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TEACHING THE MEMBERS OF LAKEVIEW BAPTIST CHURCH  
IN BENTON, KENTUCKY, TO UNDERSTAND AND  
PRACTICE BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

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A Project  
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the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Doctor of Ministry

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by  
Bradley Wayne White  
December 2016

**APPROVAL SHEET**

TEACHING THE MEMBERS OF LAKEVIEW BAPTIST CHURCH  
IN BENTON, KENTUCKY, TO UNDERSTAND AND  
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## PREFACE

First and foremost I wish to thank the Lord Jesus Christ who loved me, gave himself for me, and called me into his service.

Additionally, I am thankful for those who have been used by the Lord to shape me during my pilgrimage as a believer, including my parents; my friend, Lee Tankersley; my pastor when I was called to ministry, Paul Blizard; and my supervisor at HeartCry Missionary Society, Paul Washer.

I am also grateful for all who have directly contributed to my D.Min. experience: Drs. Michael Wilder, Rob Plummer, Gregg Allison, Robert Cheong, Michael Lawrence, and Benjamin Merkle. I also appreciate those who served on my expert panel: The late Dr. Mike Morrow, and Drs. Shawn Wright, and Lee Tankersley.

This project would not have been possible without the participation of the members of Lakeview Baptist Church. I am thankful for their participation and for their willingness to allow me the time to pursue this degree. Neither would this project have been possible without my mother-in-law, Pamela Seward, whose support enabled me to pursue this degree

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Cassie, for her patient endurance as I have worked on this degree. My life and ministry are enhanced in every way because of her.

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Radford, Virginia

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to teach the members of Lakeview Baptist Church (LBC) in Benton, Kentucky, to understand and practice biblical community.

#### **Goals**

The first goal of this project was to evaluate the current understanding and practice of biblical community among adult church members. This goal was measured by asking 10 to 15 adult church members<sup>1</sup> to complete a questionnaire regarding their understanding and practice of biblical community.<sup>2</sup> This goal was considered successfully accomplished when the desired number of participants returned their questionnaires and those questionnaires were analyzed. This analysis yielded a clearer picture of the understanding and practice of biblical community at LBC.

The second goal of this project was to develop a curriculum for an eight-week small group Bible study on biblical community. This goal was measured by a rubric used by an expert panel of two pastors and one professor to evaluate and offer constructive insight on the biblical and theological fidelity of the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> This goal was considered

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<sup>1</sup>Ten to 15 church members represent a significant percentage of those adult members who attend worship regularly. While there are over 200 members on the church roll, according to the Annual Statistical Profile, average Sunday morning worship attendance was 58 in 2013.

<sup>2</sup>See appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup>See appendix 2.

successfully accomplished when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation indicators on the rubric met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

The third goal of this project was to increase understanding of and commitment to biblical community by teaching the eight-week curriculum to the project participants. This goal was measured by administering a post-series questionnaire to the participants of the Bible study which gauged their understanding of biblical community and commitment to participate in activities which contribute to biblical community.<sup>4</sup> This goal was considered successfully accomplished when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference between the pre-series and post-series questionnaire scores.

### **Ministry Context**

The ministry context for this project was Lakeview Baptist Church (LBC) in Benton, Kentucky. Three aspects of the ministry context at LBC were relevant to this project. First, the core group of members at LBC share two commitments which provide the necessary foundation for positive changes at the church. These commitments are to the preservation of LBC and to the authority of Scripture. Sixty-one percent of the active members of the church have been members since they were children or young adults.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-nine percent of the active members had parents who attended the church.<sup>6</sup> Forty-two percent of them have never been members of any other church.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the

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<sup>4</sup>See appendix 1.

<sup>5</sup>This number represents 35 out of 57 active church members who attend worship at least 3 Sundays per month. This statistic comes from a spreadsheet containing data I collected. See appendix 3.

<sup>6</sup>This number represents 22 out of 57 active church members who attend worship at least 3 Sundays per month. This statistic comes from a spreadsheet containing data I collected. See appendix 3.

<sup>7</sup>This number represents 24 out of 57 active church members who attend worship at least 3 Sundays per month. This statistic comes from a spreadsheet containing data I collected. See appendix 3.



core group of the church is extremely committed to LBC and its preservation.

The members of LBC share an unquestioned commitment to the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Such commitment is enshrined in the church's confession of faith and it is evidenced in the attitudes of the members. They are in complete agreement that the Bible alone is to be their guide in faith and practice. Consequently, there was good reason to believe that they would embrace changes at the church if they could be shown what the Scripture teaches and requires of them.

Second, the commitment of the core group of LBC was more of a commitment to the institution of the church and to its events than a commitment to live in biblical community with one another. Commitment to the institution expressed itself primarily through attendance at church activities such as Sunday school, worship services, and other church sponsored events, but there was not much of a sense of accountability and mutual care for one another's spiritual well being among the members. Sixty-six percent of those who attended Sunday morning worship also attended Sunday school.<sup>8</sup> Almost 50 percent of the adults who attended Sunday morning worship were present on Wednesday night either serving in children's ministry or attending the adult Bible study.<sup>9</sup> Attendance at church-sponsored fellowship or outreach events often exceeded the attendance of the Sunday morning worship service.

Lack of commitment to one another's spiritual well being was seen in multiple ways. While there is a church covenant which clearly articulates commitment to helping one another and to living out the Christian life together, there was no real awareness of the covenant among the members. The covenant hangs on the wall in the sanctuary, but

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<sup>8</sup>This number represents 38 out of 57 active church members who attend worship at least 3 Sundays per month. This statistic comes from a spreadsheet containing data I collected. See appendix 3.

<sup>9</sup>This number represents 22 out of 57 active church members who attend worship at least 3 Sundays per month. This statistic comes from a spreadsheet containing data I collected. See appendix 3.

the commitments which it entails were never mentioned by the members. A clear evidence that the commitments involved in the church covenant were not present in the minds of the members has to do with “non-resident members.” The last clause of the covenant clearly calls on members who move away to join another church of like faith and practice. Nevertheless, at some point in its history, LBC began to allow members who had moved away to stay on the roll as non-resident members.

Further evidence of a lack of commitment to one another’s spiritual growth was seen in the lack of intentional, spiritually-focused, interaction among members outside of church-related events. Other than officially sponsored church events, no church members gathered together for mutual edification through Bible study or prayer. There were no accountability partners or prayer groups. The Sunday school classes, which provide the greatest opportunity for interaction and mutual edification, did not have gatherings outside of the church property.

The lack of intentional efforts at mutual edification and concern for one another was due to a lack of understanding of the accountability and responsibility that church members should have toward one another. The members of LBC felt responsible to attend the events of the church but they did not understand their responsibility to help one another to live the Christian life and to grow in faith. Their commitment to the institution of the church sometimes led members to express concern over a drop in attendance, but rarely did they express concern over a particular individual who seemed to be straying from the faith. Similarly, it was rare to hear a public prayer for the spiritual growth and progress of the other members of the church.

Third, there had been no recent attempt at the church to emphasize deliberate efforts to live together in biblical community. Different aspects of what it means to live intentionally together in biblical community were occasionally addressed in sermons and Sunday school classes, but there had been no focused study on the issue. Nor had there been any initiatives to promote more deliberate, spiritual interaction with one another. A

new members' class had been developed which touches on the issue to a degree. However, because the majority of the members had been members for many years they had not received the class. Nor had they been a part of any other class which focused on life together and their responsibilities to one another. This lack of training led to the situation where the members were more committed to attendance at events than they were to intentionally living out their faith together in biblical community.

If LBC was to become a healthy church, its members needed to grow in their understanding of biblical community and to begin to pursue it with intentionality. Otherwise, LBC would continue to be something less than what the New Testament envisions for a local church. Additionally, the individual members would be impeded in their growth in the Christian life because they would not experience the giving and receiving of help from one another which God intends.

### **Rationale for the Project**

The three aspects of the ministry context at Lakeview Baptist Church (LBC) listed previously demonstrated both the need for focused teaching on biblical community and that such teaching was likely to be well received. First, the commitments of the members of LBC led them to be willing to learn about and grow in their practice of biblical community. Their commitment to the preservation of LBC caused them to embrace what they believed would strengthen the church. Their commitment to the authority of Scripture led them to accept what the Bible says about biblical community. The members of LBC desire to obey the Scripture and to do what is best for the church. This project showed them how pursuing biblical community will help them to accomplish both of those things.

Second, this project addressed a root cause of a lack of biblical community at LBC. The absence of biblical community at the church was due to a fundamental lack of understanding the issue. The members primarily thought of church in terms of an institution rather than a family and in terms of events rather than relationships. Attendance at the "event" of worship certainly is a significant part of church membership. However,

worship attendance without a focus on relationships reflects a deficient understanding of biblical community. Therefore, this project aimed at correcting this deficient understanding through teaching on biblical community.

Third, this project brought into direct focus what had not been taught clearly at LBC. The members of LBC did not understand biblical community because there had been no focused teaching on the issue. The members had heard isolated teaching related to their responsibilities toward one another but they had not been shown how all of the pieces fit together. This project brought into explicit focus what had only been vaguely addressed in the past.

This project addressed a root cause of the lack of biblical community by bringing into direct focus what had not been emphasized at the church in the past. As the members of LBC grow in their understanding and practice of biblical community, they will personally be built up in their faith and LBC will become a healthier church. Therefore, for the good of the individual members and of the church, this project was pursued.

### **Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations**

Key terms for this project were used as they are defined below.

*Biblical community.* This term, according to Jerry Bridges, refers to “the sharing of a common life in Christ,” which includes the “idea of an active partnership in the promotion of the gospel and the building up of believers.” This spiritual partnership “is created with the objective of glorifying God.”<sup>10</sup>

*Church covenant.* This term, according to Charles Deweese, refers to “a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God

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<sup>10</sup>Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 11-12.

and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith.”<sup>11</sup>

*Church discipline.* This term, according to Robert Cheong, refers to “God’s ongoing, redeeming work through His living Word and people as they fight the fight of faith together to exalt Christ and protect the purity of the Bride.”<sup>12</sup>

*Church membership.* This term, according to Jonathan Leeman, refers to “a covenant of union between a particular church and a Christian.” This covenant includes “the church’s affirmation of the Christian’s profession . . . the church’s promise to give oversight to the Christian . . . and the Christian’s promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight.”<sup>13</sup>

This project was constrained by two limitations. First, the value of the data collected from the pre-series and post-series questionnaires depended upon the degree of accuracy that the participants used in their answers. Second, the project was limited to an eighteen-week time frame.

Three delimitations were applied to this project. First, the data pool was limited to 10 to 15 church members. Second, although some children are members of LBC, this project was limited to adult church members. Third, the focus of this project was to increase understanding of biblical community and commitment to participate in activities which promote biblical community. The scope of the project did not include enough time to observe behavioral changes over time.

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<sup>11</sup>Charles W. DeWeese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), viii.

<sup>12</sup>Robert K. Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride: A Handbook for Church Discipline* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 9.

<sup>13</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 217.

## **Research Methodology**

The research instruments that were used to evaluate each of the goals for this project included a pre-series questionnaire, an evaluation rubric, and a post-series questionnaire.<sup>14</sup> The first goal of this project was to evaluate the current understanding and practice of biblical community among adult church members at LBC. Prior to any of the teaching sessions, 10 to 15 adult church members were recruited to participate in this project. They were recruited through announcements in the church bulletin and through personal conversations with me. In order to participate in the project, members were asked to commit to attend at least 6 of the 8 teaching sessions and to listen to the recordings of the sessions which they did not attend. Those participants who listened to the recording of a session were asked to complete and bring to the next session a worksheet that corresponded to the lesson in order to confirm that they had actively engaged with the material. The participants were also asked to commit to attending a pre-series and post-series session in order to complete the respective questionnaires.

The pre-series questionnaire was distributed and completed during the first meeting with the participants.<sup>15</sup> In order to obtain accurate answers, the participants completed the questionnaires anonymously. Each participant identified himself with a four digit code that he chose. The analysis of the pre-series questionnaire yielded a clearer picture of two things at LBC. First, it showed how well the participants understood the concept of biblical community. This section of the questionnaire included questions about fellowship, church membership, the church covenant, church discipline and the key passages of Scripture that address biblical community. Second, the questionnaire revealed the current practices of the participants in activities which express biblical community. This section not only showed the actual practices of the participants but also their willingness

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<sup>14</sup>All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

<sup>15</sup>See appendix 1.

to participate in activities that express biblical community. This section of the questionnaire included questions about spiritually-oriented interaction with other members of the congregation. These questions related to the frequency and nature of prayer for other members, accountability to other members, and the amount of time spent with other members. The first goal was successfully accomplished when 10 to 15 adult church members completed the questionnaire and the results were analyzed.

The second goal of this project was to develop a curriculum for an eight-week small group Bible study on biblical community. The curriculum consisted of eight lessons that addressed the biblical concept of fellowship, the church covenant, church membership, church discipline, and the “one another” passages. The lessons were designed to be taught in one-hour sessions. During the eight weeks, before the beginning of the series, one lesson per week was written and submitted for approval to an expert panel of pastors and professors. This goal was measured by the expert panel which utilized a rubric to evaluate the material based on its biblical and theological fidelity, clarity, relevance, applicability, and order.<sup>16</sup> In the event that less than 90 percent of the indicators on the rubric met or exceeded the sufficiency level for a given lesson, that lesson was modified in light of the feedback from the expert panel. The lesson was then resubmitted to the panel for approval. This process was repeated until the sufficiency level was met. When a minimum of 90 percent of the indicators reached the sufficiency level for each lesson, this goal was successfully accomplished.

The third goal of this project was to increase understanding of and commitment to pursue biblical community by teaching the eight-week curriculum to 10 to 15 adult church members. The curriculum was taught on Tuesday or Thursday evenings for eight consecutive weeks in the home of a participant. During the pre-series session, up to 8 participants were asked to host the study one week in their homes. If, on a given week, no

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<sup>16</sup>See appendix 2.

participant volunteered to host the study, it took place in my home. Each session included a brief time of prayer followed by the teaching of the lesson, which lasted approximately one hour. After the lesson, there was a time for questions and discussion. During the last two or three sessions, the participants were given the vision of continuing to meet together even after the completion of the eight-week curriculum. They were encouraged to invite other church members to participate in the group and even to prayerfully consider the possibility of creating another similar group.

The week after lesson 8 was taught, the participants were asked to meet for a follow up session. During the session they completed the post-series questionnaire.<sup>17</sup> When they completed the questionnaire, they identified themselves using the same four digit code which they used on the pre-series questionnaire. The post-series questionnaire, like the pre-series questionnaire, assessed the participants' understanding of and commitment to pursue biblical community.

The third goal was successfully accomplished when a t-test for dependent samples showed a positive statistically significant difference between the pre-series and post-series questionnaire scores. According to Neil Salkind, "A *t* test for dependent means indicates that a single group of the same subjects is being studied under two conditions."<sup>18</sup> The test "involves a comparison of the means from each group of scores and focuses on the differences between the scores."<sup>19</sup> The t test for dependent samples was the appropriate test statistic for this goal because the same participants were surveyed under two conditions; before and after the intervention.

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<sup>17</sup>See appendix 1.

<sup>18</sup>Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 189.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 191.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

Individualism is widespread in the United States. Jonathan Leeman describes the attitude of an individualistic person:

I am principally obligated to myself and maximizing my life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Among my various relationships, I may choose to identify with another party, but only so long as doing so is demonstrably conducive to my personal advantage.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, many professing Christians view the church through an individualistic lens. Mark Dever writes, “Many Christians in the West today (and elsewhere?) tend to view their Christianity as a personal relationship with God and not much else.”<sup>2</sup> Those who view Christianity in an individualistic way sometimes view relationships with other Christians as unnecessary or even as obstacles to their own personal spiritual growth. Ironically, such an attitude hinders growth in spiritual maturity because God has designed the Christian life to be lived out in community with other believers. Without biblical community, individual believers cannot attain spiritual maturity and local churches cannot accurately reflect Christ in their communities.

This chapter explains the biblical and theological basis for biblical community, showing that the Christian life is rightly lived when believers devote themselves to life together in biblical community by worshipping together, doing ministry together, and

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 44.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 21-22.

striving for mutual edification thereby reflecting their dependence upon one another. The exegesis of five biblical texts confirms this thesis. First, exegesis of Acts 2:42-47 will show that the earliest Christians were devoted to life together and it will demonstrate what was involved in their life together. Second, exegesis of Hebrews 10:19-25 will show that Christians are commanded to make meeting together a priority in order to worship and build one another up. Third, exegesis of Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30 will demonstrate that the basis of Christian fellowship is the gospel and that fellowship in the gospel includes a shared commitment to promote the gospel. Fourth, exegesis of Ephesians 4:11-16 will show that God desires that individual Christians, local churches, and the universal church attain spiritual maturity and that such spiritual maturity is only arrived at when all believers use their gifts to build one another up in love. Finally, exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 will demonstrate that individual Christians are all part of the larger body of Christ and that the spiritual wellbeing of each individual is bound up with that of the rest of the body.

#### **Acts 2:42-47**

A careful examination of Acts 2:42-47 reveals that the earliest Christians devoted themselves to life together. Although the early church was not perfect, the picture of its life together, which is presented in Acts 2:42-47, is ideal.<sup>3</sup> The text shows how the first Christians were devoted to life together, the foundation of that life, and the expressions of that life. This passage then provides an ideal picture of biblical community and confirms that the Christian life is *rightly* lived not as an individualistic endeavor but in constant interaction with other believers.

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<sup>3</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book Of The Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 73.

## **Devotion to Life Together**

Acts 2:42 serves as the conclusion of the Pentecost story and shows how those who were converted at Pentecost were incorporated into the church.<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:42-47 as a whole summarizes the community life of the early church. Verse 42 reveals a picture of the internal life of the church while verses 43-47 describe the external impact of that life on those outside the church.<sup>5</sup> Verse 42 describes in summary fashion several things to which the earliest believers “devoted” themselves, including “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship . . . the breaking of bread and the prayers.”<sup>6</sup> The phrase “devoting themselves” includes “the idea of persistence or persevering in something.”<sup>7</sup> Its “imperfect periphrastic construction speaks of . . . ongoing devotion.”<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:42 reveals that the earliest Christians were not marginally committed to their life together. Nor were they seriously committed, but only for a short period of time. Rather, they were heavily committed to life together and they persevered in this commitment in an ongoing way.

## **The Foundation of Life Together**

The foundation of the early church’s life together was the apostles’ teaching. The initial inclusion of the members of the early church came as a result of their having responded to the apostolic message with repentance and faith expressed through baptism (Acts 2:37-41). Verse 42 indicates that, for the new believers, even after their conversion

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<sup>4</sup>John Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 118.

<sup>5</sup>Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 149.

<sup>6</sup>All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 149.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

and inclusion into the church, the apostles' teaching continued to be the foundation of their life together.<sup>9</sup>

The apostles' teaching was authoritative because it was "proclaimed by accredited apostles."<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce says that it was "authoritative because it was the teaching of the Lord communicated through the apostles in the power of the Spirit."<sup>11</sup> The content of the apostles' teaching would have included the "a compilation of the words of Jesus . . . some account of his earthly ministry, passion, and resurrection . . . and a declaration of what all this meant for man's redemption."<sup>12</sup> The teaching probably included both ethical and practical teaching like that which is found in the Gospels and the Epistles.<sup>13</sup> Therefore the bond, which drew the first believers together into a community of faith, was the teaching of the apostles. This same teaching, and devotion to it, continued to serve as the foundation of the life of the early church.

### **The Expression of Life Together**

Acts 2:42-47 shows that the life of the early church expressed itself in three primary ways. First, it expressed itself through continual and frequent times of worship together. This worship included at least three aspects. There were times of teaching as the new disciples "sat at the apostles' feet, hungry to receive instruction."<sup>14</sup> There were also times of united prayer. Verse 42 says the believers devoted themselves to "the prayers."

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<sup>9</sup>Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 73.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Longenecker, *Acts*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 289.

<sup>11</sup>Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 73.

<sup>12</sup>Longenecker, *Acts*, 289.

<sup>13</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 150.

<sup>14</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 82.

Luke's use of the Greek article before "prayers" has led many interpreters to see a connection with the formal and set times of prayer at the temple.<sup>15</sup> Acts 2:46 and 3:1 report that the first Christians continued to attend the temple. John Stott argues that these new believers no longer participated in the sacrifices of the temple but that they did continue to be a part of the prayer services.<sup>16</sup> John Polhill does not rule out the possibility that early Christians attended the prayer services in the temple, but believes the reference to "the prayers" in verse 42 "is probably much broader and involves primarily their sharing in prayer together in their private homes."<sup>17</sup> The worship of the early church also included the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. Verse 42 says the early believers were devoted to "the breaking of bread." Verse 46 specifies this was done in their homes. This "breaking of bread" appears to have typically been the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a part of a larger fellowship meal.<sup>18</sup>

Verse 46 provides significant insight into the worship of the early church. It shows the frequency of its worship, the locations for its worship, and the kind of worship in which it was involved. At this point in its history, the members of the church were meeting together daily, both in the temple and in homes. As noted, their meetings in the temple may have included participation in the set times of prayer, which then reveals that its worship was both formal and informal. The application of these insights to the contemporary church is straightforward. The ideal expression of biblical community today should not be limited to brief interaction with one another, one time per week, during the formal gathered worship of the church at a public place. Rather, believers should also

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<sup>15</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 120.

<sup>16</sup>Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 85.

<sup>17</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 120.

<sup>18</sup>Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 73; Polhill, *Acts*, 119; Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 84-85.

interact with one another and even worship together throughout the week in a more informal way.

The second expression of the early church's life together was fellowship. In verse 42, the early believers are described as having been "devoted . . . to fellowship." The Greek word behind "fellowship" is *koinonia*, which can refer to "association, communion, fellowship, close relationship,"<sup>19</sup> or "sharing in common."<sup>20</sup> The word was used by Paul to refer to the sharing of goods and to communion with God in 2 Corinthians 9:13 and 1 Corinthians 10:16 respectively.<sup>21</sup> Stott takes it as referring both to sharing in communion with God and sharing financially with one another.<sup>22</sup> The foundation of the church's fellowship, as noted, certainly was a shared experience of conversion and a shared belief in the apostles' teaching. In the context of Acts 2:42-47, the expression of the church's fellowship is described in terms of shared activity.<sup>23</sup> This is seen, in part, in the apposition of "fellowship" with the activities of "the breaking of bread" and "the prayers."<sup>24</sup>

Three principal activities expressed the church's fellowship. First, fellowship was expressed in the "breaking of bread" (v. 42). As noted, this referred to a fellowship meal that took place in the homes of believers, which also included a celebration of the Lord's Supper. The celebration of this meal in one another's homes "suggests the intimate

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<sup>19</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 119.

<sup>20</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 150.

<sup>21</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 119.

<sup>22</sup>Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 82-83.

<sup>23</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 150.

<sup>24</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 119.

interaction and mutual acceptance that was a part of community life.”<sup>25</sup> Second, fellowship together was expressed in “the prayers.” As was noted, this referred not only to formal times of prayer together in the temple, but also to times of prayer together in one another’s homes. Third, fellowship was expressed by helping one another with material needs. Verse 44 says the believers “had all things in common.” Verse 45 elaborates on what it meant for them to have all things common. On a regular basis, many believers voluntarily sold their private property in order to help those in need.<sup>26</sup> The sharing that took place among these believers was “a favorable indication of the depth of fellowship and mutual care at work in the community.”<sup>27</sup>

The third expression of the early church’s life together was evangelistic ministry. Verse 47 says that the early church was “having favor with all the people” and that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Clearly, the strong community life of the early church contributed to its favor with the people and its evangelistic success.<sup>28</sup> According to verse 47, the Lord Jesus himself added new believers to his church, but it is implicit that he did this through the evangelistic witness of his people.<sup>29</sup> Witness was a regular activity for the early church. Stott notes, “The early church’s evangelism was not an occasional or sporadic activity . . . just as their worship was daily (v46a), so was their witness.”<sup>30</sup>

Acts 2:42-47 reveals both the importance of biblical community as well as a clear picture of what it should look like by providing an ideal picture of the early church.

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<sup>25</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 151.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 152-53.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 154-55.

<sup>29</sup>Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 86.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 87.

The earliest Christians were devoted to the Lord and one another in an ongoing and serious way. The foundation of their life together was their mutual faith: the common experience of salvation through the apostolic gospel and a common belief in apostolic teaching. Their devotion to life together manifested itself through their shared worship, fellowship, and evangelistic ministry. All of these observations reveal that their involvement in one another's lives was significant and intimate.

### **Hebrews 10:19-25**

Hebrews 10:19-25 is one of the most significant texts about biblical community in the Bible. It is often used to motivate church members to attend worship because it contains the clearest direct command to do so. It very plainly shows that “the New Testament lends no support to the idea of lone Christians.”<sup>31</sup> That there can be no “lone Christians” is seen both through the direct command to not neglect to meet together, but also through the three cohortative exhortations in verses 22-24. These exhortations, which all begin with “let us,” in the first person plural, reveal that what the readers are being called upon to do cannot be done alone. In verses 19-21, the author of Hebrews establishes the foundation for Christians to meet together. He bases this foundation on two realities that have resulted because of what God has done through Christ. Then, in verses 22-25 he names three purposes of believers meeting together: for worship, to help one another to persevere in the faith, and for mutual edification.

### **The Foundation for Meeting Together**

The author of Hebrews grounds his exhortations to meet together in spiritual realities that are true of his readers because of what God has done through Christ. Verses 19-21 serve as a condensed summary of the argument, which the author developed in

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<sup>31</sup>Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 216.



Hebrews 8:1-10:18.<sup>32</sup> That argument focused on two truths related to the sacrifice of Christ and his high priestly office.<sup>33</sup>

**Confidence to enter.** The first reality that forms the foundation for believers to meet together is that, through Christ, they have the confidence to enter the presence of God. The author describes entering the presence of God as entering “the holy places.” The imagery is clearly drawn from the tabernacle and the temple and it is intended to present a contrast between the old and the new covenants.

The author elaborates on the confidence that believers have to enter the presence of God in verses 19-21. Under the Mosaic covenant, access to God’s presence was limited. However now, because of what Christ has done, all Christians may be assured they are welcome in God’s presence. In fact, the boldness of their entry into the presence of God “is justified and indeed demanded *by the blood of Jesus.*”<sup>34</sup>

**A great high priest.** The second reality that forms the foundation for believers to meet together is that, according to verse 21, they have Jesus as their great high priest. This phrase highlights the superiority of the new covenant to the old covenant and is intended to motivate the readers to heed the upcoming exhortations. In Hebrews 3:1-6 and 7:23-25 the author has shown how Jesus is superior to Moses and to all high priests under the old covenant. In Hebrews 7:25 he argued that, since Jesus lives forever, he permanently serves as high priest, always able to intercede for his people and therefore able “to save to the uttermost those that draw near to God through him” (v. 25).

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<sup>32</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 279.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 406.

## The Purpose of Meeting Together

In verses 22-25 the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to do three things. William Lane argues that since each verse begins with a different verb, the three exhortations likely represent three separate thoughts.<sup>35</sup> As noted, these exhortations are grounded in the theological argument that has been developed earlier in the book of Hebrews and which has been summarized in verses 19-21. Each of the exhortations reveals a purpose or reason for believers to meet together regularly.

**Let us draw near to God.** The exhortation to draw near to God is the climax of the argument the author has been presented in verses 19-21. Donald Guthrie claims it is the main exhortation of the entire epistle of Hebrews.<sup>36</sup> In light of the access to God which all believers now have, access which was previously limited to the high priest on the Day of Atonement,<sup>37</sup> the author wants his readers to take full advantage of what is theirs in Christ. Drawing near to God is the essence of being a Christian and the only appropriate response to what God had done for those who are in Christ.<sup>38</sup>

The writer wants his readers to draw near to God in personal and corporate worship and devotion. The Greek word *proserchōmetha* that stands behind “let us continue to draw near” is also used in Hebrews 7:25; 11:6; 12:18, 22 with reference to prayer.<sup>39</sup> However, here “it is undoubtedly inclusive of every expression of worship in the life of a congregation.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, as it relates to biblical community, Hebrews

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<sup>35</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 285.

<sup>36</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 213.

<sup>37</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 254.

<sup>38</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 286.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

10:22 issues a clear call for Christians to draw near to God *together* in corporate worship.

**Let us hold fast.** In verse 23, the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to hold fast the confession of their hope. He was aware that some of them “might be in danger of relaxing their hold on this hope.”<sup>41</sup> Essentially the call to “hold fast” their hope is a call to persevere in their faith. “In Hebrews the term ‘hope’ always describes the objective content of hope, consisting of present and future salvation.”<sup>42</sup> The readers are then being called upon to “maintain a firm confidence in the objective gift of salvation God has extended to the community on the basis of Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice.”<sup>43</sup> The author has already warned his readers in Hebrews 3:6, 14 that if they do not persevere in their faith, they are not part of the house of God and they do not have a share in Christ. The motivation, which he gives them to persevere in verse 23, is that God is faithful and will keep the promises he has made to them in Christ. As it relates to biblical community, it is important to note that the author of Hebrews has stated this exhortation in the first person plural. Therefore, persevering in the faith is something done in the context of community.

**Let us consider.** Although the exhortation to draw near to God was probably foremost in the mind of the author of Hebrews, the exhortation to consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, in verse 24, is the most relevant to the issue of biblical community. It is relevant because it specifically calls for mindfulness and encouragement of one another and specifies these things can only be done by regularly meeting together.

The Greek word *katanoōmen*, which is translated “let us consider,” refers to

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<sup>41</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 214.

<sup>42</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 288.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

paying thoughtful attention to something.<sup>44</sup> The readers of Hebrews are supposed to pay thoughtful attention to how they might “stir up” or encourage one another to love and good works. Love and good works were to be primarily directed toward one another within the body as “a caring response to need in the lives of other Christians.”<sup>45</sup> The good works then, would have been “tangible expressions of caring love.”<sup>46</sup> This exhortation therefore, militates against an individualistic approach to the Christian life, with its call to be mindful of the needs of fellow believers.

In verse 25, the author specifies that stirring one another up to love and good works requires believers to meet together. “Meeting together” clearly refers to the worship meetings of the church, but may also have included other gatherings of an informal kind.<sup>47</sup> Bruce suggests the readers were being encouraged to welcome “every opportunity of coming together and enjoying their fellowship in faith and hope.”<sup>48</sup> The readers were challenged to not neglect to meet together because the author knew some had begun to do this. Those who were neglecting to meet with other believers might have been doing so out of indifference, apathy, fear of persecution, or busyness.<sup>49</sup>

The author concludes his exhortation in verse 25 by telling his readers that instead of neglecting to meet together they should encourage one another, especially in light of the approaching Day. The word *parakalountes*, which is translated “encouraging

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<sup>44</sup>Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 415.

<sup>45</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 289.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 215-16.

<sup>48</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 257.

<sup>49</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 290.

one another,” can include the idea of exhortation.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, one of the purposes for believers to meet together was to encourage and exhort one another. In light of the warning about the impending “Day” (day of judgment), the focus on encouraging and exhorting one another appears to again be related to the idea of persevering in the faith. The readers were to be concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of one another. Lane writes, “The entire community must assume responsibility to watch that no one grows weary or becomes apostate.”<sup>51</sup>

Hebrews 10:19-25 clearly establishes the importance of biblical community and leaves no room for an individualistic approach to the Christian life. Because of the great salvation that Jesus has accomplished for his people, Christians are to regularly draw near to God to worship together and to help one another persevere in their faith.

### **Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30**

An exegesis of Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30 supports the thesis of this chapter by showing that biblical community includes doing ministry together. The particular focus of these texts in Philippians is evangelistic ministry or missions. Shared evangelistic ministry is implied in Acts 2:47, as was noted, however, it is explicit in Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30. Likewise, it was noted that “fellowship” involves shared activity. In Acts 2:42-47 the activity included “the breaking of bread,” “the prayers,” and helping one another with material needs. In Philippians 1, the shared activity is advancing the gospel. Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30 reveals both how the Philippians had partnered with Paul to advance the gospel and how Paul expected the Philippians to continue to partner with one another to advance the gospel in their own context.

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<sup>50</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 216.

<sup>51</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 290.

## The Philippians's Partnership with Paul

In the “thanksgiving” section of his greeting in Philippians 1:3-5, Paul revealed a very warm relationship with the Philippian church.<sup>52</sup> Paul’s relationship with this church had begun approximately ten years earlier, when he founded the church.<sup>53</sup> In verses 3 and 4 Paul tells the Philippians of how he joyfully remembers them regularly in his set times of prayer.<sup>54</sup> In verse 5 he explains the reason for his joyful remembrance of the Philippians; their partnership with him in the gospel from the first day until the present.

Paul had recently received a gift from the Philippians, but his reference to their “partnership in the gospel” was to more than their gift.<sup>55</sup> Rather, Paul was thinking broadly of the fact that the Philippians were collaborating with him to spread the gospel. Gordon Fee describes what Paul meant by “partnership in the gospel” as “partnership *for (the furtherance of) the gospel*.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Peter T. O’Brien describes it as “your cooperation [in promoting] the gospel.”<sup>57</sup> Moises Silva, in commenting on the translation of the Greek word *koninōnia*, writes,

Although the word may have the general meaning of “communion” or “fellowship” in this passage, such renderings as “participation” (NASB) and “partnership” (NIV) more accurately bring out the *activity* of the Philippians in promoting the work of the gospel.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 56.

<sup>53</sup>D. A. Carson, *Basic for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 15.

<sup>54</sup>Ralph Martin and Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 16-17.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>56</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 82.

<sup>57</sup>O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 62.

<sup>58</sup>Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New

The Philippians partnered with Paul to promote the gospel in three ways. First, according to Philippians 4:10, they had recently sent by the hand of Epaphroditus, a monetary gift to Paul while he was imprisoned. Second, their recent gift represented a revival of financial support for Paul (4:10, 15-16), which they had been a part of “from the first day” (1:5). According to Philippians 4:15-16, the Philippian church had been the only one which financially supported Paul at one stage of his ministry. Third, the Philippians partnership with Paul in the gospel also included “their participation in spreading the gospel itself, in every possible way.”<sup>59</sup> Paul may have had in mind their having responded to the gospel themselves and especially “their involvement in sharing the gospel with others.”<sup>60</sup>

### **The Philippians’ Partnership among Themselves**

In Philippians 1:27, Paul addressed “a serious and fundamental concern in the letter.”<sup>61</sup> He was concerned that the Philippians maintain spiritual unity in the face of opposition, which might intimidate them.<sup>62</sup> Paul made use of a play on words by calling the Philippians, who were known to be very patriotic and loyal citizens of Rome, to be “worthy citizens” of the colony of heaven in Philippi.<sup>63</sup> In verse 27 he told them he wanted them to live lives “worthy of the gospel” and made clear to them that this involved defending and contending for the gospel. Even as Paul was grateful for the Philippians

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Testament, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 44.

<sup>59</sup>Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 84.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Silva, *Philippians*, 79.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 161-62.

partnership with him in the gospel, so he wanted them to stand firm together and continue to partner with one another for the gospel in their local context.

According to Philippians 2:19, Paul was planning to send Timothy to the Philippians and hoped that he himself might also soon be able to visit them (2:24). However, he told them in 1:27 that whether he was able to come see them or not he hoped to hear three things about them; that they were standing firm in one spirit, that they were striving with one mind, side by side, for the faith of the gospel, and that they were not frightened by their opponents. These three things reflected Paul's desire to see the Philippians work together as partners for the gospel.

First, Paul wanted the Philippians to defend the gospel. The Greek word behind "you are standing firm" (*stēkete*) conveys the image of a defensive Roman military formation.<sup>64</sup> The Philippians were to stand firm "in one spirit." Fee views this as referring to the Holy Spirit.<sup>65</sup> O'Brien takes it as a reference to the human spirit which would render the phrase "with one common purpose."<sup>66</sup> However, he adds, "Such a unity of purpose is effected only in and through the Holy Spirit."<sup>67</sup> Both interpretations emphasize that defending the gospel requires Holy Spirit empowered unity and collaboration.

Second, Paul wanted the Philippians to not only "stand firm" defensively, but also to offensively "strive . . . for the faith of the gospel." The Greek word translated "striving together" is *synathlountes*. With this word, Paul transitioned from a military image to a word often used to describe athletic competition.<sup>68</sup> He emphasized that "striving

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<sup>64</sup>Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 56.

<sup>65</sup>Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 163-66.

<sup>66</sup>O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 150.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 166.



for the gospel” also required unity and collaboration; it was to be done “with one mind.” Paul wanted the Philippians to “stand united in their struggle for the cause of the faith—its spread and growth.”<sup>69</sup>

Third, Paul wanted the Philippians to defend and contend for the gospel in the context of persecution. He told them in verse 28 he did not want them to be frightened by their enemies. These enemies may have been the Judaizers whom he will mention later in the letter or they may have been pagans in the city of Philippi.<sup>70</sup> Paul reassured the Philippians in verses 28-29 that suffering for Christ was part of God’s plan for them. In verse 30, he encouraged them by pointing out that their suffering united them to him: they were all suffering and “engaged in the same conflict.”

Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30 makes a significant contribution to a full orbbed picture of biblical community. True biblical community or fellowship is centered on the gospel and includes collaborative efforts to spread the gospel both through financial giving and direct participation. The relationship between the Philippian church and Paul revealed that such a commitment can involve supporting ministry beyond one’s local context, while Paul’s expectations of the Philippians revealed the importance of gospel ministry together in a church’s immediate sphere of influence.

### **Ephesians 4:11-16**

Some Christians, who rightly understand that, having been born again, they should grow to spiritual maturity, wrongly pursue maturity in an individualistic way. Ephesians 4:11-16 corrects an individualistic misunderstanding of the Christian life by showing that the Christian life is rightly lived in biblical community where believers strive for mutual edification. The text reveals how the spiritual maturity of individuals,

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<sup>69</sup>O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 152.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 153.

local churches, and the body of Christ at large, is only arrived at through mutual edification which results from all of the members using their gifts to build one another up in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16 is part of a larger section spanning from 4:7-16. Ernest Best says the section is an *inclusio* that is marked off by the use of *eis hekastos* in verses 7 and 16.<sup>71</sup> Verses 7-16 viewed together reveal God's ultimate goal of Christ filling all things, the intermediate goal of spiritual maturity for individuals, local congregations, and the body of Christ, the path to spiritual maturity, and a picture of spiritual maturity and the results that flow from it.

### **The Ultimate Goal**

Even believers who understand that spiritual maturity is to be pursued in the context of biblical community with other believers could still miss the point of spiritual maturity if they did not take into account verses 7-10 and especially verse 10. In verse 10, Paul says that Christ ascended in order to “fill all things.” A. T. Lincoln says this refers to “the goal of his pervading the cosmos with his presence and rule.”<sup>72</sup> The larger reason Christ wants his body to grow to maturity is so that, through it, he might carry out his purposes for the cosmos.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately the purpose is to extend his rule and his reign, to extend his kingdom. This was God's original purpose for the world that he announced when he told Adam and Eve to “fill the earth” in Genesis 1:28. He reiterated this purpose in Genesis 9:1 when he told Noah and his family to “fill the earth.” Christ himself reiterated this goal when he gave the Great Commission to make disciples of “all nations” in Matthew 28:19. Therefore, the goal of spiritual maturity must be viewed as something

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<sup>71</sup>Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 374.

<sup>72</sup>A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 248.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

more than personal or even congregational attainment. It must be viewed ultimately as a means of extending the rule and reign of Christ.

### **The Intermediate Goal**

In order to accomplish his purpose of filling all things, Jesus intends for his people to reach spiritual maturity. Ephesians 4:11-16 reveals that this goal applies to individuals, local congregations, and the universal body of Christ. First, although Ephesians 4:11-16 primarily focuses on the corporate growth and maturity of the body of Christ, it does touch on the theme of individual growth to maturity. In verse 14, Paul says one of the results of spiritual maturity is that “we may no longer be children.” Bruce points out how, with the use of the plural “children” or “infants,” “an obligation is placed on the individual members of the body”<sup>74</sup> to grow to spiritual maturity. Second, what Paul has to say could be applied to local congregations. The two gifted people Paul mentions in verse 11, pastors and teachers, would have used their gifts in the context of their local congregations. Third, the goal of spiritual maturity in this passage primarily has to do with the universal body of Christ. Best writes, “It cannot be denied that individual believers require to grow and mature in their faith . . . however the main drive in our context is corporate, relating to the building up of the church (vv. 12, 16).”<sup>75</sup>

### **The Path to Spiritual Maturity**

The path to spiritual maturity described in Ephesians 4:7-16 includes at least three stages. First, verses 7-10 reveal that because of Jesus’ incarnation, intervening accomplishments through the cross and his resurrection, and ascension, he is able to give

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<sup>74</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 351.

<sup>75</sup>Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 401.

gifts to his people. In verse 7, Paul says Jesus has given grace gifts to his people. Then, in verses 8-10 he applies Psalm 68:18 to Jesus. Psalm 68 is a victory ode and could be pictured as “a military leader returning to Jerusalem at the head of his followers, after routing an enemy army and taking prisoners.”<sup>76</sup> Thus understood, the image appears to be of Christ as a conqueror bestowing gifts he won through his victory.<sup>77</sup> Texts, such as 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, reveal that he gives these gifts through the Holy Spirit. The connection between Christ’s ascension and the giving of the Holy Spirit is also seen in Acts 2:33.

The second step toward the spiritual maturity of the body of Christ is the giving of gifted persons. Whereas Paul stated in verse 7 that each believer is given a gift, in verse 11 he says Christ has given certain gifted people to the church.<sup>78</sup> He lists five groups of people: “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.” The first two groups, in light of Ephesians 2:20, could be described as “foundational gifts.” Lincoln argues that these two groups are no longer active today but evangelists fulfill some of the roles that the apostles once did, while pastors and teachers fulfill some of the leadership functions of the prophets.<sup>79</sup> Lincoln also argues that the responsibilities of evangelists were beyond the local congregation, in the founding of churches and mission work.<sup>80</sup> Whereas, others, such as Harold Hoehner, suggest they may have worked both inside and outside of the church.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 341.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>78</sup>Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 541.

<sup>79</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 249-50.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>81</sup>Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 542.

While there is debate about whether “the pastors and teachers” refers to one group of people or two, it is relatively undisputed they exercise their gifts in the context of the local church. Hoehner argues there is a distinction between the two, although there is overlap. Pastors must have and exercise the gift of teaching but their work also includes caring for the overall spiritual wellbeing of the flock in other ways.<sup>82</sup> Whereas all pastors are to be teachers, not every person with the gift of teaching must be a pastor. Some teachers “may not have all the administrative and shepherding responsibilities of the pastor.”<sup>83</sup> The teaching Paul had in mind included both doctrinal and ethical teaching.<sup>84</sup>

The function of the gifted people of verse 11 was to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (v. 12). Hoehner writes, “In brief, the point is that the gifted persons listed in verse 11 serve as the foundational gifts that are used for the immediate purpose of preparing all the saints to minister. Thus, every believer must do the work of the ministry.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, the giving of gifted people to the church is an intermediate step toward the maturity of the body of Christ.

The third step then toward the spiritual maturity of the body of Christ is the ministry of every believer. The word translated “ministry” is *diakonias*, which refers to service and, in Scripture, is frequently applied to service to God. Verse 12 pictures believers serving God by serving one another,<sup>86</sup> which is seen in the result of the ministry “building up the body of Christ.” One of the ways believers minister to each other is by “speaking the truth in love” (v. 15) to one another. Best suggests this refers to believers

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<sup>82</sup>Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 544.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 545.

<sup>84</sup>Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 348.

<sup>85</sup>Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 549.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 550.

exhorting one another with the truth of the gospel: “Believers console, strengthen and correct one another through the gospel and so build up their communities.”<sup>87</sup>

In verses 15b-16, Paul stresses the importance of the ministry of every believer. He says Christ builds up his body “when each part is working properly.” The implication is unless each individual is using his or her gifts to minister to one another, the growth of the body will be stunted. Hoehner suggests that *haphēs*, which in the ESV is translated “joint,” is better translated as “contact.”<sup>88</sup> In light of this translation he makes an application, which is relevant to biblical community: “The union and growth of the body can only come when there is contact with other members of the body.”<sup>89</sup>

### **A Picture of Spiritual Maturity**

Paul describes spiritual maturity in three ways in Ephesians 4:11-16. First, in verses 12b-13 he says when the body of Christ is built up and attains to mature manhood, believers will experience “the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.” The “unity of faith” refers to a unity that flows from a common faith in Christ, while “the knowledge of the Son of God” refers to a personal knowledge of Christ through experience.<sup>90</sup> Second, he describes spiritual maturity in verse 14 as “no longer being children.” The application he makes is that those (individuals or congregations) who are spiritually mature are protected from the spiritual dangers of false doctrine. Third, he describes spiritual maturity ultimately as conforming to Christ. In verse 13, he describes “mature manhood” as being measured by the “fullness of Christ.” In verse 15, he says when the body grows, it grows “into Christ.” Even as individual growth in spiritual

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<sup>87</sup>Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 407.

<sup>88</sup>Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 573.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 350.

maturity is seen in conformity to Christ (Rom 8:29), so corporate maturity is measured by the standard of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-16 confirms that the Christian life is rightly lived in biblical community as believers strive for mutual edification. Jesus has given each believer a spiritual gift and he has given certain gifted people to his church to equip all believers to minister to one another. Ultimately this matters because when believers strive for mutual edification in biblical community, they are doing more than building up themselves or their own congregation; they are helping to fulfill God's ultimate purpose for the universe.

### **First Corinthians 12:12-31**

The thesis of this chapter is that the Christian life is rightly lived when believers devote themselves to life together in biblical community. First Corinthians 12:12-31 contributes to this thesis by showing that life together in biblical community involves believers depending on one another. The text shows that to be a Christian is to be organically linked to other Christians in the body of Christ. Consequently, no individual Christian can reach spiritual maturity or accomplish God's purpose for his life as a "lone ranger Christian." He must learn to use his gifts to build up other believers and allow other believers to use their gifts to build him up.

In this passage, Paul uses the analogy of a human body to describe the church. The analogy is meant to show that the church includes both unity and diversity and such unity and diversity is necessary and good. After presenting the analogy and general idea of unity and diversity, Paul addresses two groups of people; those who feel they have nothing to contribute and those who feel they do not need other believers. He concludes by making an explicit application to his readers.

### **The Analogy of the Body**

In order to make his point that individual believers need one another, Paul presents the analogy of a human body in verse 12. Through the use of metonymy he

describes the church as the “body of Christ.”<sup>91</sup> The analogy of a body to describe a larger group of people was common in the ancient world and would have been familiar to Paul’s Corinthian readers.<sup>92</sup> In verse 13, Paul introduces the idea of unity by reminding his readers of how they came to be part of the body. All Christians share the common experience of having been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ at conversion.<sup>93</sup> In verse 14, Paul introduces the idea of diversity by reminding his readers that bodies are made up of many parts.

### **Diversity**

In verses 15-21, Paul elaborates on the idea of diversity in the body of Christ as he addresses two groups of people. In verses 15-20, he addresses those who considered themselves less gifted and “wondered whether they had any right to belong to so august a body.”<sup>94</sup> In verse 21, he began to address those who felt “they and their ‘superior’ gifts are self-sufficient for the whole body, or that others are scarcely “authentic” parts of the body, as they themselves are.”<sup>95</sup> Part of Paul’s answer to the first group was that the subjective feeling of not belonging to the body did not overthrow the objective fact they did belong.<sup>96</sup> Part of his answer to the second group was that, just because they felt like

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<sup>91</sup>Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 429.

<sup>92</sup>Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 170.

<sup>93</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 246.

<sup>94</sup>Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 171.

<sup>95</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1005.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, 1002.



they did not need others did not make it so. Paul's answer to both groups focused on the diversity of the body, which was by God's design. His point was all members of the body are necessary; "otherwise some function of the body would be missing."<sup>97</sup> Therefore, those who felt they did not belong were to understand they made a necessary contribution, while those who felt they were self-sufficient needed to realize their need for others.

## Unity

In verses 22-26, Paul elaborates on the idea of unity as he continues to address those who feel self-sufficient. In verse 22, he mentions the parts of the body that seem to be weaker. He is likely thinking of the internal organs, which seem to be weaker but are indispensable. Therefore, "crucial to this argument is the fact that they only 'seem' to be weaker."<sup>98</sup> In verses 23-24, Paul is likely thinking of the sexual organs but his point seems to be similar to the preceding sentence: "Bodily appearances are deceiving; all the parts are necessary."<sup>99</sup> Paul says on parts considered less honorable or unpresentable we bestow the greater honor (v. 23) and likewise God has so composed the body that greater honor would be given to the part that lacked it (v. 24). Thiselton explains how the church fathers applied these verses to those who appeared weak and unable to contribute anything to the body: "In patristic thought the theme recurs that believers *need* those to whom they can show active care, protection, support and love; otherwise they cannot serve as Christ served 'for others.'"<sup>100</sup> In verses 25-26, Paul explicitly states his point about unity. God has deliberately designed the body in such a way that the members need one another in

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<sup>97</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 676.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 679.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1008.

order to function.<sup>101</sup> The wellbeing of each individual is bound up with the whole. Therefore, “concern for one another ought to be the hallmark of the Christian community.”<sup>102</sup>

### **You Are the Body of Christ**

In verses 27-31, Paul concludes with explicit application to the Corinthians and a restatement of his body analogy. In verse 27, he clarifies what has been implied thus far and reinforces his point about unity in diversity. He tells the Corinthians they *are* collectively the body of Christ (unity) and “individually members of it” (diversity). In verse 28, he gives a sample list of offices and gifts. His ranking of the first three groups would seem to overthrow his argument about each member of the body being indispensable. Craig Blomberg suggests the ordering relates to chronological priority.<sup>103</sup> In verses 29-30, Paul issues a series of rhetorical questions intended to reinforce his point: no single believer has all the spiritual gifts therefore all believers need one another.<sup>104</sup> He concludes in verse 31 by saying the Corinthians should desire the higher gifts. Yet again, a focus on certain gifts being “higher” would seem to contradict what Paul has just said. Thiselton suggests Paul is saying the Corinthians used to long for gifts that were self-serving and self-glorifying, but now that they understand about the church as a body, they should long for gifts that build up the body.<sup>105</sup>

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 has revealed that God has designed the church and the Christian life in such a way that believers need one another. Therefore, no

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<sup>101</sup>Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 680.

<sup>102</sup>Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 438.

<sup>103</sup>Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 247.

<sup>104</sup>Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1023.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 1024.

Christian should believe he has nothing to contribute and no believer should think he can attain spiritual maturity by himself. Rather, all believers should acknowledge their need for one another and should express this need by devoting themselves to life together in biblical community.

### **Conclusion**

Many professing Christians, as products of their societies, while desiring to grow spiritually, mistakenly pursue such growth in an individualistic way. Still others, who perhaps do not believe they are self-sufficient, do not adequately understand the Bible's vision for life together. They believe Christian interaction should be superficial and limited to brief encounters with one another. This chapter has shown how, regardless of the motivation, those who do not live their Christian lives in close community with other believers will not live the Christian life as God intended. Rather, the Christian life is rightly lived when believers devote themselves to life together.

The ideal picture of the early church presented in Acts 2:42-47 revealed that the earliest Christians were devoted to their life together. Such devotion includes making it a priority to meet together in order to worship and encourage one another, as was shown in Hebrews 10:19-25. Philippians 1:3-5; 27-30 revealed that *Christian* life together centers around the gospel and a shared commitment to advance the gospel. Advancing the gospel, and so advancing the rule and reign of Christ is God's ultimate purpose for the universe, which according to Ephesians 4:11-16 is only accomplished by spiritually mature believers and churches when believers exercise their gifts to build one another up. Such mutual concern for one another, according to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, is God's design for his people. Therefore, all Christians should earnestly seek to give themselves to life together in biblical community with other believers.

CHAPTER 3  
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES  
RELATED TO BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

The local church is the place where God intends for believers to live out their faith together and experience community. Therefore, biblical community is most appropriately pursued in the context of membership in a local church. A right understanding of church membership is necessary to live in biblical community. Christian community that is truly biblical will practice church discipline, which is a means God has given believers for helping one another fight against sin. It is also an important mechanism for protecting biblical community. Fellowship between believers is fundamentally a shared life in Christ that is a reality because of conversion and yet something that may be cultivated. To cultivate fellowship is to pursue biblical community. The mutuality commands, or the “one another” commands, flesh out the commitments believers should have toward one another. To practice these commands in the context of a local church is to live in biblical community. In light of this idea, this chapter explains four related ideas of church membership, church discipline, fellowship, and mutual edification, all of which must be understood in order to live in biblical community.

**Church Membership**

The church is both universal and local. Gregg Allison defines the universal church as “the fellowship of all Christians that extends from the day of Pentecost until the second coming, incorporating both the deceased believers who are presently in heaven and

the living believers from all over the world.”<sup>1</sup> However, the universal church does and should find expression in local congregations. In the New Testament, the word “church” is applied to groups of Christians varying in size. While there are 109 uses of the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament, “the overwhelming majority point to local churches.”<sup>2</sup> Spiritually significant and helpful relationships may exist between believers outside of the local church; nevertheless, biblical community is most appropriately lived out in the context of membership in a local church. This section briefly considers what the local church is, what church membership is, and the connection between church membership and biblical community.

### **What Is the Local Church?**

In order to understand church membership, it is necessary to understand the nature of a local church. A local church is here understood as an autonomous group of born again, baptized members, whose officers include elders and deacons, which has congregational government, whose members have covenanted together on the basis of shared belief, in order to fulfill the purposes of the local church. These purposes include worship, nurture, and evangelism and missions. The ideas of membership, covenanting together, and nurture are of particular importance for the topic of biblical community and are examined next.

### **What Is Church Membership?**

Chuck Lawless defines church membership as “a public pledge to find our role in the body, work alongside other members, and hold each other accountable to faithful

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<sup>1</sup>Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 29.

<sup>2</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 857.

Christian living.”<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Leeman not only emphasizes the commitment of the Christian to the local church, but also the commitment of the local church to the Christian, when he describes church membership as “a covenant of union between a particular church and a Christian.” This covenant includes “the church’s affirmation of the Christian’s profession . . . the church’s promise to give oversight to the Christian . . . and the Christian’s promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight.”<sup>4</sup> In 1 Corinthians 12 through 14, Thom Rainer identifies four realities of church membership: all believers are necessary parts of the whole, members who are different from one another work together, relationships between church members are to be governed by love, and church membership is functioning membership.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes the legitimacy of formal church membership is questioned. Although the New Testament may not explicitly refer to “a member of a local church,” the concept of membership in a local body is clearly implied and necessary. It is most clearly implied in texts such as Hebrews 13:7, 17, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Acts 20:28, and 1 Peter 5:2-3, which address the relationship between Christians and their church leaders, as well as in texts related to church discipline, such as Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Benjamin Merkle includes the ideas of biblical accountability (to church leaders) and biblical discipline among four things that church membership ensures. He also lists the biblical use of gifts and the advance of God’s kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 74.

<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 217.

<sup>5</sup>Thom S. Rainer, *I am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 11-17.

<sup>6</sup>Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 33-50.

Without formal church membership, biblical accountability is problematic both for individual believers and church leaders. Merkle writes, “Biblical accountability is difficult, if not impossible, if the sheep have not formally committed to follow their leaders and if the shepherds do not know who they are responsible to lead.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the church discipline described in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 is hard to imagine without formal church membership. Mark Dever and Paul Alexander make the connection between discipline and membership when they write,

Church membership, then, is a means by which we demarcate the boundaries of the church. This is logically implied by the negative sanctions of corrective church discipline. . . . At the very least we may say that local church membership is a good and necessary implication of God’s desire to keep a clear distinction between his own chosen people and the worldly system of rebellion that surrounds them.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of local church membership then is clearly a biblical idea.

### **The Connection between Church Membership and Biblical Community**

There are three important connections between the concepts of church membership and biblical community. First is the idea that salvation is a “community creating event.”<sup>9</sup> Joseph Hellerman writes that the American Christian paradigm “understands salvation to have everything to do with how the individual relates to God and nothing to do with how we relate to one another.”<sup>10</sup> However, he points out that “we do not find an unchurched Christian in the New Testament. . . . Getting saved and

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<sup>7</sup>Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 33.

<sup>8</sup>Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 60-61.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph H. Hellerman, “Salvation as a Community-Creating Event,” in *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 120-43 (chap. 6).

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

becoming a member of the people of God are inseparable, simultaneous events.”<sup>11</sup>

Further, he argues that individual spirituality is “an incomplete and inadequate picture of the Christian life.”<sup>12</sup> It is inadequate because salvation is not simply about the individual coming into a relationship with God, but it is also about joining Jesus’ community.<sup>13</sup> In Hellerman’s words: “A person is saved to community.”<sup>14</sup> In one sense, the connection between church membership and biblical community is that it is God’s design to put believers into community. According to his design, the normative way salvation should be lived out is in the community of the local church.

Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop argue that a culture of spiritually significant relationships should center on the local church.<sup>15</sup> They claim this should be the case because of the importance of the local church in God’s economy. The local church is God’s instrument for making the gospel visible, protecting the vitality of faith, safeguarding from self-deception, and growing believers in love.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it would not be appropriate to sidestep the local church and to primarily pursue Christian community in some other format. While Christians may be blessed to experience community through campus ministries or other parachurch ministries, they should not neglect the pursuit of biblical community in their own local churches.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Hellerman, “Salvation as a Community-Creating Event,” 123.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 123.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>For an exploration of the relationship between the local church and parachurch ministries, see Jonathan Leeman, ed., “Church and Parachurch: Friends or Foes?” *9Marks Journal* (March-April 2011), accessed October 3, 2015,



The second connection between church membership and biblical community has to do with the concept of commitment. Biblical community involves believers living in relationship to one another as they live out their faith. Dever and Dunlop observe that relationships thrive on commitment and therefore church membership is essential to authentic relationships.<sup>18</sup> Church membership moves believers from a vague commitment to other Christians and “attaches that general commitment to a specific group of people.”<sup>19</sup> Formal commitment to a group of believers through church membership catalyzes informal commitment by affirming it, making it visible, and making it accountable.<sup>20</sup>

Church membership is somewhat analogous to marriage.<sup>21</sup> Just as the security found in a marriage commitment allows a deep relationship to flourish, so does commitment in church membership lead to a “culture of deep relationships.”<sup>22</sup> Dever and Dunlop write,

True love thrives on commitment, and we can enjoy the privileges of marriage far better within the safe walls of covenant. Commitment and relationship are two sides of the same coin. Similarly, the covenant of church membership is the eco-system in which a relationship-focused church culture can thrive.<sup>23</sup>

Hellerman argues that when Christians are committed to one another with a family-type commitment, they are forced to work through problems rather than running from them. Working through difficult relational issues consequently leads to growth.<sup>24</sup>

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<http://9marks.org/journal/church-and-parachurch-friends-or-foes/>.

<sup>18</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 53.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 62-64.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>24</sup>Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 150-53.

Such growth would not occur without commitment to one another.

The third connection between biblical community and church membership has to do with the church covenant. A church covenant fleshes out the commitments involved in living in biblical community, which church members make to one another. Charles Deweese writes that a church covenant is “a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith.”<sup>25</sup> Leeman explains, “If a statement of faith articulates what a church believes, a church covenant articulates how it agrees to live together.”<sup>26</sup> He acknowledges churches are not biblically obligated to articulate their commitments to one another in writing, however, he believes there are good reasons for doing so.<sup>27</sup> He offers nine specific purposes that a covenantal commitment in the local church serves, including identifying a people with God, distinguishing God’s people from the world, and identifying God’s people with one another.<sup>28</sup>

At Capitol Hill Baptist Church, members are required to sign the church covenant. Dever and Alexander write, “Requiring people to sign a church covenant lets them know that they will be expected not only to believe the statement of faith, but to live it out.”<sup>29</sup> They identify several benefits of implementing a church covenant, such as correcting the idea that members can live in isolation and unrepentant sin and still be in good standing in the church, providing a standard of behavior and lifestyle that is

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<sup>25</sup>Charles W. DeWeese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), viii.

<sup>26</sup>Leeman, *The Church*, 299.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 250-66.

<sup>29</sup>Dever and Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 62.

expected of members, and making membership meaningful by clarifying spiritual and relational commitments.<sup>30</sup>

### **Church Discipline**

Biblical community is most appropriately pursued in the context of a local church. One of the means God has given Christians to fight against their sin and to preserve biblical community is the practice of church discipline. This section includes a definition of church discipline, a description of the practice and goals of church discipline, and an explanation of the connection between church discipline and biblical community.

#### **Defining Church Discipline**

Leeman defines church discipline: “In broad terms, church discipline is one part of the discipleship process, the part where we correct sin and point the disciple toward the better path.”<sup>31</sup> Robert Cheong also views church discipline as part of the discipleship process, which focuses on helping the disciple as well as preserving the reputation of Christ and the health of his church. He defines church discipline as “God’s ongoing, redeeming work through His living Word and people as they fight the fight of faith together to exalt Christ and protect the purity of His Bride.”<sup>32</sup>

#### **The Practice and Goals of Church Discipline**

Thomas Schreiner identifies Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 as the two biblical texts where church discipline is most clearly taught. These texts identify the

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<sup>30</sup>Dever and Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 62.

<sup>31</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How The Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 27.

<sup>32</sup>Robert K. Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride: A Handbook for Church Discipline* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 9.

process, motives, and goals for confronting open and unrepentant sin in the church.<sup>33</sup>

When a believer becomes aware of open and unrepentant sin in the life of another believer, he should approach that person privately in order to rebuke him and to plead with him to repent. If he repents, he should be forgiven. His repentance and forgiveness will result in restoration of the relationship with the person whom he has sinned against. It will also provide evidence of the genuineness of his salvation.<sup>34</sup>

In the case of a person who does not respond to a private appeal to repent of his open sin, he should be confronted again, this time by the person who originally approached him, as well as one to two more witnesses. These witnesses should be people of integrity who do not have a personal vendetta against the person in sin and who are simply seeking to help “establish impartially what has occurred.”<sup>35</sup> If the person repents, the discipline should not advance any further.

If the person in sin refuses to repent, even after two to three other believers, who have verified the charges against him, have confronted him, then the whole church should be made aware of his sin and encouraged to call him to repentance. If he repents, then he should be forgiven and restored. However, if he does not repent, then the church should consider him an unbeliever and no longer a part of the church.<sup>36</sup> At this point Leeman argues that the covenant between the local church and the member has been broken: “The church withdraws its affirmation of the individual’s faith, announces it will cease giving oversight, and releases the individual back into the world.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 106-22.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 107-8.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>37</sup>Leeman, *The Church*, 220.

While there may be multiple aims to church discipline, Allison argues that the restoration of the person in sin is the primary objective: “Church discipline is to be undertaken with the goal that the offending Christian will acknowledge sin, confess it, and repent so that reconciliation will be effected. Simply put, restoration is the intended purpose of church discipline.”<sup>38</sup> Schreiner concurs, “The goal of discipline is not the humiliation or public rebuke of those straying. Rather, the design is to restore them to the fellowship of the redeemed community.”<sup>39</sup> However, in light of 1 Corinthians 5 he adds that another purpose of church discipline is to preserve the purity of the church and to protect it against the corrupting influence of unchecked sin.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Connection between Church Discipline and Biblical Community**

Church discipline is connected to the idea of biblical community in at least three ways. First, it is a means whereby those who are living in biblical community help one another fight against their sin. Second, it is a means for preserving unity within the community of the local church when believers sin against one another. Third, it is a means for preserving the spiritual vitality of the community by protecting it from corrupting influences.

In *God Redeeming His Bride*, Robert Cheong presents a compelling vision of how church discipline can be used to help believers fight against their sin. In his definition of church discipline (cited previously), he acknowledges that the fight of faith is done *together*.<sup>41</sup> God does not intend for believers to live the Christian life in isolation or to

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<sup>38</sup>Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 188.

<sup>39</sup>Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 106.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>41</sup>Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*, 9.

wrestle against their sin alone. Rather, he intends to work through his people in order to continue to redeem them and to purify his bride.

Cheong argues that God “calls us to a *radical life of community* where we encourage and challenge one another to live out the gospel.”<sup>42</sup> He connects this radical life of community with the idea of discipline. He suggests that believers often consider themselves to be autonomous. When they struggle against sin they either do not believe they need the help of others or they do not want others intruding in their lives. Many desire community when they are in need but do not connect the idea of community with discipline and their fight against sin.<sup>43</sup> Cheong argues that such an attitude is mistaken and that there are “benefits and blessings of living an open life with others in a dependent, sacrificial, and loving way.”<sup>44</sup>

Dever and Dunlop also address the role believers are to play in other’s lives as they fight against their sin. They argue that, ideally, local churches should be places “where it is normal for people to have deep and honest conversations about their spiritual lives.”<sup>45</sup> Such conversations could be awkward, but they also could be the means God uses to help his people in their struggle against sin. Awkward questions about struggles with sin, far from representing an imbalanced intrusion into another person’s life, are actually manifestations of a “culture obsessed with serving others.”<sup>46</sup> Dever and Dunlop argue that it is the responsibility of all church members, not just the leaders, to address sin in

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<sup>42</sup>Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*, 32., emphasis original.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>45</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 171.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

the church and that such confrontation of sin is actually an expression of love.<sup>47</sup>

Thabiti Anyabwile makes the connection between church discipline and community explicit when he writes, “But, if we are to enjoy authentic community, we must be a group of people committed to the sometimes painful and messy work of restoring others.”<sup>48</sup> He argues that the proper context for the grace of correction is the local church and that “correction is a vital expression of spiritual fellowship in the local church.”<sup>49</sup> As believers wrestle with sin, they need spiritual fellowship and require correction from outside themselves.<sup>50</sup> God intends for this correction to come from fellow believers within the local church, but for this to happen believers must accept that they are responsible for one another’s spiritual wellbeing. This includes the responsibility to correct and restore.<sup>51</sup>

Much of the sin in the lives of believers is committed against other believers in the local church. Therefore, another function of church discipline is the preservation of unity within the community of the local church. Hellerman points out, “We continue to wrestle with sin and selfish behavior in our lives long after our salvation. . . . This is precisely what makes it so difficult to live as a family, to stay together, to embrace the pain, and to grow up in community with one another.”<sup>52</sup> Commenting on Matthew 18 he

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<sup>47</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 173-74.

<sup>48</sup>Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Life of God in the Soul of the Church: The Root and Fruit of Spiritual Fellowship* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 111.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>52</sup>Hellerman, *When The Church Was a Family*, 151.

explains, “Jesus assumes an intimate relational context for the exercise of church discipline. He assumes a family context.”<sup>53</sup>

Anyabwile argues, “Forgiveness is critical to the unity of the church . . . therefore, *giving and receiving forgiveness is an important personal and public priority.*”<sup>54</sup> The local church is a place where members sin against one another, but it must also be a place of forgiveness. “Such a culture of forgiveness is vital to the unity of the church.”<sup>55</sup> Unresolved disputes between church members ultimately become the concern of the whole church because they threaten the unity of the church. This is why even a private dispute between brothers, like the one Jesus mentions in Matthew 18, could eventually come to the attention of the whole church.<sup>56</sup>

Church discipline is a means of protecting the spiritual vitality of biblical community from the corrupting influence of unchecked sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that the Bible calls for reproof when a fellow believer “falls into open sin,” because “defection from God’s Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation.”<sup>57</sup> Sin damages the vitality of biblical community in two ways. First, because believers are organically connected to one another in the body of Christ, when part of the body becomes unhealthy the whole body will suffer.<sup>58</sup> Second, church discipline protects the vitality of biblical community by establishing good order in the

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<sup>53</sup>Hellerman, *When The Church Was a Family*, 154.

<sup>54</sup>Anyabwile, *The Life of God*, 144, emphasis original.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>57</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 107.

<sup>58</sup>Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*, 51.



church, which “creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members.”<sup>59</sup> Unchecked sin, like the sin of Achan in Joshua 7, can wreak havoc on a church.<sup>60</sup> Practicing church discipline, especially when sin is addressed publicly, emphasizes the seriousness of sin.<sup>61</sup> Thus, discipline warns and encourages believers to fight sin.

## **Fellowship**

In order to live in biblical community it is necessary to understand the concept of fellowship. For those who are in Christ, fellowship is a spiritual reality that flows from conversion and at the same time is something that must be cultivated. The pursuit of living in biblical community involves the cultivation of fellowship. To experience fellowship is to experience biblical community. This section includes a definition of fellowship, a description of several aspects of fellowship, and an explanation of the connection between fellowship and biblical community.

### **Defining Fellowship**

Fellowship is a word frequently used among Christians, however, what Christians often mean by “fellowship” is not what the Bible means. J. I. Packer writes,

We often say that we have had fellowship when all we mean is that we have taken part in some Christian social enterprise. . . . Our point is simply that to equate these activities with fellowship, and fellowship with them, is an abuse of Christian language.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 17.

<sup>60</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 169.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>62</sup>J. I. Packer, *18 Words: The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 183.

Jerry Bridges agrees, “New Testament fellowship is far more than just Christian social activity.”<sup>63</sup> However, he does acknowledge that it may include social activity.<sup>64</sup> Anyabwile specifies three things which spiritual fellowship is not: a set of activities, a program, or something that must happen in a particular place. However, certain activities and programs may facilitate fellowship, and fellowship may often occur in specific places designated for the pursuit of fellowship.<sup>65</sup>

If fellowship is not merely social activity among Christians or participation in a program or a set of activities, what is it? The English word “fellowship” is translated from the Greek word *koinōnia*. The word is alternately translated in the New Testament in English as “participation,” “partnership,” “sharing,” or “fellowship.” Its first occurrence in the New Testament comes in Acts 2:42.<sup>66</sup> Bridges writes, “Sharing a common life . . . is the most basic meaning of *koinōnia*, or fellowship.”<sup>67</sup> This common life is shared with other Christians and is fundamentally a relationship and not an activity.<sup>68</sup>

### **Aspects of Fellowship**

Bridges identifies four primary dimensions of fellowship: relationship, partnership, communion with others, and sharing material possessions.<sup>69</sup> Biblical community, which is experienced in fellowship, “is first of all the sharing of a common

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<sup>63</sup>Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 149.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Anyabwile, *The Life of God*, 17.

<sup>66</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 9-10.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 10-16.

life in Christ.”<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, the relationship of “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, the relationship between Christians has as its foundation the relationship of each Christian to God through Christ. John Hammett writes, “The implication is that any genuine experience of fellowship on the human level must be preceded by fellowship with God, who embodies fellowship in his triune nature, created humans for fellowship, and bestows fellowship on his people.”<sup>72</sup>

Christian fellowship also includes the idea of partnership. Christians who have fellowship together have partnered together with the ultimate objective of glorifying God by spreading the gospel and working to build up the body of Christ.<sup>73</sup> Partnership in spreading the gospel includes things like giving to support ministries and praying for missionaries.<sup>74</sup> Anyabwile points out that partnership in spreading the gospel has a global focus: “Spiritual fellowship in the church includes a cooperative venture to reach the nations.”<sup>75</sup> The relationship between Paul and the Philippians is an example of a partnership in the gospel.<sup>76</sup>

Christian fellowship includes the idea of communion with other Christians. Because of vertical fellowship with God, Christians can experience horizontal fellowship with one another. “The horizontal dimension of fellowship is the habitual sharing, the

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<sup>70</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 11.

<sup>71</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

<sup>72</sup>John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 233.

<sup>73</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 12.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 76-82.

<sup>75</sup>Anyabwile, *The Life of God*, 90.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 91-95.

constant giving to and receiving from each other, which is the true and authentic pattern of life for the people of God.”<sup>77</sup> Christians experience communion with one another, not simply by attending worship services together, but through spiritually intentional relationships.<sup>78</sup> Jerry Bridges argues that Hebrews 10:24-25 is not obeyed simply by attending a church service, but through personal relationships:<sup>79</sup> “We need both the public teaching of our pastors and the mutual encouragement and admonishing of one another.”<sup>80</sup> The aim of these relationships is “doing another person spiritual good.”<sup>81</sup> Practically these relationships include sharing with one another from the Bible, helping one another fight sin, and praying together.

Christians experience fellowship together through personal relationships as they share with one another what they are learning from the Bible. Such sharing might occur in the context of a more mature Christian discipling a younger Christian, or in a relationship between two mature believers.<sup>82</sup> What Christians share with one another from the Bible can be “a means to finding strength, refreshment, and instruction for one’s own soul.”<sup>83</sup>

Christians also experience fellowship through personal relationships as they fight sin and pray together. The basic unit of spiritual fellowship through personal relationships is one-to-one relationships, although it can also occur in small groups.

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<sup>77</sup>Packer, *18 Words*, 185.

<sup>78</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 117-32.

<sup>79</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 61-62.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>81</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 120.

<sup>82</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 70; Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 119-20.

<sup>83</sup>Packer, *18 Words*, 187.

However, “spiritual fellowship becomes more and more difficult as a group becomes larger.”<sup>84</sup> This is true because people are less likely to be open and honest with one another as a group becomes larger.<sup>85</sup> In smaller groups or in one-to-one relationships Christians can experience fellowship by helping one another fight sin and by praying for and with one another. Such relationships require an openness to share about one’s sins and failures, and a willingness to be exhorted and held accountable.”<sup>86</sup>

A few other issues related to fellowship are worth noting. First, there are certain pre-requisites for Christians to have fellowship with one another. The primary pre-requisite for fellowship is a shared experience of salvation through Christ. Bonhoeffer writes, “One is a brother to another only through Jesus Christ. I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him.”<sup>87</sup> Salvation through Christ is the foundation of the shared life in Christ. Spiritual gifts are also an essential pre-requisite for fellowship. These gifts are given to Christians in order to bless and serve one another.<sup>88</sup> Christians must be willing to use their spiritual gifts to build one another up in order to have fellowship. Another pre-requisite for fellowship with other believers is personal fellowship with God. A person who is not living in vital communion with God will have nothing to share with a fellow believer to build him up.<sup>89</sup> A final pre-requisite for fellowship is mutual commitment and responsibility which involves making it a priority to meet

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<sup>84</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 70-71.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 66-68.

<sup>87</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 25.

<sup>88</sup>Anyabwile, *The Life of God*, 78, 81.

<sup>89</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 16, 63.

together, to honestly share with one another, to encourage one another, to watch out for one another, and to pray for one another.<sup>90</sup>

Second, the ultimate purpose of fellowship between believers is fellowship with God. Fellowship with God is fed by fellowship with other Christians.<sup>91</sup> Third, some common obstacles to fellowship are self-sufficiency, formality, bitterness, and elitism. Some Christians do not want to acknowledge their need for one another (self-sufficiency), some simply want to be involved in public worship but do not want to be involved in anything more intimate (formality), some have unresolved hostility toward other believers because of past offenses or jealousy (bitterness), and some are unwilling to associate with others based on extra-biblical requirements for spirituality (elitism).<sup>92</sup>

Fourth, the experience of fellowship between believers can be cultivated in several ways. Hammett suggests that the cultivation of fellowship begins with consistent teaching on the gospel, since spiritual life in Christ is the starting point for fellowship.<sup>93</sup> He also asserts, “Churches need to create other contexts in which fellowship can develop. . . . Most often fellowship is nurtured in small groups,” such as Sunday school classes or home-based small groups.<sup>94</sup> Dever and Dunlop suggest cultivating a culture of spiritually intentional relationships (fellowship between believers) by advocating for simple and informal relationships, advocating for lives centered on the local church, and by emphasizing the privileges of church membership.<sup>95</sup> They identify four primary means

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<sup>90</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 63.

<sup>91</sup>Packer, *18 Words*, 185.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 189-90.

<sup>93</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 237.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 119-31.

for cultivating this kind of culture in churches: personal example, preaching, prayer, and patience.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Connection between Fellowship and Biblical Community**

The connection between fellowship and biblical community is clear and direct. To experience fellowship is to experience biblical community. Fellowship refers to sharing a common life in Christ. The experience of sharing that life together is living in biblical community. Jerry Bridges writes, “The concepts of *community* and *fellowship* are so closely linked that we cannot have true community unless we practice true fellowship.”<sup>97</sup> Further, Bridges affirms that fellowship is at the heart of biblical community when he states, “In fact, the concepts of biblical community and biblical fellowship are so closely tied that I may sometimes use the words *community* and *fellowship* interchangeably.”<sup>98</sup>

### **The Mutuality Commands**

Living in biblical community requires an understanding of the mutual edification of believers through the practice of the “one another” or mutuality commands. These commands flesh out the commitment believers should have toward one another. To practice these commands in the context of a local church is to live in biblical community. This section explains the purpose of the mutuality commands, describes the broad categories of the commands, and addresses the connection between the mutuality commands and biblical community.

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<sup>96</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 131-32.

<sup>97</sup>Bridges, *True Community*, 15-16.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

## The Purpose of the Mutuality Commands

The purpose of the mutuality commands is to instruct Christians how to live together in biblical community to the end that local churches and individual believers grow spiritually and function in a healthy way. Cheong writes, “God provides clear instruction for how we are to live together as the body of Christ through His one another commands.”<sup>99</sup> Gerald Sittser likewise emphasizes the role of the mutuality commands in governing relationships between Christians: “The apostle Paul uses the metaphor of joints and ligaments to emphasize the necessity of nurturing healthy relationships in the church. . . . The New Testament issues a series of commands to show us how to develop these healthy relationships.”<sup>100</sup> The goal of healthy relationships between believers is the spiritual growth of those believers and the churches to which they belong. Sittser continues, “If a healthy church is the goal, the mutuality commands are the means to get us there.”<sup>101</sup> Gene Getz also asserts that the goal of the mutuality commands is to help churches to be healthy:

New Testament writers exhorted believers to engage in specific activities that would enable the body of Christ to function effectively and to grow spiritually. . . . God desires that every believer be a functioning member of a local church—a local “body” or “family” of believers.<sup>102</sup>

Both Sittser and Getz believe the foundational command Jesus gave to the church is to love one another and the other mutuality commands are an outworking of the command to love. Getz writes, “Foundational to all meaningful Christian action is *love*. . . . Most all of the additional “one another” exhortations in the New Testament actually

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<sup>99</sup>Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*, 195.

<sup>100</sup>Gerald L. Sittser, *Love One Another: Becoming the Church Jesus Longs for* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 20.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>102</sup>Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another: How Every Member of the Church Can Help Strengthen Other Christians* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1976), 4.



demonstrate love in action. They tell us *how* to love!”<sup>103</sup> Sittser lists “love” as the first of twelve mutuality commands and says the other mutuality commands “translate love into action.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Classification of the Mutuality Commands**

In English Bible translations, the Greek word frequently translated as “one another” is *allēlōn*. In the New Testament the word is used fifty-eight times outside of the Gospels. Some of the fifty-eight uses of the word are repetitions of the same commandment.<sup>105</sup> While there are many mutuality commands in the New Testament, they can be narrowed down and classified into a smaller number of commandments. Getz claims,

When all the “one another” exhortations are studied carefully, and grouped together according to specific meanings, they can be reduced to approximately 12 significant actions Christians are to take toward “one another” to help build up the body of Christ.<sup>106</sup>

The twelve actions Getz identifies, which serve as the basis for twelve chapters in his book, are accepting responsibility for one another (acknowledging believers are members of one another), being devoted to one another, honoring one another, being of the same mind with one another, accepting one another, admonishing one another, greeting one another, serving one another, bearing one another’s burdens, bearing with one another, submitting to one another, and encouraging one another.<sup>107</sup> Sittser also narrows the mutuality commands to twelve. His list includes some overlap with Getz, but

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<sup>103</sup>Getz, *Building Up One Another*, 5-6.

<sup>104</sup>Sittser, *Love One Another*, 20.

<sup>105</sup>Getz, *Building Up One Another*, 4.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 7-120.

is not exactly the same. He includes the commands to love one another, be subject to one another, forbear one another, forgive one another, confess sin to and pray for one another, serve one another, encourage one another, comfort one another, bear one another's burdens, stir up one another, and admonish one another.<sup>108</sup>

Cheong classifies the mutuality commands under four broad categories: loving God and one another, engaging one another with the gospel, fighting for one another in suffering and sin, and forgiving and reconciling with one another.<sup>109</sup> He argues that Christians love one another primarily because God's love is at work in their lives and because of their love for God. In fact, he claims that Christians love God *by* loving others.<sup>110</sup> Love for one another is expressed mainly "through comforting and challenging one another with the gospel so that we all grow in our love for God and others."<sup>111</sup>

Engaging one another with the gospel involves efforts to build one another up through the gospel, speaking the truth in love to one another, stirring one another up to love and good works, and avoiding sins of speech against one another.<sup>112</sup> Fighting for one another in suffering and sin includes things like bearing one another's burdens, praying for one another, pursuing one another when they wander into sin, and confessing sins to one another.<sup>113</sup> Forgiving and reconciling with one another requires believers to reject bitterness, anger, and disunity in the pursuit of peace and unity. It involves believers loving and forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven them.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>108</sup>Sittser, *Love One Another*, 13-175.

<sup>109</sup>Cheong, *God Redeeming His Bride*, 195.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 197-200.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, 200-206.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, 206-9.

## **The Connection between the Mutuality Commands and Biblical Community**

The mutuality commands move Christians from vague notions of love for and commitment to one another into concrete expressions of love and commitment. These commands describe the actions of those living in biblical community together. To obey these commands, in the context of a local church, is to live in biblical community.

### **Conclusion**

It is impossible for Christians to live in biblical community with one another without understanding church membership, church discipline, fellowship, and mutual edification. While the concept of local church membership is sometimes challenged, it is clearly a biblical idea. In order for believers to live in community with one another, they must formally commit to one another. Church discipline is a corollary of church membership and must be understood and practiced as a means of preserving the unity and spiritual vitality of biblical community in the local church. The concepts of fellowship and biblical community are virtually inseparable. Fellowship is, on the one hand, a spiritual reality resulting from conversion. Yet, it is also something that may be cultivated. To cultivate fellowship is to cultivate biblical community. To experience fellowship is to experience biblical community. Life together in biblical community occurs when believers understand, embrace, and live out their responsibilities toward one another through the practice of the mutuality commands. One will find biblical community in a group of people that understand and practice church membership, church discipline, fellowship, and the mutuality commands.

## CHAPTER 4

### DETAILS OF THE PROJECT

The ministry project was carried out in eighteen weeks. The first eight weeks involved writing the curriculum for the eight-week small group Bible study on biblical community and receiving the approval of the expert panel for each lesson. The first eight weeks were also devoted to the recruitment of the ministry project participants. The second nine weeks of the project began with a meeting with the project participants in order to explain the project and to administer the pre-series questionnaire. The initial meeting with the participants was followed by eight weekly sessions where the curriculum was taught. During the final week of the project, the participants met to take the post-series questionnaire and to discuss future plans for meeting together as a small group. This chapter explains the implementation of the project by describing the actions taken each week during the project.

#### **Writing and Recruitment**

The first eight weeks of the project were given to writing the curriculum for the project and obtaining the approval of the lessons by the expert panel. Participants for the project were also recruited during this time.

#### **The Expert Panel**

Although the eighteen weeks of the project officially began on January 9, 2016, one important step was taken prior to that time—the expert panel was enlisted in order to evaluate the curriculum for the ministry project. In April 2015, I asked Lee Tankersley to be on the panel. Tankersley has a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from The

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has been one of the pastors at Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, Tennessee, since 1999. In November 2015, I asked the now late Michael Morrow to be on the panel. Morrow had a D.Min. from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. He served in pastoral ministry for over forty years and was pastoring Union Baptist Church in Marion, Kentucky, at the time of his death. In December 2015, I asked Shawn Wright to be on the panel. Wright is a professor of Church History at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is an elder at Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Each of these men has extensive academic training and pastoral experience. Consequently, their insights into the lessons proved helpful.

### **Week 1**

I finished writing the first lesson of the curriculum on January 9, 2016. On the same day, I sent the first draft of lesson 1 along with the evaluation rubric to the panel. On January 11, before either of the other members of the panel had responded, Wright returned his evaluation rubric for the lesson. More than 90 percent of the indicators on the rubric did not meet or exceed the sufficiency level according to his evaluation. Particularly, he believed the application section of the first lesson required attention and that the lesson needed to include more discussion questions. Therefore, I revised the lesson in light of his suggestions and sent the revised lesson to each member of the panel on January 12. I asked the other two members of the panel to only evaluate the revised lesson. By January 16, each member of the panel had returned his rubric and the lesson was approved.

Lesson 1 was entitled, “Fellowship.” The lesson closely followed the material presented in Chapters 2 and 3 of the ministry project. However, after I wrote chapter 2, a new book on biblical community was released which also significantly influenced lessons 1 through 5 of the curriculum. The book was co-written by Mark Dever and Jamie

Dunlop and is entitled *The Compelling Community*.<sup>1</sup> The main idea of lesson 1 was that fellowship is a spiritual reality, which flows from conversion and yet must be cultivated. I argued that the cultivation of fellowship is the pursuit of biblical community and that to experience fellowship is to experience biblical community.

The lesson began by explaining that fellowship is more than Christians simply joining together in some kind of social activity. Rather, it is the sharing of a common life in Christ. Four aspects of fellowship were identified: relationship, partnership, communion, and sharing. The key biblical texts were 1 John 1:3, Philippians 1:3-5, 27-30, Hebrews 10:19-25, and Acts 2:44-45. The lesson moved on to a consideration of additional issues related to fellowship, such as pre-requisites for fellowship, the purpose of fellowship, common obstacles to fellowship, and ways to cultivate fellowship. Lesson 1, like lessons 2 through 5, concluded by highlighting the connection between the topic of the lesson and biblical community.

## **Week 2**

I finished writing lesson 2 of the curriculum on January 15. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. Wright and Tankersley approved the lesson by January 21. Morrow, who was beginning to have some health problems, did not approve the lesson until February 12.

Lesson 2 was entitled, “Church Membership.” Like lesson 1, this lesson also closely followed the material in chapters 2 and 3 of the ministry project. The main idea of the lesson was that, while spiritually significant and helpful relationships may exist between believers outside of the local church, biblical community is most appropriately pursued in the context of membership in a local church.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

The lesson began with a discussion of the distinction between the universal church and the local church. Then, church membership was defined and defended. I closely followed Benjamin Merkle’s argument from *Those Who Must Give an Account* to make the case for church membership.<sup>2</sup> The final part of the lesson focused on the connection between biblical community and church membership. I emphasized that in being united to Christ through salvation, believers are united to one another. The key passage which I highlighted was 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. I also shared the idea from Dever and Dunlop’s book that, since relationships thrive on commitment, local church membership helps to promote spiritually significant relationships.<sup>3</sup>

### **Week 3**

I finished writing the third lesson of the curriculum on January 23. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. All three members of the expert panel approved the lesson by February 12. At the beginning of week 3, I also began recruiting the participants for the project. I published the invitation to participate in the church bulletin on Sunday, January 17. On the same day, during the morning worship service, I gave an extensive announcement explaining the project.

Lesson 3 was entitled, “Church Membership—Part 2—The Church Covenant.” The lesson closely followed the material in chapter 3 of the ministry project. The main idea of the lesson was that a church covenant fleshes out the commitments involved in living in biblical community, which church members make to God and to one another in local church membership.

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<sup>2</sup>Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 31-52.

<sup>3</sup>Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 126.

The lesson began with several definitions of a church covenant. Then, the biblical basis for a church covenant was presented. I followed very closely Jonathan Leeman’s argument for church covenants from *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*.<sup>4</sup> The second half of the lesson was devoted to examining LBC’s church covenant. I concluded the lesson by making the connection between biblical community and the church covenant. The church covenant helps to specify and formalize the commitment between believers in a local church, which in turn causes relationships and community to thrive.

#### **Week 4**

I finished writing the fourth lesson of the curriculum on January 29. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. All three members of the expert panel approved the lesson by February 26. Between January 17 and January 24, I approached several church members in personal conversation in order to invite them to participate in the project. The invitation to participate in the project was again published in the church bulletin on Sunday, January 24, and another announcement was made during the worship service.

Lesson 4 was entitled, “Church Membership—Part 3—Church Discipline.” The lesson closely followed the material in chapter 3 of the ministry project. The main idea of the lesson was built on the idea from lesson 2: biblical community is most appropriately pursued in the context of the local church. In lesson 4, the main ideas was that since the local church is the place where biblical community is most appropriately experienced, church discipline is one of the means God has given his people to preserve biblical community and to fight against sin.

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<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 247-67.



The lesson began with several definitions of church discipline. Then, some preliminary issues were explained, such as the distinction between formative and corrective discipline. The lesson then addressed the practice and goals of church discipline. I focused on the three primary New Testament passages about church discipline: Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5, and Galatians 6:1-5. I explained from each passage how sin might come to light, how sin should be addressed, and the goal of addressing sin. I concluded the lesson by explaining the connection between biblical community and church discipline. I emphasized that church discipline is a means for believers to help one another fight sin, for preserving unity when believers sin against one another, and for preserving the spiritual vitality of the community.

## **Week 5**

I finished writing lesson 5 of the curriculum on February 5. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. All three members of the expert panel approved the lesson by February 26. Between January 24 and January 31, I approached more church members in personal conversation and invited them to participate in the project. The announcement about the project was again published in the church bulletin on Sunday, January 31, and an announcement was made during the worship service. By January 31, 10 adult church members had committed to participate in the project. The project proposal allowed for 10 to 15 participants. Therefore, I continued to invite others to participate between January 31 and March 3, when the first meeting was held. After January 31, 6 more church members expressed interest in being a part of the project, but none of them committed to participate.

Lesson 5 was entitled, “The Mutuality Commands—Part 1.” It was the first of four lessons on the mutuality commands. Lesson 5 introduced the idea of the mutuality commands and lessons 6 through 8 examined twelve of the commands. The main idea of lessons 5 through 8 was that believers must understand how God wants them to build

each other up through the mutuality commands in order to live in biblical community. It was argued that to practice the mutuality commands in the context of a local church is to live in biblical community.

The material in chapters 2 and 3 of the ministry project heavily influenced the lesson. The lesson began with an examination of the biblical background and purpose of the mutuality commands. I examined the purposes of and path to spiritual maturity by considering Ephesians 4:7-16. I emphasized that the members of the body of Christ help each another to grow to maturity. Then I explained how two authors classified the mutuality commands and concluded by explaining the connection between biblical community and the mutuality commands. The mutuality commands describe the actions of those living in biblical community with one another.

## **Week 6**

I finished writing lesson 6 of the curriculum on February 16. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. All three members of the expert panel approved the lesson by February 26.

Lesson 6 was entitled, “The Mutuality Commands—Part 2.” As noted, the main idea of the lesson was the same for lessons 5 through 8: believers must understand how God wants them to build each another up through the mutuality commands in order to live in biblical community. Lessons 6 through 8 each examined four mutuality commands. The particular commands that were examined and the order in which they were examined were taken from Gene Getz’s *Building Up One Another*.<sup>5</sup>

The four mutuality commands examined in lesson 6 were introduced in the form of questions: Do we need one another? How should we think about one another? How should we treat one another? Must we be united to one another? The first command

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<sup>5</sup>Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another: How Every Member of the Church Can Help Strengthen Other Christians* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1976).

was to embrace responsibility for one another. The command is implied in Romans 12:5 and Ephesians 4:25 where Paul says believers are “members of one another.” I used 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 to elaborate on what it means to be members of one another. The second command was to be devoted to one another in brotherly love. The command is stated clearly in Romans 12:10. Additionally, 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, 1 Peter 3:8, and 2 Peter 1:5-7 were considered. The third command, to honor one another, is stated clearly in Romans 12:10. The same idea is communicated in Philippians 2:3-4; therefore, I focused on both texts. The fourth command, to be of the same mind with one another, is stated in the form of a prayer in Romans 15:5 and is given in the form of a command in Philippians 2:2. In addition to these texts, I pointed out the command to maintain the unity of the Spirit in Ephesians 4:3 and Jesus’s prayer for the unity of his people in John 17:21, 23. For each of the commands considered in lesson 6, I explained the basis of the command, the purpose of the command, the necessary attitudes for fulfilling the command, and the actions that flow from the command.

## **Week 7**

I finished writing lesson 7 of the curriculum on February 19. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. All three members of the expert panel approved the lesson by February 26.

Lesson 7 was entitled, “The Mutuality Commands—Part 3.” The lesson began with a reminder of the main idea of lessons 5 through 8: the relationship between the mutuality commands and biblical community. Then, four more mutuality commands were examined.

The first command, to accept one another, is stated in Romans 14:1 and 15:7. The word “accept” is used in the New American Standard Bible, whereas other translations, such as the English Standard Bible, used the word “welcome.” I pointed out that the purpose of the command is to preserve unity in the church. The basis of the

command is that believers should accept those whom God has accepted through Christ. I then explained the dangers Paul describes for both the “weak” and the “strong.”

The second command, to admonish one another, is stated in both Romans 15:14 and Colossians 3:16. I explained five things about admonishment: its meaning, the pre-requisites for admonishing a fellow believer, which believers should admonish others, how admonishment should be done, and the goal of admonishment.

The third command, to greet one another, is given in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and 1 Peter 5:14. In each place the command is stated as a command to greet one another “with a holy kiss.” I explained that while the cultural practice of greeting one another with a kiss does not necessarily carry over to today’s culture, the expectation that believers would greet one another warmly is abiding. It was also explained that the function of the command is to promote reconciliation and genuine love between believers.

The fourth command, to serve one another, is given in Galatians 5:13-14. In order to explain this command, I also focused on the teaching and example of Jesus in Mark 10:43-45 and John 13:1-17. I concluded the lesson by sharing a definition of serving one another as well as practical ideas about serving one another from Gerald Sittser’s book *Love One Another*.<sup>6</sup>

## **Week 8**

I finished writing the eighth lesson of the curriculum on February 27. The lesson was sent to the expert panel on the same day. All three members of the expert panel approved the lesson by March 14.

Lesson 8 was entitled, “The Mutuality Commands—Part 4.” The lesson began with a reminder of the main idea of lessons 5 through 8, about the relationship between

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<sup>6</sup>Gerald L. Sittser, *Love One Another: Becoming the Church Jesus Longs for* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

the mutuality commands and biblical community. Then, four more mutuality commands were examined.

The first command, to bear one another's burdens, was taken from Galatians 6:1-3. I reached back into Galatians 5 in order to explain the general principle behind the command. Instead of being conceited, believers should view one another as brothers and seek to serve one another, even in uncomfortable ways, such as restoring those who fall into sin. I pointed out five things in verse 1 about restoring those who are caught in a sin. Then, I addressed misgivings that believers might have about fulfilling this command.

The second command, to bear with one another, is stated in Ephesians 4:2 and Colossians 3:13. I explained what it does and does not mean to bear with one another. Then, I described three necessary attitudes for bearing with one another. I concluded by explaining that the commandment is important because it relates to the command in Ephesians 4:3 to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

The third command, to submit to one another, is found in Ephesians 5:21. I shared definitions of submission from two authors and then explained that believers are called upon to submit to others in various relationships. I concluded by explaining how the command to submit to one another is related to the commands to serve and honor one another, to the idea of being part of a body, and to the church covenant.

The fourth command, to encourage one another, is given in 1 Thessalonians 5:11. In order to explain the command, Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 3:16, and Hebrews 10:23-25 were considered. I began by explaining what it means to encourage one another. Then, I pointed out that the primary way believers are to encourage one another is by speaking the truth of God's Word to each other. I concluded the lesson by explaining that believers should encourage one another because mutual encouragement is one of the means God gives believers in order to persevere until the coming "day" which is mentioned in Hebrews 10:25.

## **Survey and Sessions**

The second nine weeks of the project were given to administering the pre-series questionnaire to the participants, and teaching the eight-week curriculum to them. The curriculum was taught in five different homes, with one family hosting three meetings, two families hosting two meetings each, and two families hosting one meeting each.

### **Week 9**

The first meeting with the project participants was on Thursday, March 3 at 7 p.m. The session began with a time of intercessory prayer. After the prayer time, I shared what the format for the meetings would be. I gave a very general introduction to the topic of biblical community and then administered the pre-series questionnaire.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to ensure accurate responses, the questionnaire was anonymous. Each participant identified himself or herself with a four-digit code on his or her questionnaire. For the post-series questionnaire the participants were asked to identify themselves using the same code. In order to make sure participants remembered their codes, a list was compiled with their names and codes. This list was kept in a sealed envelope until the final meeting when the post-series questionnaire was administered.

### **Weeks 10 through 17**

The curriculum was taught to the participants in eight sessions between March 8 and April 26. Some weeks the meetings took place on Tuesday evenings, while other weeks the meetings took place on Thursday evenings. Each week the group chose the date for the next meeting based on the schedules of the participants. As noted, the meetings took place in several homes, but they all followed the same format.

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<sup>7</sup>See appendix 1.

Each session began with a time of intercessory prayer in response to prayer requests. Then the lessons were taught using a combination of lecture and discussion. For each lesson, the participants were given a handout with an outline, along with recommended reading. The recommended reading included books that had influenced chapters 2 and 3 of the ministry project, which in turn had influenced the lessons. Each session ended with a time of prayer. All the host families provided snacks and most of the participants continued to visit with one another thirty to forty-five minutes after the session was officially over.

### **Post-Series Questionnaire and Planning**

The last phase of the ministry project involved one final meeting with the participants. The purpose of the meeting was to administer the post-series questionnaire and to discuss future plans for continuing to meet together as a small group.

### **Week 18**

On May 3, the participants met together one final time. The session began with intercessory prayer. Then, the post-series questionnaire was administered. Once all the participants completed the questionnaire, the group discussed plans for continuing to meet together. During weeks 15 through 17 of the ministry project, I had begun to suggest to the participants that I would like for the group to continue to meet together. I had also mentioned that the group might even multiply into more than one group in the future.

During the final session, each participant expressed an interest in continuing to meet together. Once it was agreed upon that the group would continue to meet, the next part of the discussion focused on when meetings might take place. Several suggestions were offered, including replacing the church's current prayer meeting and Bible study on Wednesday nights during the summer, continuing to meet on a Tuesday or Thursday night on a monthly basis, or replacing the church's Sunday evening service once a month.

The most popular suggestion was replacing the church's Sunday night service once a month. However, it was acknowledged that the entire church would need to agree to such a plan. It was also pointed out that meeting on Sunday nights would probably require the group to divide into at least two groups, which would require someone other than myself to lead one of the groups. In light of these potential obstacles and details that needed to be worked out, the group decided to schedule the next meeting for Thursday, June 7 at 7 p.m. It was also decided that since the study on biblical community had concluded, the meeting on June 7 would include a discussion of the sermon from the previous Sunday morning.



## CHAPTER 5

### EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter assesses the effectiveness of the ministry project by evaluating its purpose and whether its goals were accomplished. The strengths and weaknesses of the project are also considered. The chapter concludes with theological and personal reflections on the project.

#### **Evaluation of the Project Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to teach the members of Lakeview Baptist Church (LBC) in Benton, Kentucky, to understand and practice biblical community. The need to raise understanding of biblical community and commitment to pursue it was described in chapter 1 of this project. Among the active members of LBC there was a commitment to attend the formal meetings of the church, but there was little awareness of each another. The members did not understand their responsibility to help one another grow to maturity in Christ. Outside of the formal activities of the church, there was very little spiritually focused interaction among the members. In short, the members did not understand biblical community and consequently were not participating in activities that express and promote biblical community.

The first chapter of this project highlighted two aspects of LBC, which suggested that the ministry project would be favorably received. First, the members of LBC are firmly committed to the authority of the Scriptures. Thus, there was every reason to expect they would respond positively to what the Scriptures teach about their responsibilities in the area of biblical community. Second, many LBC members are

fiercely dedicated to the preservation of the church. Consequently, it was expected they would embrace that which they believed would strengthen the church.

The execution of the ministry project confirmed both aspects highlighted in chapter 1. The assessment of the pre-series questionnaire,<sup>1</sup> as well as the comments of the participants during the small group Bible study, revealed a deficient understanding of biblical community and very little participation in activities that promote biblical community. However, once the participants were able to see what the Scriptures teach about biblical community, they warmly embraced the concepts. They communicated their acceptance of the teaching verbally during the small group Bible study and in personal conversations since the conclusion of the project. The participants have all also committed to continuing to meet together in a small group. The completion of the project therefore revealed that the ministry project was appropriate, necessary, and timely.

### **Evaluation of the Project Goals**

There were three stated goals for the project. The first was to evaluate the current understanding and practice of biblical community among adult church members. The goal was measured by asking 10 to 15 adult church members to complete a questionnaire.<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire was designed to reveal both the understanding and practice of the participants in the area of biblical community. Several questions presented biblical concepts related to biblical community and asked the participants to what degree they agreed or disagreed with the concepts. Other questions focused on practices related to biblical community. This group of questions probed both the current practice of the participants and their willingness to be involved, in the future, in activities that contribute to biblical community.

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<sup>1</sup>See appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup>See appendix 1.

The successful accomplishment of this goal required two actions. First, between 10 and 15 church members needed to complete the questionnaire. Second, the questionnaire needed to be analyzed in order to yield a clearer picture of the understanding and practice of biblical community among church members. This goal was successfully accomplished when 10 adult church members completed the questionnaire and the questionnaire was analyzed.

The second goal of the project was to develop the curriculum for an eight-week small group Bible study on biblical community. The lessons were designed to be taught in one-hour sessions and addressed the topics of fellowship, church membership, the church covenant, church discipline, and the mutuality commands. Four lessons were given to the mutuality commands.

An expert panel used a curriculum evaluation rubric to measure the second goal.<sup>3</sup> Using the rubric, the panel evaluated the biblical and theological fidelity of the curriculum. The panel also evaluated the clarity and structure of the material, the relevance of the material, and proposed teaching methodology. In order for the second goal to be successfully accomplished, the panel had to score 90 percent of the indicators on the rubric at the sufficiency level or above. Ninety percent of the indicators did not meet the sufficiency level the first time lesson 1 was submitted to the panel. The second submission met the required level and was approved. Lessons 2 through 8 all met the required sufficiency level the first time they were submitted. When the panel approved lesson 8, the second goal of the project was accomplished.

The third goal of this project was to increase understanding of and commitment to biblical community by teaching the eight-week curriculum to the project participants. This goal was measured by administering the post-series questionnaire to the participants

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<sup>3</sup>See appendix 2.

after the eight-week Bible study.<sup>4</sup> The results of the pre-series questionnaire were compared with the results of the post-series questionnaire using a *t*-test for dependent samples. The mean score for the pre-series questionnaire was 191.10 and the mean score for the post-series questionnaire was 228.10. The *t*-test demonstrated that the ministry project made a positive statistically significant difference in the understanding and commitment to practice biblical community among the project participants ( $t(9) = 7.082$ ,  $p < 5.774 \times 10^{-5}$ ). Therefore, this goal was successfully accomplished.

### **Strengths of the Project**

The first strength of the project was that the location of the Bible study helped contribute to the goal of the project. The Bible study was held in the homes of multiple participants. The goal of the project was to help the members understand and practice biblical community. As noted in the “Ministry Context” section of chapter 1, many of the members of LBC did not know one another very well. Few of them spent time together outside of the formal activities of the church. Those who did spend time together beyond the church property did not do so with the purpose of building one another up spiritually.

Meeting together in an informal setting in the participants’ homes, to study the Bible, helped contribute to the goal of the project by allowing the participants to experience spiritually significant personal interaction.

The second strength of the project was that the Bible study had an interactive format, which included a considerable amount of discussion. The interactive format provided an opportunity to clarify concepts, address misunderstandings, and help the group to think about practical applications. The discussion questions forced the participants to engage with the material they were being taught. The questions, which the

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<sup>4</sup>See appendix 1.

group sometimes posed to me, forced me to articulate ideas more clearly and to think more carefully about how the material could be applied at LBC.

The third strength of the project had to do with the makeup of the participants. Most of the participants had not known one another very well before the project. Some of them had never even spoken to one another. The project helped these participants to not only meet, but also to spend spiritually significant time together. The group also represented a good cross-section of the church because of the diversity of the ages of the participants. There were two participants in their 20s, one in her 30s, two in their 40s, four in their 60s, and one in her 70s.

The fourth strength of the project was that it lent itself to becoming an ongoing ministry at LBC. While the focus of the project was on teaching about biblical community, the small group format could be used to study other biblical topics and to provide a context for believers to experience biblical community. As noted in chapter 4, I suggested to the group that we continue to meet as a small group on a regular basis and each member of the group expressed a desire to do so. Plans have been made for subsequent meetings and I am hopeful that the project will serve as the beginning of a small group ministry at LBC. Small group ministry does not always produce genuine biblical community, however, it does provide a format for it.

The fifth strength of the project was that the content of the Bible study was firmly grounded in the Scriptures. Each of the eight lessons for the small group Bible study included a great deal of Scripture. As noted in chapter 1, the members of LBC are firmly committed to the authority of Scripture. Consequently, I believed the participants would embrace the truths that the Bible teaches about biblical community. Based on the post-series questionnaire and the comments of the participants, during and after the Bible study, these truths were received.

## **Weaknesses of the Project**

The first weakness of the project had to do with the meeting time for the Bible studies. The meetings took place at 7 p.m. The rationale for meeting at this time was to ensure that the participants who work would be able to attend the meetings. The problem with meeting at this time was that some of the participants were drowsy and not entirely focused during the sessions. I also felt pressure to finish the sessions on time, so the participants would be able to return home at a reasonable hour. The desire to finish on time caused me to rush through some of the material at times.

The second weakness of the project was that the length of the sessions for the Bible studies was not long enough. The lessons were designed to be taught in one-hour sessions. Some of the discussion times were helpful and I allowed them to carry on for several minutes. The long periods of discussion forced me to hurry through or occasionally skip some of the material I had in my notes.

The third weakness of the project was that I was not able to recruit enough long-standing members of LBC, who represent the core group of the church, to participate in the project. Many of the aspects of the ministry context at LBC, described in chapter 1 of this project, especially apply to the lifelong members of the church. The same group of long-standing members represent the majority of active church members at LBC and the most influential church members. While the participants in the project represented a broad range in their ages, only one of them had been a member at LBC for more than twenty years. Since most of the participants in the project were relatively new members of the church, the impact of the project was not as broad as it could have been.

The fourth weakness of the project was related to the third weakness. The project was not connected to the whole church. When I began to recruit project participants, I shared generally with the whole church about the project. However, those who participated in the Bible studies represented less than 20 percent of active church members. Consequently, the project made little direct impact on the church at large.

The fifth weakness of the project was that I did not do enough work ahead of time to prepare for the next step after the project. I proposed to the group that we continue meeting together; however, I did not have a concrete plan for when we might meet. Not having a definite plan for the next step has caused the group to lose some momentum and continuity.

The sixth weakness of this project was that the participants did not have enough opportunities to put into practice the things they were learning. A significant part of the curriculum focused on cultivating spiritually-focused interaction among church members. In the lessons, I suggested some ways the participants could do this. Though, I did not call upon them to take any specific action or organize outlets for them to implement what they were learning.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

The things I would do differently, if I were doing the project again, relate to the identified weaknesses. First, I would change the meeting time from 7 p.m. to 6 p.m. Of the ten participants, only three work outside the home. I believe I was overly cautious and allotted too much time for them to make it to the meetings—those three participants could have made it to the meetings by 6 p.m. Meeting earlier would likely have helped all of the participants to be more alert.

Second, I would lengthen the project in one of two ways. I either would lengthen each teaching session to one and one half hours, or I would lengthen the number of sessions from six to eight. Lengthening the project would have allowed me to teach all of the material I prepared.

Third, I would work harder to recruit and incorporate more lifelong or long-standing members of the church. I would make it a stipulation in the project proposal that at least 5 of the project participants be lifelong members of LBC and that at least 10 must have been members twenty years or more. As noted in chapter 4, six adult church

members expressed an initial interest in participating in the project but did not participate. Each of those six is a long-standing member of LBC. All of them were interested in attending a home Bible study, but when they realized that participation required a ten-week commitment, they chose not to participate. In order to overcome this obstacle, I would have begun recruiting these members much earlier and given more effort in trying to persuade them of the benefits of being a part of the project

Fourth, I would invest more energy in recruiting a larger number of project participants. Because the Bible studies took place in homes, I limited the number of participants to between 10 and 15. All of the homes where the group met could have easily accommodated up to 20 people. Therefore, I would change the number of participants to between 15 and 20. Making this change would significantly raise the percentage of active church members involved in the project.

Fifth, I would add two sermon series. The purpose of the first sermon series would be to recruit participants and the purpose of the second would be to connect the project with the whole church. The first sermon series would be based on the foundational passages of chapter 2 of the project and would be preached during the recruitment phase of the project. The second sermon series would come immediately after the eight-week small group Bible study and would include, in sermonic form, the material, which was taught in the small group Bible study.

The sixth thing I would do differently would be to present to the group a definite plan for subsequent meetings. I wanted the group itself to offer input on when would be the most convenient time for them to meet. Therefore, I would have presented to them three or four concrete suggestions for when the group could meet and let them decide which was most convenient. Since some of the options, such as meeting one Sunday night a month, would impact the whole church, I would talk with the deacons and other key leaders ahead of time about those possibilities in order to gain their support.



Seventh, I would add an additional element to the project. Since, much of the curriculum focused on cultivating spiritually significant and helpful relationships, I would pair the participants up into groups of two or three ask them to meet together once a week. I would encourage the participants to have an informal time of sharing with one another things they are learning from the Bible and to pray together. I would also suggest to them that these meetings could include an element of accountability.

### **Theological Reflections**

I began this project with awareness that God has designed the Christian life to be lived in community. I could see that life together in biblical community was not a reality in the lives of most of the members of LBC. The preparation and implementation of this project served to help me to grow in my understanding of some essential truths related to biblical community. As a result of the project, I am more convinced than ever of the importance of the foundational truths that undergirded the project.

First, no Christian can reach spiritual maturity alone. Two of the foundational passages examined in chapter 2 demonstrate this point with absolute clarity. First Corinthians 12:12-31 shows that no believer should consider that he is unable to contribute to the health of the body of Christ. Nor should any believer conclude that he does not need other believers in order to reach maturity. The members of Christ's body are interdependent. The spiritual wellbeing of the each member is bound up with the wellbeing of the other members. Likewise, Ephesians 4:7-16 explains that the body of Christ builds itself up in love as those members are connected with one another. Therefore, by God's design, believers grow to maturity in the context of community. The community where God intends for this growth to happen is the local church. Consequently, the exhortation of Hebrews 10:25 is about more than simply checking a religious chore off a list. It is about pursuing the Christian life according to God's design.

Meeting together with other believers is an integral part of the Christian life. In the providence of God, Christians are sometimes required to live the Christian life in relative isolation. Some may be confined to their homes because of their health. Others might be isolated from fellow believers because they are serving as missionaries in an unreached area. Believers in those situations will struggle in certain ways and will have to think carefully about how they can grow in their faith. However, God's normal pattern for pursuing maturity in the faith is by active participation in God's community, the local church.

Second, I am more convinced than ever that for a local church to be healthy and to experience biblical community, its members must practice biblical church membership. Practicing biblical church membership will require the members to understand and embrace biblical concepts related to membership, the church covenant, and church discipline. As I prepared for chapter 3 of the project, I was able to see more clearly than before how each of these concepts represents a piece of a puzzle that fits together. Given the lack of biblical community at LBC, I was not surprised to discover that several of the project participants had a very deficient understanding of these issues.

In order for biblical community to thrive, the members of the community must know who the other members are and they must be committed to one another. Therefore, church membership is essential to biblical community. While the New Testament never uses the phrase "member of x local church," nevertheless a strong case can be made from the New Testament for church membership.

If members of a local church are truly going to hold one another accountable and help one another to grow in holiness, there must be some kind of agreed upon standard by which they will order their lives together. The church covenant provides this standard. Even though there is not a mandate in the New Testament to establish a church covenant, there is a clear biblical rationale.

If church membership and the church covenant are to play a meaningful role in the life of a local church, the church must practice church discipline. A church that emphasizes meaningful membership and serious accountability undercuts those emphases if it does not practice church discipline. Given the interconnectedness of the body of Christ, seen in texts such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Ephesians 4:7-16, it is clear that the spiritual health of members of a local church is tied up together. Members will grow and thrive together or they will struggle together. Church discipline is one of the means God has given his people to preserve the vitality of the local church. Unaddressed sin, like leaven, will spread and damage the church.

Third, the mutuality commands provide a succinct and helpful description of how church members are to relate to one another in biblical community. A church, which teaches and practices these commands, will live together in biblical community. In light of the important role these commands play in living in biblical community, I was surprised, as I prepared chapter 3, to find so few books given specifically to the topic.

### **Personal Reflections**

The most important personal reflection from the project on biblical community is that all of the truths I understood and taught to others also apply to me. Although I am the pastor of LBC, I cannot attain spiritual maturity by myself. God also intends for me to grow as part of a body, which is living together in biblical community. God intends for me to not only use my gifts to build others up, but also to be built up by them. If I am to grow, I too must submit to God's design for the local church and be willing to participate in meaningful church membership. I must be willing to enter into covenant with my fellow church members. I must be willing to be held accountable and to hold others accountable.

Some of the truths related to biblical community are easier to understand than to put into practice. The things I taught the project participants, while understandable, are

uncomfortable to put into practice and will require the participants to grow. The same is true for me. Although I am thoroughly convinced the Christian life should be lived in community, I still fight against individualism and selfishness in my own heart. Although I see clearly the need for accountability and confrontation of sin, I still find both being held accountable and holding others accountable to be uncomfortable. Therefore, I was challenged by the project perhaps as much as anyone.

Another reflection is that the members of LBC are willing to try new things. I was able to see this willingness in those who participated in the project. I see now that I may have too easily assumed that the members of the church were unwilling to try new things. In light of the positive response from the project participants, I am encouraged to challenge the rest of the church to try new things, which I believe would help the church practice biblical community and to be a healthier church.

The conclusion of this ministry project and the D.Min. in Applied Theology represents the end of my formal academic training. While my M.Div. experience was more time consuming and foundational, my D.Min. experience has been equally as helpful in my own formation as a minister. I approached this round of education with new eyes, which I did not have when I pursued my M.Div. This time, I had fifteen years of ministry experience behind me, which helped me to appreciate certain truths more and to see the need for things I did not see before. This project served to sharpen me in my understanding and to push me to think about how to apply spiritual truths to real life situations. Therefore, I am extremely grateful for my experience as a D.Min. student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to teach the members of Lakeview Baptist Church, in Benton, Kentucky, to understand and practice biblical community. The purpose of the project was accomplished as each of the three goals of the project was

fulfilled. Each of the participants in the project grew in understanding of and commitment to practice biblical community.

Chapter 1 explained the need for increased understanding and practice of biblical community at LBC. Chapter 2 provided the biblical and theological basis for biblical community. Chapter 3 addressed theoretical and practical issues related to biblical community. Chapter 4 described the details of the project's implementation. Chapter 5 has evaluated the project's purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses—it explained how the project could have been improved and included my reflections on the project.

This project accomplished the purpose of teaching a significant number of the members of Lakeview Baptist Church, in Benton, Kentucky, to understand and practice biblical community.

## APPENDIX 1

### PRE-SERIES AND POST-SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE

#### **Agreement to Participate**

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify for each participant the current understanding of, participation in, and commitment to pursue biblical community. This research is being conducted by Bradley White for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this questionnaire, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Personal Identification Number: Choose a number that will be memorable to you. Do not choose something like “1 2 3 4.”

Write your number here: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer. Respond to question three before the class by affirming what you will do and after the class by confirming what you did. Respond to question four by filling in your answer.

#### **Part 1**

1. Have you repented of your sin and trusted in Jesus Christ alone for salvation?  
 A. Yes  
 B. No
2. I regularly attend Sunday morning worship.  
 A. Yes  
 B. No
3. I will/did participate in each of the eight lessons.  
 A. Yes  
 B. No
4. How long have you been a member of Lakeview Baptist Church? \_\_\_\_\_

CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE

**Part 2**

Directions: Please give your opinion regarding the statements below, using the following scale: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DS = disagree somewhat, AS = agree somewhat, A = agree, SA = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

5. I am committed to fellowship with members of my church.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
6. I understand what it means to have fellowship with other believers.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
7. The Bible teaches that churches should practice church discipline.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
8. I am willing to meet with other church members to pray together.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
9. I am willing to invite other church members to my home.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
10. I am willing to talk about spiritual issues with other church members.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
11. My fellow church members should call me to repentance when I am openly involved in deliberate and unrepentant sin.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
12. I regularly engage with an accountability partner.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
13. I am willing to have an accountability partner.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
14. I am responsible to motivate other believers to love and good works.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
15. In the last thirty days I have motivated other believers to love and good works.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
16. I need my fellow church members help in order to grow spiritually.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
17. I am committed to meeting frequently with other believers for worship.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA
18. Pastors should do most of the ministry in the church.  
SD    D    DS    AS    A    SA

CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE.

19. I understand the purpose of our church covenant.  
SD D DS AS A SA
20. I am responsible to help my fellow church members to grow spiritually.  
SD D DS AS A SA
21. My fellow church members and I share a common understanding of the gospel.  
SD D DS AS A SA
22. In the last thirty days I have collaborated with my fellow church members to spread the gospel.  
SD D DS AS A SA
23. I am willing to work with other church members to spread the gospel.  
SD D DS AS A SA
24. I understand the commitments involved in our church covenant.  
SD D DS AS A SA
25. I am responsible to meet frequently with other believers for worship.  
SD D DS AS A SA
26. My spiritual health depends on the spiritual health of my fellow church members.  
SD D DS AS A SA
27. When my fellow church members are not doing well spiritually, I am concerned.  
SD D DS AS A SA
28. When my fellow church members are not doing well spiritually, I am willing to take action to help them.  
SD D DS AS A SA
29. In the last thirty days I have taken action to help my fellow church members who are not doing well spiritually.  
SD D DS AS A SA
30. I am willing to spend spiritually-oriented time with my fellow church members outside of the regular activities of the church.  
SD D DS AS A SA
31. In the last thirty days I have spent spiritually-oriented time with my fellow church members outside of the regular activities of the church.  
SD D DS AS A SA
32. In the last thirty days I have prayed for my fellow church members regularly.  
SD D DS AS A SA

CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE.



33. When I pray for my fellow church members, I pray for their spiritual growth.  
SD D DS AS A SA
34. I understand my responsibilities as a church member.  
SD D DS AS A SA
35. I am accountable to my fellow church members.  
SD D DS AS A SA
36. My fellow church members are accountable to me.  
SD D DS AS A SA
37. I consider my fellow church members to be my spiritual family.  
SD D DS AS A SA
38. Our church covenant is important.  
SD D DS AS A SA
39. Pastors are supposed to equip believers to do ministry.  
SD D DS AS A SA
40. My fellow church members help me to grow spiritually.  
SD D DS AS A SA
41. I believe that our church should practice church discipline.  
SD D DS AS A SA
42. I understand the practice of church discipline.  
SD D DS AS A SA
43. I am committed to frequently spending time with other believers.  
SD D DS AS A SA
44. If another church member is openly involved in deliberate and unrepentant sin, I should confront him or her and call him or her to repentance  
SD D DS AS A SA
45. In the last thirty days I have regularly spent time with other church members talking about spiritual issues.  
SD D DS AS A SA
46. If a member of our church continues to be openly involved in deliberate and unrepentant sin, even after other church members have appealed to him or her to forsake his or her sin, he or she should be removed from the church.  
SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 2

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

<b>Biblical Community Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>Lesson Evaluation</b>					
<b>1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The material is biblically accurate.					
The material is theologically sound.					
The main idea of the lesson is clear.					
The body of the lesson supports the main idea.					
The material is relevant to the issue of biblical community.					
The material contains clear points of application.					
The proposed teaching methodology will actively engage the learners.					
The proposed teaching methodology is clearly stated.					

APPENDIX 3

CHURCH MEMBER BACKGROUND  
AND PARTICIPATION

Table A1. Background and participation

Member	Always member at Lakeview	Attended since childhood or young adulthood	Parents attended	Attends Sunday School	Attends on Wednesday night
1	x	x	x		
2		x		x	x
3				x	
4		x		x	x
5		x		x	x
6					
7		x	x		
8		x			
9	x	x	x		
10		x		x	x
11	x	x	x	x	x
12	x	x	x	x	x
13					
14	x	x	x	x	x
15	x	x	x	x	x
16	x	x	x	x	x
17		x		x	x
18	x	x	x	x	x
19	x	x	x	x	x
20	x	x	x	x	x
21	x	x	x	x	x
22		x	x	x	x
23				x	x
24	x	x	x	x	x
25					
26					
27				x	x
28				x	x
29		x		x	x
30	x			x	
31				x	
32				x	x

Table A1 continued

33	x			x	
34	x	x	x		
35	x	x	x	x	x
36		x			x
37				x	x
38				x	
39	x	x	x	x	
40		x	x	x	
41				x	
42	x			x	
43					
44	x				x
45	x	x	x	x	x
46	x	x			
47	x	x			
48	x	x	x		
49		x			
50	x	x	x		
51				x	x
52				x	x
53				x	
54				x	
55		x	x	x	
56		x			
57		x			
Total	24/57	35/57	22/57	38/57	28/57
Percentage	42	61	39	66	49

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## ABSTRACT

### TEACHING THE MEMBERS OF LAKEVIEW BAPTIST CHURCH IN BENTON, KENTUCKY, TO UNDERSTAND AND PRACTICE BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Brian J. Vickers

The purpose of this project was to teach the members of Lakeview Baptist Church in Benton, Kentucky, to understand and practice biblical community. Chapter 1 describes the ministerial context of Lakeview Baptist Church and demonstrates the need for the members of Lakeview Baptist Church to understand and practice biblical community.

Chapter 2 examines five biblical passages that demonstrate the Christian life is rightly lived when believers devote themselves to life together in biblical community. Chapter 3 explains four related ideas of church membership, church discipline, fellowship, and mutual edification, which must be understood in order to live in biblical community. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the implementation of the project. Chapter 5 evaluates the project and determines if the project successfully increased understanding of biblical community and commitment to live in biblical community among the project participants.

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