitful ministries and having a reputation in the community for its warm, harmonious fellowship. And the next thing you know, it's experiencing a terrible split that destroys its witness, weakens its ministries, and ruins its reputation in the community. And, sad to say, so often the split is over nothing of real importance or consequence to the kingdom of God. And people are left in anguish and dismay asking, 'How could this happen? How could such a terrible thing as this have happened to us? Everything was going so well. We seemed to be so blessed. How? How?'

And the answer is: 'You have just experienced an attack of Satan. He got to someone in the congregation; no doubt some weak link in the chain. He knew of their weakness and was able to use them to start a wedge of divisiveness in the congregation. And the wedge grew until it created a split. That's how it happened. That's how it always happens.'

What To Do About Divisiveness

What can be done when a congregation learns that there are those who are being divisive in their midst? Do they stand by passively and watch the congregation be carved up into pieces and do nothing about it, as is so often the case? Do they seek to maintain peace at any price even if it means the congregation ends up being fragmented or destroyed? No! Congregations need to exercise what James Dobson has called 'tough love' and do precisely what the Apostle Paul directs to be done under such circumstances.

He first advises: 'Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way, contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them' (Ro. 16:17). Then he adds, 'Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him' (Titus 3:10).

Who in the congregation is going to be responsible for watching out for divisive people? Who is going to issue the warning when they are detected? And who is going to call for withdrawal from them if they refuse to heed the warnings?

The main responsibility for doing this falls upon the elders of the church. This is part of their work. Paul informed the Ephesian Elders that they were to 'guard' and 'shepherd' the flock (Acts 20:28). Then he warned them, 'After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves.' And then he charged them: 'Therefore watch' (Acts 20:29-31 NKJV).

The author of Hebrews gave the same direction to leaders when he wrote, 'keep watch' over the flock 'as men who must give an account.' And the flock was instructed to 'obey' them 'and submit to their authority' (Heb. 13:17).

The elders must constantly keep watch over the flock looking for any threats to its unity. If any are detected they should lead in confronting the would be divisive people. And if such divide, people refuse to heed the elders' warnings against being divisive, the elders should direct the flock to withdraw from them. Wise elders will quickly deal with anyone who threatens the unity of the congregation. They will take whatever steps are necessary to avert disunity.

Promoting Unity in the Congregation

Divisiveness is usually dealt with in a congregation after it has already become a raging fire and the unity of the congregation is in peril. But by then it is usually too late to preserve its unity.

The time to secure unity in a congregation is before any divisiveness breaks out, not after the fact.

Most cities maintain a fire department with a full complement of well-trained men to deal with the problem of fires. If most fire departments are like the one in the city where I live, they spend far more time promoting fire prevention than they do fighting fires. And the firemen like it that way. They would much rather spend their time preventing fires than fighting them.

Church leaders who are wise will spend more time promoting unity in the congregation and warning members of the evil of divisiveness than they will fighting divisiveness after it has already broken out. They will make it clear that divisiveness will not be tolerated and if detected will be immediately and decisively dealt with for the evil that it is.

Is There Unity Among Churches Today?

Since unity was such a major concern of Jesus and the Apostles, a big question that needs to be asked today is 'Does today's church share that concern? And the honest answer surely must be, not really. There may be an underlying, general recognition of a need for unity among believers and churches, and even some attempts at promoting it, but such attempts have usually resulted in producing a compromised version of the Biblical model, not a reproduction of it.

Disunity Is a Plague to Christianity

In view of the importance that Jesus and the Apostles placed on unity among believers and congregations plus the reasons they gave for maintaining it, can anyone honestly justify or defend the divisiveness of denominationalism and denominational splits? Or the fracturing, splintering, and splitting that characterizes so many groups and congregations within Christianity today? Can anyone honestly say that these things are anything other than a plague to the faith?

Divisiveness in the homes of believers and within congregations, or among them, defames the name of Jesus, thwarts the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of unity, denies the faith making it out to be a contradiction, destroys Christian witness, ruins its fellowship, and turns seekers away.

The two most frequently cited reasons unbelievers give for having nothing to do with the church are: 'The church is full of hypocrites,' and, 'People in the church are always fighting among themselves.'

Disunity among believers is certainly a grief to Jesus, since he died to effect not only their reconciliation with God but with one another. Seeing His people divided up into hundreds of factional groups, and seeing congregations split up into divisive, sometimes warring groups and cliques, doesn't please Jesus. It breaks his heart. A Christian singer, Twyla Paris, is one who has obviously come to see this and sings in her composition 'I Commit My Love to You': 'When we are divided, I can hear him crying. And I won't be a part of breaking his heart anymore. I just can't do it anymore, so brother, I commit my love to you.'

Sound the Call for Unity

Instead of today's Christians continuing to ignore Christ's call to unity and seeking to justify, rationalize, and excuse their disunity, they need to get in step with their Lord and start making unity among believers the top priority matter of concern that he did.

Where do we begin? By trying to corral divided believers into unity meetings? By starting a unity campaign or movement?

No! Unity must begin with individual believers taking to heart Jesus' prayer for unity and denouncing all divisiveness as the evil that it is. Individual believers must start extending unflinching love toward one another (I Pet. 4:8). They must let love become their guide. They must be willing to be wronged and to suffer in order to maintain unity (I Cor. 6:7). They must stop allowing divisive people to continue to carve their congregations up into factious, splinter groups (Titus 3:10; Ro. 16:17). They must start actively contending against divisiveness whenever and wherever they are faced with it and make a strong appeal to believers everywhere to unite in Christ and the truth of his word as the basis of unity. They must start contending against denominationalism, sectarianism, and every other ism that separates and divides God's people. Lovers of Purity must start denouncing and forsaking every cause of division and start pursuing the unity that Jesus prayed for. They must see, as John Calvin did, that the devil's chief device is disunity and division. They must advocate with him: 'Among Christians there ought to be so great a dislike of schism that they would always avoid it so far as it lies in their power.'

Will doing such things as these result in immediate unity in the church? Not very likely. But unity must begin somewhere. It is better to light one candle than curse the dark. God will bless and multiply every effort put forth to bring about unity because unity among brethren is His expressed will.

When believers come to see that unity is not just a good idea, an option, or an alternative, but a matter of obedience, they will start doing these things and whatever else God leads; them to do to promote it. Until and unless they do, divisiveness will continue to be the order of the day. God have mercy on the church if it is!

BIBLICAL PATTERNS FOR THE CHURCH

After God had carefully developed detailed plans for the building of the tabernacle, He gave them to Moses and directed him: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain' (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5). If God was so precise in seeing to the construction of the tabernacle, is it not reasonable to believe that Christ would give some direction or provide some kind of pattern for the building of such an important thing as his church? Surely he must have given us something to help us determine what he wanted it to be and to do in this world. It is unreasonable to believe that he left it up to each generation of believers to decide for themselves what his church should be like and what its mission should be. Didn't he give us a pattern? Surely he did. Well, then, if he did, where can we find it? If he gave us one, wouldn't we expect to find it in his inspired word? He did give us one, and a blueprint of it can be found in the New Testament account of the first century church.

Prior to his departure Jesus personally commissioned the Apostles to inaugurate his church and see to its development. And they did. They nurtured it until the end of the first century shepherding it through every conceivable situation it might ever face. And then they left us a record of the whole account to serve as an inspired pattern to follow.

If our concern is to have today's church become what Christ intended it to be, one of the wisest things we could do would be to bypass the twenty centuries of accumulated human tradition that has adulterated it, and has too often obscured the picture of what it was meant to be, and return to the ideal that is pictured for us in the first century church. If we take the message and ideal of that church and seek to reproduce it today we should come up with basically the same thing.

When King Tut's tomb was discovered in 1922 one of the interesting things that was found in it were some grains of wheat. Out of curiosity some were planted. What happened? Wheat came up. Wheat from 1350 B.C. was planted in 1922 A.D., and it came up wheat. If the message and ideal of the first century church is planted in the minds of people today it should produce the same kind of church that existed then.

Going Back To Antioch

One of the first places we should look for a first century pattern for the church should be the church in Antioch in Syria. It was at Antioch that the disciples of Jesus were first called 'Christians' (Acts 11:26).

You might wonder why Jerusalem wouldn't be the place to start looking since the church began there. The reason is the Jerusalem church never seemed to be able to get over being Jewish and was therefore limited by that fact. Because of that, Antioch soon evolved as the center of international Christianity, Barnabas was one of the leaders of that church. He helped develop it. And when additional help was needed, he brought Paul there and the two of them taught for a year (Acts 11:25, 26) after which they were commissioned to be missionaries by the Holy Spirit and were sent out by that church to evangelize the

Gentile world. Paul became the 'Apostle to the Gentiles' and Antioch became his home base.

Let us look to Antioch and get some idea of what the church was like at its best in the beginning. We will not look there exclusively, but that's where we'll spend most of our time as we consider ten characteristics of the church of the New Testament which stand as ideals for the church for all time.

There Was a Great Spirit of Oneness

In the beginning the church was characterized by a great spirit of oneness. This oneness prevailed from the day it began. One of the first things said about the church after it began was, 'All the believers were together and had everything in common' (Acts 2:44). As it began to number in the thousands and tens of thousands, it was still characterized the same way: 'All the believers were one in heart and mind' (Acts 4:32).

Oneness was one of the great characteristics of the church at Antioch. Though it had leaders who are described as having come from various backgrounds racially, religiously, nationally, and class-wise (Cf. Acts 13:1), they had united together to produce a church in which people worked together in harmony. So much so that the Holy Spirit was able to speak to them as a whole and direct them to commission Paul and Barnabas as missionaries (Acts 13:2), and in unity of spirit and purpose they obeyed. They sent them out, later received them back after their mission, shared in their success, and then sent them out again. Next to love, the one thing the Lord calls for in his church is for a spirit of unity and oneness to prevail among its members. A church in disunity is completely out of step with Jesus its Head.

Wherever the Apostle Paul went, he labored to establish and maintain unity among believers. The call to unity appears in his writings constantly. A good example is in his letter to the Philippians: 'complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind' (Phil. 2:2 RSV).

It Was A Classless Society

The church as Jesus conceived it was a classless society. The Christian faith began as a classless faith that produced a classless society. Jesus came as the Prince of Peace and the great leveler of men to break down every barrier that divided and separated people and to create one new humanity in which everyone stood on the same level. Paul wrote that Jesus' 'purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two (Jew and Gentile, the two groups comprising humanity from a Jewish perspective), thus making peace, and in this one body (the church) to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility' (Eph. 2:15, 16).

In this body there was to be 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female' for all were to be 'one in Christ' (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:11). All class distinctions were to be eliminated and all people were to become of equal social standing.

The list of leaders in the church at Antioch serves to demonstrate this (Cf. Acts 13:1). Barnabas was named, first and Saul last. Barnabas was from Cyprus and had been a Jew and a Levite which means he had served in the temple doing work comparable to that of deacons in the church. His original name had been Joseph (Acts 4:36) which literally means 'one more.' This may indicate that he came from a large family that had run out of names when he was born which led his parents to say, 'He is just 'one more.' He obviously had had a humble beginning.

Sandwiched between Barnabas and Saul were Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen. Simeon most probably came from Africa, for Niger is an African name which means 'black.' He could well have been a black man. Lucius was from North Africa for that is where Cyrene is. And Manaen had been

raised as an aristocrat in the court of Herod the tetrarch who ruled Galilee and Peraea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39 as puppet king under Rome. He was Herod's foster-brother.

Last on the list was Saul who was from Tarsus in Cilicia, a city in Asia Minor. Though listed last, he became the most well known of all becoming Paul, the missionary Apostle to the Gentiles and author of half the books of the New Testament.

That little band of church leaders is representative of the kind of classless society that the church was meant to be. Men of varying backgrounds and from many lands had discovered the secret of oneness and equality because they had discovered the secret of Christ.

Had the church maintained this spirit and attitude, it would have captured the hearts of people everywhere in every generation. But later it would sing:

'The rich man in his castle,

The poor man at his gate,

God made them high and lowly.

And ordered their estate.'

The church at Antioch would have choked on that. The church later swallowed it and became class-filled like the heathen society around it. And to the extent that it did, it lost its universal appeal. But it can be regained in any generation by returning to the spirit of Antioch and once again becoming a classless counterculture.

Antioch Was Not Only Classless, It Was Color Blind

With Jesus all racial and color lines were erased. A person was a person for who he or she was. The church at Antioch had followed the example of its Lord. This can be seen by looking again at its list of leaders, particularly to 'Simeon called Niger,' literally, 'Simeon called the black.'

At Antioch a black man had an honored place in leadership among the 'prophets and teachers' of the church. He wasn't there as a token black to make the congregation appear to be politically correct. He wasn't being tolerated in order to pacify the blacks in the city. He was in the center of things as an honored leader in the congregation. His hands were laid on Paul and Barnabas ordaining and commissioning them to go forth to eventually take the gospel to white Europeans. A black man ordained the missionary that took the gospel to whites.

That beautifully illustrated the spirit of Christ who does not call people into his church to become racially tolerant of one another, but to rise above race and see each person as one for whom he died and one whom he greatly desires to see become a member of God's family.

Christ desires for his church to be a people who are not conscious of race, but who are deeply conscious of people. He desires that the members of his body be joined together racelessly and that race not be the topic of conversation in every interracial assembling of his people. He would have his people be known, as Martin Luther King once put it, 'not for the color of their skin, but for the content of their character.'

Antioch Was An International Church

Not only was the church at Antioch classless and color blind, it was also an international church. It was located in an international city. With a population of 500,000, Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. And it was at a crossroads through which commerce moved going in every direction.

Acts 11:19-21 tells us that when the great persecution erupted in Jerusalem following the stoning of Stephen, believers were scattered in every direction. They went north through Phoenicia to Cyprus and then on to Antioch proclaiming the good news of Jesus wherever they went. At first they only shared with Jews, but then they began speaking to Greeks. And as they did the Lord blessed them 'and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.' This resulted in the development of a great international church in Antioch. It was made up not only of Jews and Greeks but of people from all over the Mediterranean world. It reflected the international makeup of the city of Antioch. A look again at the list of its leaders will demonstrate this. They were from Cyprus, Asia Minor, North Africa, and Galilee, none were natives of Antioch itself.

Because the church at Antioch had an international makeup, it had an international mindset. And this is, no doubt, why the center of Christianity was moved there from Jerusalem. Because of its international makeup and mindset, God was able to use it as the base for evangelizing the world. It became the great hub of first century Christianity.

The message that comes out of Antioch is that God wants' his church to be an international church made up of people from every racial, ethnic, and national background and that it have a world vision of evangelism.

The modern marketing theories about 'church growth' which advocate that churches should be made up of people of the same race, national origin, and socioeconomic level in order to be successful, flies in the face of the model at Antioch where the church grew in response to God's grace rather than through social engineering.

Congregations of the first century included people from all classes of society, all races of mankind, all the many cultures of the day, all ages, every political and national allegiance, every occupation, and all manner of religious backgrounds. They believed and practiced the truth that in Christ all the barriers that divide people into hostile groups had been torn down and a new humanity had been created in which all people had become one. Those who establish churches along racial, national, or social lines, deny this truth and actually erect walls that divide and separate. Because this is the general practice in American churches, they are more responsible for dividing people into separatist groups than any other entity in American society.

There Was a Oneness Among Congregations

There was a oneness and a camaraderie among congregations of believers of the first century church. They were universal in spirit. They saw themselves as members of one great church, Christ's church. And it was not divided up into denominations or movements. It was the same church wherever they went. The members of every congregation had the same God and Father, had surrendered to the same Lord Jesus, had received the same Holy Spirit as their source of new life, had adopted the same faith to live

by, were sustained by the same hope, and had all been initiated into the faith by the same rite of baptism (Cf. Eph. 4:3-6).

Because of their oneness, there was a great spirit of sharing and cooperation among congregations. When one congregation was in need of help, other congregations sought to meet it. For example, when the believers in Judea were in distress because of a severe famine, the believers in Antioch, Corinth, and Macedonia sent them help (Cf. Acts 11:27-30; I Cor. 16:1-4; II Cor. 8:1-4, 13-14) even though some of them were going through a 'severe trial' of 'extreme poverty' themselves (II Cor. 8:2).

Because of their oneness there was free travel among congregations. Hospitality was quickly extended wherever you went. Members of one congregation were quickly accepted' as family members by another. Priscilla and Aquilla could travel from Rome to Corinth to Ephesus and be readily accepted by congregations in each place and given a place of service: and leadership. Peter, Paul, Timothy, Silas, Titus and Apollo could move from one congregation to another and be received as leaders and be given the opportunity to freely teach and preach. Members in one congregation supported leaders while they labored in other congregations. The Church at Antioch and at Philippi supported Paul while he labored in many places.

Think of the impact the church and its ministry could. have on the world for Christ today if this spirit of oneness existed. Think what could be done if congregations and believers everywhere were joined together in fellowship in a worldwide common labor for Christ and no longer contended against one another and duplicated one another's work. Think what could be accomplished if all their resources were pooled into one great effort. This is Christ's will for his church. The picture and message of the first century church tells us this.

Differences Didn't Result In Denominations

Though there was a great spirit of oneness among first century believers and congregations, there was room for differences of opinion. Brothers could even at times strongly disagree. But with no thought of separating themselves into divisive groups or denominations. A classical example of this can be seen in the strong disagreement Paul had with Barnabas over the advisability of taking John Mark with them on their second missionary journey.

John Mark had left them halfway through their first missionary journey and when they decided to leave on their second journey, Barnabas wanted to take him with them, but Paul didn't. 'Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus' and Paul chose Silas to accompany him as he revisited the churches that had been started in Syria and Cilicia on their first journey (Acts 15:36-41).

Their 'sharp disagreement' could have created two factions in the church. And both could have offered good reasons for their positions. Barnabas could have started the 'Redemptive Christian Fellowship' denomination contending that in his group people could have a second chance when they failed.

Paul could have started the 'Purified and Cleansed Holiness' denomination contending that the church should be kept pure and failures like John Mark should be purged from its fellowship lest it be contaminated.

Both Paul and Barnabas had good ideas for a new denomination, better than most have today. But neither started a schism in the church. The church at Antioch held them in unbroken fellowship and commended them both 'to the grace of the Lord' (Acts 15:40) .

Actually, their disagreement and separation resulted in a great good. For one thing, it doubled the missionary workforce by creating two missionary teams. And for another, it provided two well-known leaders the opportunity to work through a serious difficulty and come out victorious. And they did, as we shall see in the next section.

Congregations and their members are bound to have their differences of opinion, and even at times sharp disagreements. But the first century church teaches us that this does not have to lead to schisms or the creation of denominations in the church. Differences of opinion can at times actually turn into a great good, provided we let the grace and love of God hold us together in unbroken fellowship.

The New Testament Church Was Redemptive

The church of the first century was redemptive. It reclaimed, recycled, and restored people. Nothing could illustrate this better than a follow-up on the Paul and Barnabas disagreement over John Mark.

Barnabas, whose name means 'son of encouragement' (a nickname given him by the Apostles, Cf. Acts 4:36), took John Mark the deserter and failure, applied his ministry of encouragement, nurtured and restored him, and developed a spiritual maturity in him that in time resulted in his becoming one of the most fruitful and reknowned disciples of the first century. He became Peter's assistant (I Pet. 5:13) and was used to put Peter's teachings about Jesus into writing. It became the first written gospel about Christ and eventually became the second book in the New Testament. It is now known as The Gospel According To Mark.

To even better illustrate the redemptive spirit of the first century church, we only have to follow through on the John Mark story. As we do, we learn that in time Mark became Paul's beloved co-worker. Though Paul had refused to work with Mark after his desertion on the first missionary journey, in time God effected a great reconciliation between the two so that when we read about Mark in Paul's prison letters, he is addressed as 'my fellow worker' and is listed ahead of such notables as Luke (Col. 4:10; Pslm. 23, 24). In some of his very last words, Paul wrote to Timothy asking him to 'Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry' (II Tim. 4:11) .

Surely God has placed these accounts of redemptive action in his word to serve as a pattern for all succeeding generations of believers and congregations to emulate.

Leaders Were Not Superstars

One characteristic of the congregations we read about in the New Testament is that they were not led by, nor did they become dependent upon, individual superstars or charismatic leaders. In fact, none of

the congregations we read about were led by only one man. Every time we read about congregational leadership in the New Testament, it is always pluralistic. And no one leader ever seems to stand above others. The list of leaders in the church at Antioch illustrates this. Of the five men named, the Apostle Paul is at the bottom of the list.

Those whom we today regard as the outstanding leaders of the first century church never seemed to have been taken up with a sense of their own self-importance. Neither were they placed on a pedestal by their fellow believers. There were times when even greats like the Apostle Paul had to appeal to congregations to accept him as the God-ordained Apostle that he was. Those of his day sometimes spoke of him critically as being 'timid,' 'unimpressive,' a poor speaker lacking content in his message, and an 'inferior' Apostle who was plagued with 'weaknesses' (II Cor. 10:1, 10; 11:5, 6, 30; 12:5, 9, 10). He described himself to the Corinthians as one having come to them 'in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.' He said that his message and preaching 'were not with wise and persuasive words' and that he was 'the least of the apostles and [did] not even deserve to be called an apostle' (I Cor. 2:3, 4; 15:9). He wrote to those in the Ephesian church saying that he was 'less than the least of all God's people' and was effective only because of God's enabling grace and power (Eph. 3:7, 8).

The Apostle Peter, whom many consider to be the leading figure in the church, certainly never thought of himself in any exalted way. When he was elected by God to be the first to take the gospel to the Gentiles and was entering the house of Cornelius to share with him, 'Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. 'Stand up,' he said, 'I am only a man myself'' (Acts 10:25, 26).

First century leaders, for the most part, took to heart the warning of Jesus against exalting themselves and assuming venerated titles (Cf. Mt. 23:8-12). They considered themselves to be plain, ordinary men who had become the humble servants of Christ and were by God's grace and empowering, seeking to be led by the Spirit to do the will of God.

Though men in their own wisdom may think that the kingdom is advanced by charismatic leaders with impressive educational qualifications and titles who are given positions of power and authority, the witness of God has always been: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty' (Zech. 4:6). The Kingdom of God has always been advanced by humble, ordinary people who have been harnessed to the will of God and have been inspired, equipped, and empowered by His Spirit.

It Was A Holy Spirit Led Church

This leads to another observation about the church that is pictured in New Testament scripture: it was Holy Spirit led. It was sensitive to the urging and prompting of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit could speak to its leaders and give them direction. Again, the church at Antioch serves to illustrate. While the leaders of that congregation 'were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'' (Acts 13:2). Evidently the Spirit had issued a previous call to Barnabas and Saul and was now directing the other leaders of the congregation to confirm it and set them apart and commission them to the task. They did. Barnabas and Paul went out on their first missionary journey, won many people to Christ, and established a number of congregations on the island of Cyprus and in Asia Minor.

How was it that the Holy Spirit was able to speak to the leaders in the church at Antioch? In the same way that he had always spoken to men--through the prophets. Several illustrations will enable us to see this.

As the church in Jerusalem was praising God in prayer because of the release of Peter and John from jail, they prayed to God, 'You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David' (Acts 4:25). When Paul was on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his last missionary journey, he stopped off at Caesarea to visit Philip the evangelist for a number of days. Agabus the prophet came down from Jerusalem with a message for him from the Holy Spirit. As he gave Paul the message, he became the Holy Spirit's spokesman as he said, 'The Holy Spirit says ...' (Acts 21:8-11). In the final scene in the Book of Acts where Paul is imprisoned in Rome and has called the leaders of the Jews to visit him and has tried to convince them that Jesus was the Christ, some were convinced, but others were not. The record says that Paul 'made this final statement: 'The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet. (Acts 28:24)

In each of these instances, when the Holy Spirit spoke, he spoke through a prophet. So how did the Holy Spirit speak to the leaders of the church in Antioch? Undoubtedly in the same way. The leaders at Antioch are introduced with this statement: 'In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers.' (Acts 13:1). One of those prophets obviously became the spokesman for the Holy Spirit.

Can the Holy Spirit speak to today's church? Yes. How? In much the same way that he spoke to the first century church —through prophets; those who proclaim his word. How will the Holy Spirit get his message to these prophets? He will speak to them. How will he speak to them? Through his written word. You see, all of scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and is his word. Peter tells how it happened when he says, 'For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (II Pet. 1:21). Often when Old Testament scripture is quoted in the New Testament the quote is prefaced with 'the Holy Spirit spoke' or 'said' or 'testified' (Cf. Acts 1:16; Heb. 3:7; 10:15).

The Holy Spirit can speak more clearly and more fully to today's church than he could to the first century church because today's church has the full record of all that the Holy Spirit has chosen to speak to man.

The inspiration and example that we get from the first century church is that it looked to the Holy Spirit for its direction and obeyed when that direction was given. The Holy Spirit Led the Church To Reach Out. The outcome of the Holy Spirit leading the first century church was that he got the church to outgo. The Holy Spirit prompted the church to carry out Jesus' final commission. That commission is given in all four Gospels and the Book of Acts. Matthew's gospel has Jesus saying, 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'

The first century church began carrying out this commission from its inception. From the day of Pentecost to the end of the Biblically recorded account of its activities, the church was constantly witnessing.

When the Holy Spirit is able to speak to a congregation, one of the first things he will emphasize will be the importance of every member becoming involved in communicating the message of Christ to the lost. In almost every instance in the New Testament where believers are spoken of as being 'filled with the

Holy Spirit,' it is for the purpose of proclaiming the message of Christ. Paul makes it clear that as soon as one is reconciled to Christ (Cf. Mt. 28:19, 20; Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:46 f f. ; Jn. 20:21; Acts 2, Cf. Acts 4:4, 31; 5:42; 6:7; 10:23-48; 11:19-21; 13-14; Cf. Acts 2:4, 22-36; 4:8, 31; 7:3, 7, 9-10, 55; 9:17-20; 11:24; 13:9-12; 13:52-14:1) he should immediately become a reconciler.' The Holy Spirit empowered believers so that they might evangelize the lost.

If there is one thing that the example of the first century Church makes clear; it is that the church needs to be reaching out to the lost with the saving message of Christ. The church needs to ring door bells instead of church bells. It needs to go out as much as it needs to come in. It needs to spend more time seeking to find others and less time seeking to find itself. It needs to get out of itself and get into the lives of others. It needs fewer programs and more proclamation. It needs fewer clerks and more salesmen. It needs fewer whiners and more witnesses. It needs to talk less about itself and more about Him. It needs to become less apologetic and more evangelistic.

The church of the New Testament teaches us that as soon as one comes to Christ and receives the Holy Spirit, there should be an inward stirring within him prompting him to find someone to bring to Christ. Peter's brother, Andrew, serves as a good example of this. As soon as he discovered Christ, he brought his brother Peter to Christ. Cf. II Cor. 5:17-20.

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

The New Testament makes it clear that Christ is the infallible, authoritative, chief leader of his church. He is its founder, Savior, head, and Lord. He is its 'Shepherd and Overseer' (I Pet. 2:25). In fact, he is called the 'great Shepherd' of his sheep (Heb. 13:20).

It became obvious even before Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father that he was going to have men assist him in shepherding his people. One of the final things that he did before His ascension was to appoint Peter to assist him in shepherding His sheep. He commissioned Peter to be his undershepherd to help 'take care' of them and 'feed' them (Jn. 21:15-17). So in addition to being an Apostle, Peter became what was to be known as an 'elder' or 'overseer' (bishop) in the church.

From what Peter later wrote we learn that not only did he assist Christ in shepherding His church, but shepherds were appointed in every New Testament congregation to help Christ shepherd his church. Peter addressed these undershepherds when he wrote in his first letter: 'To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who will also share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers (bishops).' (I Pet. 5:1, 2) .

That there were undershepherds overseeing every flock is further substantiated by passages that clearly tell us that they were chosen and appointed in every congregation where Paul ministered. Acts 14:23 tells us that 'Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church ...' When Paul gave instructions to Titus regarding the churches on Crete he wrote: 'appoint elders in every town, as I directed you' (Titus 1:5). When he wrote his letter to the Philippian church, he addressed it: 'To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers (bishops) and deacons' (Phil. 1:1). He wrote to both Timothy and Titus listing the qualifications for those to be considered as overseers or elders in each congregation (I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).

It is obvious that Jesus' plan for shepherding his church was to have mature, qualified men appointed as His undershepherds in each congregation and for them to be given the responsibility and authority to oversee his church and see that His directives were carried out.

Titles Of the under shepherds

It might seem confusing in reading the New Testament to find that the undershepherds of the church were called by three differing titles. Sometimes they were referred to as 'elders,' sometimes 'overseers' or 'bishops,' and at other times as 'pastors' or 'shepherds.' Does this mean that there were three kinds of leaders in the church? Were they graduated in rank? No, all three designations referred to the same office and all three were used interchangeably. This is demonstrated in several passages where the undershepherds are addressed.

For example, in Acts 20:17 Paul called the elders of the Ephesian church to Miletus to bid them farewell for the last time. In verse twenty-eight he addressed them saying, 'Guard yourselves and all the flock of v/hich the Holy Spirit has made YOU overseers (bishops). Peter used two of the terms interchangeably when he wrote, 'Be shepherds (pastors) of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers (bishops). (I Pet. 5:1, 2). In Titus 1:6,7, where Paul lists the qualifications for 'an elder,' although he

begins addressing elders, halfway through the list he switches terms and starts talking about 'overseers' (bishops). He gave Timothy almost the same identical list of qualifications as he did to Titus except Timothy's list is addressed to 'overseers' (bishops) instead of 'elders'. (Cf. I Tim. 3:1, 2).

The Greek word that Paul used for 'shepherds' in addressing the Ephesian Elders in Acts 20 (poimainein) was the same basic word he used in Ephesians 4:11 when he listed God's gift of leaders to the church and said, 'It was he who gave some to be pastors (poimenas) and teachers.' The same word was also used by Peter when he addressed elders and said, 'Be shepherds' (pastors-poimanein, I Pet. 5:1, 2). George E. Ladd says that, 'The language of Ephesians 4:11 suggests that pastor-teacher is a single office embodying a twofold function: that of shepherding or overseeing the flock and of teaching. It is probable that this term designates leaders in the local church and is basically the same as presbyteroi (elders) and episkopoi (bishops).'

George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 533.

The terms elder, overseer or bishop, and pastor or shepherd are all terms used interchangeably in the New Testament referring to one and the same office. And it is important to note that in no instance in the New Testament is there a reference to this office in the singular except when it lists the qualifications that a person should meet in order to be considered for the office. There was no such things as 'the pastor,' or 'the bishop,' or 'the elder' as the singular leader of the congregation. The New Testament knows nothing of a one man pastor type leadership. There was always a plurality of leaders leading a congregation. Larry Richards writes, 'I can find no case in which local leadership was limited to one person. All New Testament references are to elders (plural), none to 'the elder' (e.g., leader) of the church at such-and-such.' And the authority and realm of their leadership did not extend beyond the local congregation.

W. E. Vine says that 'Presbuteros, an elder, is another term for the same person as bishop or overseer. The term 'elder' indicates the mature spiritual experience and understanding of those so described; the term 'bishop' or 'overseer' indicates the character of the work undertaken.' W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 128, 129.

George E. Ladd says that, 'The word 'elder' is the translation of 'presbyter.' These leaders were called not only elders but bishops (episkopoi), a term designating their function of overseeing the church.'

A. M. Hunter writes, '(It is agreed that in the New Testament 'elder' and 'bishop' refer to the same office, the former stressing status, the latter function).'

William Hendriksen says that 'Very fittingly the term overseer is used when the emphasis is on their work (I Tim. 3:1), the term elder when the emphasis is on the honor that is their due (I Tim. 5:17).'

The Responsibility of Church Leaders

The primary responsibility of leaders in the Church of New Testament times was to shepherd or superintend the flock. The terms 'pastor' and 'overseer' strongly emphasize this. The term 'elder' was more descriptive of the man than the office and was used to describe one who was mature and experienced in life and faith and who was definitely not a novice in the faith.

In Acts 20:28-30 Paul told the elders-bishops-pastors at Ephesus to feed, shepherd and guard the flock. The writer of Hebrews wrote that they were to 'keep watch' over it (13:17). In Titus 1:9 Paul said that they were to 'encourage' the flock 'by sound doctrine, and 'refute those who oppose it.' Peter instructed that they were to shepherd the flock by 'being good examples to' it (I Pet. 5:3). James taught that they were to have a concern for the physical well being of the flock and were to minister to its sick through prayer (James 5:14-16).

Perhaps no passage sets forth the duties they had as clearly and simply as does I Timothy 5:17. It states that they had a threefold responsibility: ruling, preaching, and teaching. Paul wrote: 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching' (RSV).

This passage indicates that all elders were to participate in ruling or overseeing the flock but not all elders were to necessarily engage in preaching and teaching. To qualify as an elder one had to be 'able to teach' (I Tim. 3:2), but the indication is that not all did. One thing seems quite clear: the elders were the main preachers and teachers in New Testament congregations. And they were compensated for their work.

In I Timothy 5:18 Paul argued for them to be compensated by the congregation with the same arguments he used to justify his own support when he was serving the church (Cf. I Cor. 9:1-14). His bottom line argument was that 'the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel' (I Cor. 9:14). In a similar way he instructed the Galatians that 'Anyone who receives instructions in the Lord must share all good things with his instructor' (Gal. 6:6).

It may not be that all the elders in a congregation engaged in preaching and teaching as full time, salaried workers, but for those who did it can be argued that they derived their living for doing such on the principal that 'those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel' (I Cor. 9:14; also Cf. Lk. 10:7).

Although every elder who ruled well had a right to remuneration, especially those who preached and taught, it does not follow that they always exercised that right. Paul as an apostle certainly didn't (Cf. I Cor. 9:15-18).

How Leaders Are To Lead

The kind of leadership that Christ seeks for his church is a very different kind of leadership than is usually seen in this world. People think of leadership in terms of superiority, rank, authority, and power. When Jesus thought of leadership he had only one thing in mind-servanthood.

The mind of Christ concerning leadership is revealed in two incidents in the gospel of Matthew. In one, his concept of leadership is contrasted with that of the world, and in the other it is contrasted with that of the religious leaders of his day.

Responding to a disturbance among his disciples arising out of contention over who should have the prominent positions of power in his kingdom, 'Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first

must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:25-28).

Leaders in his church were to follow his example, not that of leaders in the world. Leaders in the world ruled from positions of power and exercised authority over others. Like Him, His disciples were to lead as servant leaders. Rather than standing above and over others commanding and demanding, his disciples were to get beneath others and lift them up and equip them to become effective servants in their own right. Leaders were appointed to serve the people, not be served by them.

Describing the Pharisees, which were the religious leaders of the day, Jesus pictured them as weighting others down with 'heavy loads' without helping in any way, parading themselves and their religion before others in self-aggrandizement, seeking places of prominence and honor wherever they went, and taking

upon themselves titles of honor and exaltation. He then said to his disciples, 'The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted' (Mt. 23:11, 12).

'The spiritual leadership in Israel in Christ's day exercised authority, but were neither examples nor servants of God's people. And thus they stood condemned.'

Richards, Op Cit, p. 112. Being a leader in the church means being a servant. And servants do not go around exercising their authority over others commanding them or making demands upon them. It isn't that they don't have authority, they do. But their authority does not reside within them personally. Their authority rests in the office to which they have been appointed and in the faithfulness with which they live and teach the Word of God. Therefore, they have no need to demand or scheme, or to politic or to plot. They only have to be faithful as a servant: leading, not pushing; demonstrating, not demanding.

The New Testament gives an example of a church boss who sought to exalt himself and exercise authority over others. It does so for the purpose of condemning such action. The Apostle John wrote to Gaius, 'I wrote to the church, but Diotrefes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us.' He then exhorts, 'do not imitate what is evil but what is good' (III Jn. 9,11).

True spiritual leaders of the church are to lead primarily by their godly life and by their teaching. By their good example they say in effect, 'Follow me as I follow Christ.' Through their teaching they offer encouragement, instruction, reproof, rebuke, correction, and training. They appeal to the word of God and call upon members of the flock to obey what it says. Their authority does not extend beyond this. If the sheep will not follow the example of their shepherds or heed their teaching, they simply cannot be led.

Leading by Example and Teaching

The call for leaders to lead by their example and by their teaching appears often in scripture. In I Timothy 4:12 Paul instructed Timothy, 'set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.' In verse sixteen he exhorts him: 'Watch your life and doctrine closely.' To Titus he wrote: 'in everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching' show integrity, seriousness

and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned.' (Titus 2:7,8). Peter appeals to elders to serve not by lording it over those entrusted to them, but by 'being examples to the flock' (I Pet, 5:3).

Paul's personal appeal as a leader to those in the Corinthian church was for them to follow his 'way of life in Christ Jesus, which (he said) agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church' (I Cor. 4:17). He exhorted those in the Philippian church saying, 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice' (Phil.4:9).

Although Paul most often led by his example and his teaching, there were times when he exercised the authority the Lord gave him. But it was always for building up and not for tearing down. Twice in his second letter to the Corinthians he said that the Lord had given him authority 'for building you up, not for tearing you down' (II Cor. 10:8; 13:10). Usually, he used his position and message to appeal to believers to do what was right. For example, in issuing a call for Christian living to those in the church at Rome he wrote, 'I appeal to you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God' (Ro. 12:1 RSV). Likewise, to those in the Ephesian church he wrote, 'I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received' (Eph. 4:1). To Philemon he wrote, 'although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — I appeal to you for my son Onesimus' (Phlmn. 8-10).

In the life of the church, those leaders who lead by example and by faithful teaching which appeals rather than commands will most successfully fulfill their responsibilities.

How Leaders Are Chosen

The qualifications for undershepherds are listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The lists are identical except that the Titus list adds 'hospitality' and the need to encourage with 'sound doctrine' and 'refute those who oppose it.' And omits 'not (being) a recent convert' and 'able to teach.'

These two lists of qualifications seem to naturally fall into three categories that include character, domestic, and spiritual qualities.

They list some character traits that are necessary, and some that shouldn't be found in the life of a candidate. On the positive side, the candidate was to be blameless, temperate, sober, and of good behavior. On the negative side, he was not to be given to much wine, not to be violent, not to be greedy for money, not to be quarrelsome, not to be covetous, and not to be self-willed.

Those to be considered as undershepherds were to have their households in good order. The reason being that if one 'does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?' (I Tim. 3:5). He, therefore, needed to be the husband of one wife, rule his own house well, and have a hospitable home.

To be an effective shepherd called for one to be more than a man of character and a good husband and father. He had to be divinely enabled and equipped in certain ways. He needed to be able to teach, exhort, and convince with sound doctrine. He would need to hold firmly to the trustworthy message of the Word making it the sole source of his teaching material. He was required to be holy and just. He could not be a recent convert or he might be overtaken by pride. And he had to have a good reputation with outsiders as well as with those in the church.

It is obvious from this that the spiritual leaders of the church were to be those who had made distinct progress in the Christian life and had character that witnessed evidence of transformation developed by the Holy Spirit.

It is not hard to see that the development of qualified leadership in the New Testament church was dependent more upon the prospective leader's growth and maturity in Christ than anything else. It is also clear that congregational leaders of first century churches were not developed in schools or centers outside the local congregation because such training centers were nonexistent. It is more likely that they were developed and raised up from within the local congregation where their character and family life could be constantly monitored and evaluated, where their gifts could be discovered, honed and developed, and where they could have the opportunity to receive practical experience in serving. The congregation would watch them begin to meet the qualifications listed in

I Timothy and Titus and would in time choose them and ordain them to be one of the shepherds of the flock.

The qualifications in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 served as guidelines for the congregation to follow in choosing men who would be capable, responsible shepherds who could easily move among the sheep performing their duties with the least possibility of criticism or rejection. The qualifications were not stringent. What they called for could have been met by any serious believer with some degree of maturity. They were not given to make it difficult for one to become a shepherd, but to enable him to more easily perform his duties, and do so with the least amount of difficulty and the greatest amount of effectiveness.

Who Chose the under shepherds?

The fact that qualifications were given for the selection of shepherds for a congregation necessitated that someone had to do the choosing. Who did it?

At first, the choice was made by the apostles or their assistants (Cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), but in their absence, and certainly after their departure, the responsibility would have fallen either upon the existing elders, if there were any, or upon the congregation as a whole. The elders or the members of the congregation, whichever the case might have been, would have chosen those from their midst who met the qualifications for shepherd and would have then appointed or ordained them as their leaders. As the duly appointed leaders of the congregation, they would then have 'direct(ed) the affairs of the church' (I Tim. 5:17) not as its overlords but as its overseers.

And though they would have been given authority to 'direct the affairs of the church' they would have been chosen by its members and would have been responsible to them.

Since shepherds were chosen and ordained by the congregation to govern it, the church's government would not have been congregational (where decisions are made by the congregation as a whole), nor would it have been dictatorial (where a few make unilateral decisions with responsibility to no one), but representative (where a few lead by consent of the whole).

The Flock's Responsibility to Its Shepherds

While the shepherds of New Testament congregations were charged with certain duties and responsibilities as the leaders of the flock, their leadership could not have been realized without the congregation honoring and respecting their position as shepherds and being willing to follow their leading. Members of the congregation were, therefore, charged with certain responsibilities to their shepherds. They were called upon to respect them and hold them in highest regard in love. Paul instructed the Thessalonians 'to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you, hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work' (I Thess. 5:12, 13). He told Timothy to teach that 'double honor' be bestowed on those who did their job well (I Tim. 5:17), and that no accusation be brought against them unless it was substantiated 'by two or three witnesses' (I Tim. 5:19). The writer of Hebrews directed: 'Remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith' (Heb. 13:7). And again, 'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden' (Heb. 13:17).

So the congregation was to esteem, honor, love, emulate and obey its leaders in order to encourage them to do their job well so that in return its members would have effective leaders to shepherd and care for them.

The Ministry Of Deacons

A second category of servant-leaders in the New Testament church was that of deacon. Deacons were special servants in the church who assisted the overseers. Their function was more in the area of practical service. The very word deacon indicates that. It is borrowed from the Greek work diakonos which was the common word for a servant, to be distinguished from the word doulos which was the word for a bondservant or slave.

Deacons are referred to in only two places in scripture, but both times in association with the overseers. In Paul's letter to the Philippians he greets them along with the overseers (Phil. 1:1), and in I Timothy three he lists their qualifications following that of the overseers (I Tim. 3:8-13). The inference is that the two offices worked in concert with one another. The overseers did the shepherding, teaching, and governing, and the deacons worked supporting their leadership seeing to it that the practical needs of the congregation and its ministries were met. Their work was not of inferior value. It was an expression of Christ's loving concern for his people and having their needs met.

In order to carry out their task effectively, deacons, like elders, were called upon to meet certain qualifications. Like the elders, they were to possess certain character traits, have certain domestic qualities, and demonstrate a servant spirit.

They were to be men of respect, and to be sincere, moderate, and honest. They were to have a solid grasp of the faith and hold it with a clear conscience. They were to have only one wife and were to manage their children and households well. And like elders, they were to be seasoned believers who had stood the test of trial and had demonstrated their fitness for the task.

Those who met these qualifications and received the approval of the congregation to serve as deacons were ordained to the office by the overseers.

These two groups of leaders provided the leadership through which Christ shepherded his people and saw that their needs were met. We would do well to emulate this pattern.

THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

An inquisitive five year old boy asked his mother, 'Mother, what is worship?' And she replied, 'Worship is what we do in church on Sunday.' That mother defined worship as most people think of it. If you don't think so, just start asking people what comes to their mind when they hear the word 'worship.' Having done so on many occasions, I have found that most people define worship as the mother did. They think of it only in terms of what they do when they are assembled on Sunday.

But you would never come to that conclusion by reading about worship in the New Testament. Of the nine Greek words used in the New Testament to speak of worship, not one is used to describe what the church did when it was assembled. All are used to refer to the worship of the individual believer in his daily life experience.

This is not to say that the church of the New Testament did not engage in corporate worship; it surely did. But first century believers had a concept of worship that included much more than what they did in their Sunday assemblies. For them, worship included not only what they did when assembled with other believers on Sunday, but everything else they did in life that pleased and honored God.

All of Life Expressed Worship

The Apostle Paul's appeal to first century believers was for them to give the whole of their lives in sacrificial service to God as an expression of their worship of Him. He wrote to the church at Rome, 'offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--which is your spiritual worship' (Ro. 12:1). He could call upon them to do so because their lives no longer belonged to them; they had been 'bought at a price' and therefore should 'honor God with [their] body' (I Cor. 6:19, 20). They should 'offer [themselves] to God, as those who have returned from death to life,' and 'offer the parts of [their bodies] to him as instruments of righteousness' (Ro. 6:13).

The very term Paul used for 'worship' when calling upon the Roman Christians to give the whole of themselves to the worship of God, was a term that in itself indicated that all that is done in life that is God-honoring is part of one's worship of God. For example, one could be said to be worshiping God when offering honest, faithful work on one's job, faithfully and responsibly serving family, reaching out to neighbors in time of need, communicating the message of Christ to others, joining other believers in the work of the church, as well as worshiping with them on Sunday. All of these things would be considered expressions of Christian worship.

James spoke of worship in basically the same way Paul did when he wrote to believers about external expressions of worship. He maintained that meeting the obvious needs of others as well as seeking purity of life for one's self were examples of what worship was meant to be. He wrote, 'External religious worship (religion as it is expressed in outward acts) that is pure and unblemished in the sight of God the Father is this: to visit and help and care for the orphans and widows in their affliction and need, and to keep oneself unspotted and uncontaminated from the world' (James 1:27 Amp. N.T.)

With this kind of teaching coming from leaders who were revered and accepted as inspired spokesmen for God, first century believers could not have conceived of worship in any other way. They knew it included all they did every day in every way including their assembly worship.

Assembly Worship

But because the Sunday assembly was a highlighted aspect of the worship of first century Christians, and because it was a reflection of the whole of their worship, what they did when assembled would be an important matter to consider. So let's seek to determine when and where they met and what they did when they assembled for worship.

It may come as a surprise, but the New Testament really doesn't tell us too much about their assembly worship. We get a few brief glances in the book of Acts and in I Corinthians. But other than that, all else that we know comes from exhortations or general instruction about worship in the rest of the New Testament letters.

Nevertheless, there is enough said to give us an adequate picture of what they did and how they went about it.

The Day and Time of Assembly

Perhaps we should begin by considering what day and what time of day they assembled for worship.

Actually, in the beginning, they met together every day for worship (Acts 2:46, 47), but in time they settled into meeting on the first day of the week which came to be known as 'the Lord's Day' (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:1, 2; Rev. 1:10). Why the first day of the week and not the Sabbath (Saturday), the centuries old Jewish traditional day of worship? Several reasons; none of which was because Sunday was a day off from work.

Aside from scriptural examples, early Christian tradition tells us that one of the main reasons they chose to meet on Sunday instead of the traditional Sabbath was because they didn't want to be identified as a cult of Judaism.

The respected church historian Philip Schaff gives us the other main reason: 'It was on that day that Christ rose from the dead; that he appeared to Mary, the disciples of Emmaus, and the assembled apostles; that he poured out his Spirit and founded the church; and that he revealed to his beloved disciple the mysteries of the future.' This reason is strongly supported in such first and second century writings as The Epistle to Barnabas, the Didache, and particularly in chapter sixty-seven of The Apology Of Justin Martyr To the Emperor Antoninus Pius (circa 155 A.D.)

What hour of the day did they meet? If scripture would support any particular time of day when they assembled, it would probably be evening, for there are several Biblical references to

their having gathered then (Cf. Acts 12:12; 20:7). For most people, particularly slaves, it would have had to have been evening or early in the morning either before or after all work was done. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, p. 478

Where did first century believers meet for their assemblies?

It was a matter of indifference to them where they met. For at least the first 150 years of Christianity, congregations did not own property or erect special buildings to meet in. Churches didn't start

constructing special buildings to meet in until about 200 A.D. And interestingly enough, during the first two centuries of Christianity the Church experienced its greatest period of vitality and growth until recent times.

Howard Snyder says, 'In those days it was mobile, flexible, friendly, humble, inclusive—and growing like mad!' Its focus was upon people. They were the all important thing. They constituted the church. They were what was sacred in the sight of God. If someone in the first or second century Mediterranean world would have asked for directions to the church, he would have been directed to a group of people, not a building.

Modern believers suffer from an edifice complex and tend to believe that specially constructed church buildings are absolutely essential to the church's evangelistic effort, growth and development, and all else that it does. And so it spends the larger part of its time and money building and maintaining them believing that they are essential to attracting unbelievers and promoting church growth. But that premise is wrong on two counts. First, Jesus said that his disciples were to 'go and make disciples' (Mt. 28:19), not build attractive buildings to lure them to the assembly. To do the latter could be compared to attempting to catch fish by spreading out a net on the beach and waiting for them to jump out of the ocean into it. Second, to try to attract sinners with beautiful buildings is to appeal to their pride. And that is evangelism at its worst. Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem Of Wineskins*, p. 73.

This is not to say that clean, attractive buildings cannot be useful to the ministry of the church, especially if they are flexible and multi-purposed and are seen as instruments to be used to extend the Kingdom of God.

If first century believers didn't have church buildings, then where did they meet?

At first they met in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 4:1; 5:42). Then when they were dispersed from Jerusalem because of the great persecution that arose following the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), and were divided into smaller groups, they started meeting in homes. In Acts 12:12 they are seen meeting in the house of Mary, John Mark's mother. And Paul addresses churches meeting in someone's house four times in his letters (Ro. 16:5; I Cor. 16:9; Col. 4:15; Phlmn. 2).

Sometimes early believers met in rented buildings, but never those that had been used for heathen worship. When Paul was in Ephesus for two years, he and the disciples met 'in the lecture hall of Tyrannus' (Acts 19:9).

Sometimes first century believers met early in the morning (Cf. Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan, circa 111-113 A.D.) or late in the evening in fields under the trees. And when severe persecution started during the reign of emperor Nero (54-68 A.D.), Christians were forced to meet in hiding places. Those in Rome met in the catacombs.

Descriptions of Worship

The earliest and only detailed description of the worship of the New Testament church is the account of the continued activity of the 3,000 following their conversion on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2:42 tells us 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' Let's briefly consider each one of these.

First, 'they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. All teaching about Jesus and all other teaching about the Christian faith originated with the apostles. They were its recognized inspired spokesmen (Cf. Heb. 2:3; II Pet. 3:2) and their teaching was accepted on a par with Old Testament scripture (II Pet. 3:15,16).

At first, all of their teaching was done personally and orally. But with the rapid spread and growth of Christianity, it became necessary to put it into written form so that it could be more widely circulated. In time, their writings were collected and organized by the church into what has now become known as the New Testament scriptures.

The teaching of the Apostles created the church and then fed and sustained it. Along with Old Testament scripture, the early church thrived on the Apostles' teaching.

The teaching and preaching of the apostles' message is still essential in making disciples and in nurturing and maturing them. The church will always find its source of life in their teaching. It is not by random selection that devotion to the Apostles' teaching appears first on the list of those things to which the first 3,000 Christians gave themselves. Devotion to God's word is the primary element in Christian worship.

The second thing that the first Christians devoted themselves to was fellowship. The word used for fellowship (Koinonia) means to give or to share. And that is precisely what the first Christians did when they came together. They gave themselves to one another and shared their means. The unfurling of their story repeatedly witnesses to this.

The oft repeated call for believers to 'encourage one another' given in the New Testament letters (next to 'love,' 'encouragement' is called for most) is a further witness to how they gave themselves to building up one another. The love, support, and encouragement that they gave to one another made their meetings seem more like a family gathering where family members were rallied to give support to one another, rather than a solemn assembly of worshippers gathered to go through some impersonal, meaningless ritual.

Cf. Acts 20:7; I Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; I Tim. ^ 4:3; II Tim. 4:2. Cf. Acts 2:44,45; 4:32; 11:29,30; I Cor. 16:1-4; II Cor. 8:13,

Cf. passages like I Thess. 4:18; 5:11; Heb. 3:13; and particularly Heb. 10:25. The third thing the first Christians devoted themselves to in their assemblies was 'the breaking of bread.' This was obviously not a common meal of some kind because it appears in the middle of a list of spiritually significant items of worship in which it is preceded by fellowship and followed by prayer. The fact that it immediately follows the reference to fellowship makes it appear to be a special expression or symbol of that fellowship. Indeed, the word used here in Acts 2:42 translated fellowship is the very same Greek word that is used to describe the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians 10:16. F. F. Bruce says that, 'The 'breaking of bread' here denotes something more than the ordinary partaking of food together; the regular observance of the Lord's Supper is no doubt indicated.'

I. H. Marshall simply says, 'This is Luke's term for what Paul calls the Lord's Supper.' And adds, 'Luke is simply using an early Palestinian name for the Lord's Supper.'

So the 'breaking of bread' spoken of here is undoubtedly the observance of the Lord's Supper which is also called elsewhere in scripture the 'communion,' 'table of the Lord,' and 'the loaf and the cup.' The 'breaking of the bread' as used here, refers to that observance which Jesus instituted on the night of his betrayal when he took unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine, likened them to his own body and blood, passed them among his disciples to eat and drink, and requested that they continue to do so in remembrance of him after his departure (Luke 22:14-20).

F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 79.

Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 83,

By the time you get to Acts 20:7 and I Corinthians 10 and

11 the Lord's Supper has become an established, central part of congregational worship. Certainly in the second and third century post-apostolic church, it had become firmly established as the focal point of assembly worship. The *Didache*, an early second century sixteen chapter manual of instruction for new converts, offers typical instruction of the day: 'On every Lord's Day--His special day--come together and break bread and give thanks' (14:1).

Both the Biblical message and post-apostolic writings point to the fact 'that the Lord's Supper was the central act of worship for the apostolic church, and was more emphatically such for the post-apostolic church.'

The fourth thing that the first Christians devoted themselves to when they came together was prayer. Prayer was an integral part of their assembly worship. One of the main reasons they came together was to pray. When Peter and John were released from jail and from defending themselves to the rulers of the Jews, they sought out the believers and they all joined in prayer for greater boldness to witness (Acts 4:23-31). When King Herod had Peter thrown into prison 'the church was earnestly praying for him.' Even as an angel was rescuing him 'many people had gathered and were praying' for him (Acts 12:5, 12). It was after they 'had fasted and prayed' that the church at Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries (Acts 13:2, 3).

In their letters to the churches, the Apostles constantly called the church to prayer: 'Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.' 'Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.' 'Pray continually.'

These four things—teaching and preaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer—were the basic, essential elements of the worship of the New Testament Church. Included in them were the several other things that the church did while assembled such as singing, sharing in the 'love feast, receiving offerings, extending a 'holy kiss' and ministering to the needy. But these were the basics.

Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2; I Thessalonians 5:17. Also Cf. Philipians 4:6; I Timothy 2:1,2,8; James 5:13-16. Ephesians 5:19; Col. 3:16; Cf. II Peter 2:13; Jude 12; I Corinthians 11:17-22, 33-34.

I Thessalonians 5:26; I Peter 5:14.

There Was Spontaneity and Participation

The assembly worship of the New Testament church was characterized by spontaneity and participation and was full of meaning for every member. Worshipers were not spectators, but were completely and wholeheartedly involved participants in all that went on. Their worship was less like a football game where a few participate and most observe, and more like a marathon race where everyone participates.

Aside from the fact that the Corinthian church had problems in its assembly, it nevertheless serves to illustrate spontaneity and participation. Those assembled fully participated in everything that went on. They were eager to share when given the opportunity to do so. They actually became so exuberant in their desire to participate that confusion and disorder broke out disrupting their whole worship. So much so that the Apostle Paul had to write them insisting that 'everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (I Cor. 14:40).

Some important things about first century worship can be gleaned from Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians. Because of their overexuberance in worship, there emerged four guiding principles to govern it. These principles are timeless and should serve to govern the worship of the church in every age and in every place. Cf. I Cor. 14:21

First and foremost, there was to be love. The first thing Paul said to the Corinthians about their worship was 'Follow the way of love' (I Cor. 14:1). He ended the letter by exhorting, 'Do everything in love' (16:14). Earlier in the letter he had said 'love builds up,' literally, 'love builds up the household of God' (8:1).

Secondly, everything that was done in the assembly was to 'be done for the strengthening (edification) of the church' (I Cor. 14:26). The church was to excel in the use of those gifts that would build it up (14:12).

Third, everything the church did was to serve to encourage its members (I Cor. 14:3). In fact, the main purpose for believers meeting together was so that they might 'encourage one another ...' (Heb. 10:25).

Fourth, encouragement is often associated with comfort (Cf. I Cor. 14:3; I Thess. 2:12). There would always be those in the assembly who for some reason or other would be hurting, and they would need comforting: those hurt in battle, those experiencing loss and separation, and those facing disappointment. So the church would need to offer comfort to its hurting members.

Everything that was to be done in the assembly was to be done to promote these four qualities, for these were the things that lifted the spirits of weary pilgrims, and equipped them to go out into the world exuberant in spirit to do battle for another week.

One evening I was watching a television news program in which a piece on a Tupperware sales meeting was presented. The people were shown coming together with an excited air of expectation. They warmly greeted and received one another and witnessed a great sense of camaraderie. Then a leader stood and warmly welcomed them and began to encourage and inspire them after which they all began to exuberantly sing and clap and to extol the benefits of Tupperware. They sang of the blessings they

were receiving in selling it, and the importance of getting it into more people's homes. Then several salespeople were recognized and applauded for the good job they had been doing. New, helpful information was dispensed to aid the people in becoming better salespeople. A leader gave a strong, animated exhortation about the merits of Tupperware and the importance of increasing its sale. Then they all rallied together in an intimate, final, parting circle and pledged themselves to be more effective in sales. Finally, they were dismissed with great excitement to go forth and take the world for Tupperware.

As all this began to happen, I called to my wife in another room, 'Honey, come here quick! They're picturing the assembly of the church on television as I believe it took place in the first century and as I've always thought it should be today, and its taking place in a news story about Tupperware.'

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

In the previous chapter we saw that first century Christians believed that all of life was meant to be lived as an expression of one's worship of God. They viewed worship and service as two sides of the same coin. The Christian life was a life of service, and all God-honoring service was worship.

Paul states this in clear, simple terms in Romans 12:1 when he exhorts first century believers: 'offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship.' He emphasizes this in the word he uses for 'worship' (*latrein*). It is a word that can mean both worship and service. It is used twenty-one times in the New Testament and half the time it is translated, 'worship' and the other half 'service.'

So you can see that a study of the ministry of the church would in one sense be but a continuation of the study of its worship.

Although we have already touched upon the ministry of the church in previous chapters, it is a subject that needs to be considered on its own. We need to ask and answer the question, 'what purpose did God have in mind when he designed and created the church?' Although we have already sought to make clear that the church was created to continue the life and work of Jesus Christ in this world, we need to ask what that work is. What specifically did Jesus come to do? What was the main thing his church was commissioned to do on his behalf?

Cf. the RSV New Testament in which it is translated 'worship' eleven times and 'serve' ten.

The Purpose of Jesus' Ministry

It has been said that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. So in keeping with that, let's consider the main reason for which Jesus came into this world.

In one sense, Peter summarized Jesus' ministry when he told Cornelius that, 'He went around doing good and healing, all who were under the power of the devil' (Acts 10:38). But was that his primary reason for coming? Was his main reason for coming to alleviate human suffering by healing the infirmed and feeding the hungry?

Numerous times he was hailed as a great teacher who uncompromisingly taught the truth. But was his main purpose in coming to bring truth to the world? These were certainly important aspects of his ministry, but the question still remains, was his principal reason for coming to do these things? And the answer is 'no'.

Well then, what was his paramount reason for coming? What did he come here to accomplish?

His own stated reason for coming is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew and Mark record him saying that he came to 'serve,' and 'give his life a ransom for many' (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45). Luke has him saying that he 'came to seek and save what was lost' (19:10). When you put these three together, you have him saying that the primary reason he came was to serve and his greatest service would be to give his life to redeem and save the lost. Paul helps us understand the meaning of Christ's coming when he summarizes Christ's ministry saying, 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,

not counting men's sins against them' (II Cor. 5:19). Or, 'For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation' (Ro. 5:10, 11). And once more, 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Col. 1: 19, 20).

The great underlying purpose of Jesus' ministry was reconciliation. He came to bring about a reconciliation between God and man. The two had become separated by the offense of man's sin and Jesus came to remove the offense by taking it to the Cross and doing away with it.

God's aim was reconciliation with mankind, and his instrument and agent for effecting that reconciliation was Jesus. While man was at enmity with God, or at least indifferent or apathetic toward him, Jesus came to this world and lived and died and rose again making reconciliation between the two possible.

But the need for reconciliation was twofold: mankind was not only at enmity with God, it was at enmity with itself. People everywhere 'lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another' (Titus 3:3). They were beset with tension and strife and there was war between the classes, between countries, between racial groups, and with one another.

Through his coming and dying on the Cross for sin, Jesus put an end to this hostility. He removed the barrier that divided men into hostile factions, reconciled them to one another, and created one new humanity to live in peace.

So the purpose behind all that Jesus did was to effect a two-fold reconciliation: a reconciliation between God and man and between man and man.

People can now be reconciled to God and to one another by hearing the good news of the reconciliation that has been effected by Jesus and by receiving him as their conciliator.

The Ministry of the Church

But Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father: he has returned to the invisible world of the spirit. Consequently, he must, therefore, have some physical means through which he can continue His work. The church is that means. The church is Christ's instrument of reconciliation: God's instrument of reconciliation is Christ, and Christ's instrument of reconciliation is the church.

Paul writes to the church and informs it that God 'has committed to [it] the message of reconciliation' and that its members are 'therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through [them].' He tells them that as Christ's representatives they are to implore those in the world: 'Be reconciled to God' (II Cor. 5:19, 20). This is the ultimate purpose and function of the church; it is for this reason that it has been designated the body of Christ. It exists that through it men may hear the message of reconciliation and be reconciled to God; and in it men may be reconciled to one another. This is the great double task of the church. All of its faith and life and resources should be spent in carrying out this ministry. It should pray and plan and work and 'become all things to all men that by all possible means' (I Cor. 9:22) it might become successful in this ministry. For it to use its resources for anything that does not fit into this purpose would be to squander them on the unessential.

Carrying Out the Ministry Of Reconciliation

In order for the church to carry out its reconciling ministry, it must maintain a number of internal equipping and sustaining functions. You can see how such ministries are employed by considering what happens to a person from the time of his reconciliation to God through the outreach ministry of the church, until he becomes a part of that ministry himself.

Those reconciled start out as babes or novices and must first be nurtured. Then they must be trained and equipped and their place of service within the body of Christ must be determined. After that they are ready to become a part of the reconciliation ministry. As they begin penetrating the hostile world as ambassadors for Christ, they will not always be warmly received. In fact, sometimes they will be rebuffed; even left battered and bruised and in need of first-aid and comfort. After such an experience they will need to be encouraged and inspired to rejoin the outreach team. As they rejoin the team, they will hopefully meet someone who is responsive, and becomes reconciled to God. The newly reconciled convert will then start out as a babe and the training process will start all over again.

In this process all the internal equipping and sustaining ministries of the church come into play. When people are first reconciled to God and enter into the fellowship of the church as babes, the church must minister to their needs by nurturing and feeding them. The teaching ministry of the church will serve to develop Christian conviction and attitudes within them. The leadership of the church will start equipping and preparing them 'for works of service' (Eph. 4:11, 12). The ministry of encouragement within the church will encourage them along the way. The evangelists in the church will prepare and lead them in their first attempt at reconciling someone to God. If they are rebuffed or battered, the church will minister healing, comfort, and encouragement. And if they become a casualty and leave behind a family, the church will carry out its ministry of benevolence.

Bob Smith summarizes this whole process when he says: 'The New Testament church was primarily called to be a school, a training ground, a place for the equipment of saints to do the work of ministry. These saints were then to go out and penetrate the society in which they found themselves and to confront men and women with the Gospel of the Grace of God.'

Bob Smith, *When All Else Fails... Read The Directions*, p. 62,

LIVING IN THE LIGHT WHILE PASSING THROUGH THIS DARKNESS

THIS SERIES OF BOOKS IS DESIGNED TO HELP THOSE WHO HAVE CHOSEN THE LIGHT (JESUS) AND HAVE CHOSEN TO WALK IN THE LIGHT (JESUS). IT MIGHT BE A JOURNEY OF DECADES OR DAYS, DEPENDING ON HOW LONG WE LIVE AFTER BECOMING A DISCIPLE OF JESUS. IT CAN BE A JOURNEY MIXED WITH GREAT JOY AND GREAT SUFFERING. BUT if we are in the Light, we know that this present darkness is passing. We won't be here forever, thanks to God. We are not alone. We will be with Jesus, the Eternal Life, soon. Stay in the light.

CELEBRATING IN THE LIGHT VS. SUFFERING IN THE DARKNESS

We are talking about either Light or darkness, not shades of gray.

It is one extreme or the other. Which one it is for each of us will depend on the choice each of us makes.

It is our call, our decision, our choice.

The world is described as the 'dominion of darkness' in the Bible.

This dark world has its gods.

Psalm 82:5

5 The 'gods' know nothing, they understand nothing.

They walk about in darkness;

all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

The god of this age has blinded people

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:4

They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Ephesians 4:1

This 'blinding of the minds' results in spiritual blindness and darkness. That leads to turning off our brain to the truth. We become hardened, closed, and cold to God. We cut off the messages coming from God.

Our receptors only respond to promptings and messages from the 'god of this world.' We become his slaves, living (and dying) to carry out his will. The 'god of this age' doesn't want to lose anyone he is holding captive. He will fight to keep you. He doesn't want to go down alone!

Light or darkness? It is our choice.

What draws us to the darkness to start with? It is pretty simple.

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. 1 John 2:16

It is our love for or lust for what is attractive, desirable, but in the end destructive. While we lust for these illicit, damaging things, they lead us down the path into darkness.

Esau had this problem. Genesis 25:29-34 He had to have something. He couldn't wait. He wanted it and he wanted it now. And he sold his birthright to get it. You could say he sold his soul for something he had to have that satisfied his short-term wishes, but that was damaging to him in the long run. He couldn't wait. 'Hey, it's just a bowl of soup.' But it was a bowl with deep implications. It was dark soup.

'Just once,' I'm sure he thought. 'What can it hurt?' But he crossed a line in his head and heart that changed everything for his future. He had to have it. He couldn't live without it. It would be more accurate to say he didn't want to live without it. It says he despised his birthright. He took what he had been promised as the oldest son for granted. He didn't appreciate or value it and what it meant. He valued something in the moment and was willing to trade what he was promised for the long haul in order to have something NOW. His choice took him into the realm of darkness where there was weeping, pleading, and gnashing of teeth afterwards. It seemed so innocent, so unimportant at the time. How wrong he was.

Isaiah gives an interesting description of those living in darkness.

Isaiah 5:20

Woe to those who call evil good

and good evil,

who put darkness for light

and light for darkness,

who put bitter for sweet

and sweet for bitter.

We, too, can cross into the realm of darkness when we try and take what is bad, damaging, destructive, evil, and bitter and say it is good, sweet, right, and OK.

But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! Matthew 6:23

What Jesus is saying is that if we live in the darkness where we are trying to justify what is really evil, then we have passed into darkness, the zone where it is REALLY DARK. We are in the deepest of pits.

To live in darkness or light

is a personal, individual choice

that every living person must make.

Most think they can venture into the darkness, frolic in its delights, and get out of there without being hurt. It is sort of like 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.' The problem with that saying is that it is a lie. Proverbs speaks of that. There is a way that seems right to man, but ends in darkness and death. Sorry, but you take it home with you.

Now the interesting truth is that we all start in the darkness. We are all in the same boat, and its name is Darkness.

More than a boat, it is a death cruise. It is a cursed ship. We are doomed if we stay on board.

But help has come. A rescuer has come. There is a life boat.

The LIGHT has come.

The people living in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of the shadow of death

a light has dawned.' Matthew 4:16

For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:6

God has a plan as to how to free us and rescue all of us who are slaves and prisoners in the darkness. He sent LIGHT to shine in our hearts. That LIGHT is the only thing that can guide us or lead us out of the darkness. It can save us and change our hard heart. When we see Jesus and what he has done to rescue us, how great his love is, what a huge price He had to pay to free us, our hearts will soften and we can be released from the darkness.

We can get off this condemned, cursed ship. But it is our choice. Some prefer staying on the death cruise. What a terrible choice. It might look like it now, but it IS NOT a party cruise. Its end will be more horrible than that of the Titanic.

The light came, the life boat came, but people loved the boat named darkness.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. John 3:19

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' John 8:12

All have a decision to make. Do we want to live in the Light or the darkness?

In making that decision, we need to know that the darkness IS passing.

Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. 1 John 2:8

Being surrounded by darkness is temporary for those who choose the Light.

It is permanent for those who chose the darkness, as in never ending. For them it will never end. Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30 describes the destiny of those who choose the darkness in this life. Eternity, or hell, will be an extension of what they choose in this life, darkness. It says they will be in OUTER darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth as they realize what a bad choice they made. Do you know what it feels like to know you blew it, you missed it, that you passed up the best for a poor choice? This is that feeling on steroids, for eternity. This is serious stuff.

Paul says we Christians were once darkness.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. Ephesians 5:8

Jesus came to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. Acts 26:18

Jesus came 79 to shine on those living in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1:79

The Light is shining so those living in darkness can escape.

He will guide us out of the realm of darkness into a new life for eternity.

35 Then Jesus told them, 'You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. 36 Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.' John 12:35,36

46 I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. John 12:46

It is our choice to be children of Light or children of darkness. We don't have to stay in the darkness.

When we choose the Light, we are forgiven, justified, exonerated, freed, cleansed, filled, and liberated. We are made right with God. It is a free gift with free passage out of darkness into the Light.

Living in the Light is so incredibly rewarding, fulfilling, and enriching. It is what we were created for. We were created to live IN RELATIONSHIP with our heavenly Father, in the Light. We weren't created to live in darkness.

It's our choice. But it is a choice with consequences.

Now even though the darkness is passing, those of us who have chosen to live in the LIGHT have to spend our years of life here on earth surrounded by darkness and those choosing to live in it. And it is not an easy journey.

It wasn't for Jesus. It won't be for us. Once we choose the LIGHT, we will still face challenges in life and very likely will experience suffering, persecution, unexplainable situations, and events. We will suffer losses, hurts, etc. But be strong. We aren't alone. The darkness is passing. It will end.

We have been called from the darkness.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

We heard the CALL, and bailed out of or off of the ship of death. We are in Jesus.

We need to understand that we will live with a new TENSION the rest of our life here on earth. Don't be confused by that. It is normal. It is a result of the choice we made and will need to continue making or renewing every day.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, Galatians 5:16,17

That tension is caused by HAVING TO CHOOSE between living in light or darkness every hour of every day for the rest of our life. While we changed ships, we chose Jesus, we are children of Light with all the benefits of that we will need to continue to decide and choose to be faithful to Jesus every day. The darkness (the dark side) will still be calling us to return. Satan wants us back. He will pull out the big guns. He is ticked off with our decision.

We have to continue to choose between Jesus and the light or the way of darkness or Satan. The god of this world is prowling around seeking for someone to deceive. The new tension is not a bad thing. It can strengthen us and build us up.

I ran across a picture some years ago. I don't know where it came from.

Jesus and Satan are arm wrestling.

What do you think they are arm wrestling over?

For me, as I interpret it, they are wrestling over you, over me.

We know Jesus will win in the end of time as we know it and Satan will be defeated. Satan can't and won't win.

But who will win in our life now? What determines who will win and who will be the most powerful of the two in our life?

It is the one we choose. We give the power in and over our life to the one we choose to obey and trust.

Choose to live in darkness and Satan wins, you lose.

Choose to live in the Light and Jesus wins, you win.

It is up to us.

And Satan doesn't give up easily. And certainly Jesus doesn't. They both want us with them for eternity. Satan doesn't want to suffer alone. Jesus doesn't want to celebrate alone.

The daily choice we have to make is between going after the false promises Satan offers us or the WAY Jesus offers. This choice puts us in a battle. Both Satan and Jesus are persuasive.

But all of Satan's promises are poison filled candies. They end in death.

Jesus' promises give life.

In the New Testament this conflict is described as being between the old man and the new man; the flesh and the spirit; the light and darkness. Take your pick. It is the same thing.

We need to stay in the light, close to Jesus. What draws us to and keeps us in Jesus? It's love. We love because He loved us first. 1 John 4:19

And He proved His love for us. John 3:16

Yet we are vulnerable. Just as married people are vulnerable to infidelity, so are we with our relationship with Jesus. Paul warns us to be alert, to be sincere and pure in our allegiance to Jesus.

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:3

It is a war.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 1 Peter 2:11

We are told to arm ourselves.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Ephesians 6:10-16

But in this battle we can be victorious in Jesus.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Romans 8:37

I remember the great basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski saying of basketball, 'This is a mind game.' The same can be said of living in the world, choosing between darkness and Light. It is a mind game better referred to as a war.

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Proverbs 4:23

What we give our heart to, is what will control us and our thinking and decisions.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:1,2

We need to think differently. We need to see things from God's perspectives, and truth, not Satan's.

We were darkness but now are light in the Lord.

For you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. Ephesians 5:8

We are to shine in a wayward and crooked generation.

so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky. Philippians 2:15

We are to help those still trapped in the darkness just as someone helped us. We are to try and rescue those trapped in the villages of deceit. We are to risk ourselves, to go and pillage those villages of the captives living there.

Rescue those being led away to death;

hold back those staggering toward slaughter.

12 If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,'

does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?

Proverbs 24:11,12

We are light; let our light shine.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Matthew 5:14

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Romans 13:12

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

I Peter 2:10-12

Have nothing to do with deeds of darkness.

Live to honor and please Jesus.

Venture out to rescue those in the darkness.

Be faithful till death.