

Copyright © 2022 Randall Joe Cofield

All rights reserved. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has permission to reproduce and disseminate this document in any form by any means for purposes chosen by the Seminary, including, without limitation, preservation or instruction.

ENTROPY AND RENEWAL: THE PAULINE CONCERN AND  
PARADIGM FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Educational Ministry

---

by  
Randall Joe Cofield  
May 2022

**APPROVAL SHEET**

**ENTROPY AND RENEWAL: THE PAULINE CONCERN AND  
PARADIGM FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION**

Randall Joe Cofield

Read and Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Timothy K. Beougher (Faculty Supervisor)

\_\_\_\_\_  
T. J. Betts

Date \_\_\_\_\_

To the struggling churches who are the bride of Lord Jesus,  
To our beloved Bridegroom who stands in our midst,  
And to the men laboring in the trenches of  
Revitalization pastoral ministry.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE.....	xi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Consideration of the Literature .....	4
Church Growth Centric Works.....	6
Church Health Centric Works .....	8
Analytic Descriptive Works .....	9
Scripture Centric Works .....	10
Void in the Literature.....	12
Thesis Statement .....	13
Conclusion .....	18
2. ENTROPY AND RENEWAL--THE PAULINE CONCERN.....	20
Strategic Revitalization .....	20
Revitalization During the First Missionary Excursion .....	21
Revitalization During the Second Missionary Excursion.....	26
Revitalization During the Third Missionary Excursion.....	31
Epistolary Agonies.....	32
Corinthians.....	33
Galatians .....	33
Thessalonians.....	34
Conclusion .....	36

Chapter	Page
3. PRIORITIES AND PRACTICE OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH .....	39
Kingdom Priorities .....	42
A Praying Community .....	43
A Worshiping Community .....	49
A Fellowshiping Community .....	53
A Ministering Community .....	56
An Evangelizing Community .....	59
A Discipling Community .....	61
The Pauline Paradigm .....	65
Summary .....	68
4. THE PRIMACY OF PRAYER IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....	70
The What and Why of Prayer .....	73
The Primacy of Prayer in the Jerusalem Church .....	80
The Primacy of Prayer in the Pauline Corpus .....	90
Pauline Salutatory Prayers .....	91
Pauline Exhortations to Prayer .....	95
Conclusion .....	108
5. THE WONDER OF WORSHIP IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....	111
The What and Why of Corporate Worship .....	113
The Wonder of Worship in the Jerusalem Church .....	118
Worship in the Pauline Corpus .....	127
Worship in Romans .....	128
Worship in Corinth .....	133
Worship in Colossae .....	139

Chapter	Page
Conclusion .....	146
<b>6. THE FELICITY OF FELLOWSHIP IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....</b>	<b>149</b>
Fellowship Defined .....	152
The Felicity of Fellowship in the Jerusalem Church .....	155
The Utility of Fellowship in the Pauline Corpus .....	163
The Utility of Fellowship at Corinth .....	163
The Utility of Fellowship at Ephesus .....	168
Conclusion .....	181
<b>7. THE EFFICACY OF EVANGELISM IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....</b>	<b>184</b>
Evangelism: The What and the Why .....	187
What is Evangelism .....	187
Why Should We Evangelize .....	191
The Primacy of Pastoral Evangelism .....	196
Pastoral Evangelism in Acts .....	197
Pastoral Evangelism in the Pauline Corpus .....	200
The Efficacy of Congregational Evangelism .....	204
Congregational Evangelism in Acts .....	206
Congregational Evangelism in the Pauline Corpus .....	209
Conclusion .....	228
<b>8. THE DISCIPLINE OF DISCIPLESHIP IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....</b>	<b>230</b>
Defining Discipleship .....	235
Discipleship in the Jerusalem Church .....	243
Discipleship in the Pauline Corpus .....	252
Discipleship in the Romans Letter .....	252

Chapter	Page
Discipleship in the Colossian Letter .....	258
Discipleship in the Galatian Letter .....	266
Conclusion .....	268
9. THE MEASURE OF MINISTRY IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....	271
A Brief Theology of Ministry .....	275
Ministry in the Jerusalem Church .....	278
Ministry in the Pauline Corpus .....	283
Ministry in the First Corinthian Letter.....	284
Ministry in the Ephesian Letter .....	296
Conclusion .....	311
10. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION .....	314
Revitalizing Repentance .....	316
Revitalizing Prayer.....	319
Revitalizing Worship .....	324
Call to Worship.....	326
Prayer.....	327
Singing.....	328
Affirmation of Faith.....	329
Confessions of Sin and Assurances of Pardon .....	330
Scripture Reading .....	331
The Sermon.....	332
Baptism and the Lord's Supper .....	333
Benedictions .....	334

	Page
Revitalizing Fellowship .....	335
Revitalizing Evangelism .....	339
Revitalizing Discipleship .....	344
Revitalizing Ministry .....	349
Conclusion .....	353
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	355





## PREFACE

As I complete this dissertation I find myself humbled and grateful for the influence, challenges, encouragement and prayers of those individuals God has so graciously used to shape my thinking and my walk with Christ. In a very real sense, this final product arises from the amalgamated influence of an *ecclesia* spanning several decades, at the foremost of which stands my wife of thirty-seven years.

Above all others, I am thankful for my precious wife, my greatest earthly gift. The sacrifices she made for me to be able to pursue a theological education are myriad and monumental, and yet she made them with joy. Her encouragement, support, faithfulness and prayers made this entire journey not only possible, but exceedingly joyful. Her price is far above rubies.

I am grateful for a wise earthly father who instilled in me at a very young age a love of learning, and coupled it with a Christian work ethic. From that first trip together to the local library as a young boy to the final days spent upon his deathbed, he instilled in me a love of reading and love of Lord Jesus. Though he was translated to glory above twenty-six years ago, his prayers, his instruction and his example have followed me all the days of my life.

Likewise, my maternal grandmother stands as a God-appointed influence in my life. Surely no earthly creature ever loved her Savior more than did my dear grandmother. Her daily joy and cheerfulness made me want to be saved before I ever fully realized my lostness. The joy of the Lord was her strength, and the beauty of that reality still speaks to me across the many years.

Dr. Norman Barr, a notable theologian and pastor from Killicomaine, Ireland stands as a seminal influence in my theological journey. Norman challenged me as no

other ever has to a whole-of-Scripture theological perspective. How deeply thankful I am that God was pleased to connect me with this dear pastor from an entirely different evangelical culture across thousands of miles.

And Dr. Benny Crockett, my undergraduate advisor and Greek professor. The world he opened to me through fifteen hours of Greek intensives almost defies description. I am likewise thankful for Todd Robertson, the Associational Mission Strategist for the Louisville Regional Baptist Association (LRBA). The opportunity Todd afforded me in selecting me to serve two years as the Association's Church Revitalization Catalytic Consultant was indispensable to this project. The pastors of the LRBA laboring in the trenches of church revitalization likewise humbled me, challenged me, and encouraged me. Brothers, your faces are ever before me.

God used Senior Fellow Brian Croft, of the Mathena Center for Church Revitalization at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to influence my ultimate educational destination. Brian modeled for me the noble calling and work of church revitalization, and thereby altered the entire trajectory of my theological education. I am eternally thankful for his influence.

Finally, I am grateful for Dr. Timothy K. Beougher, my supervisor. His patience, wisdom, experience and understanding were kindly used by God to shave off many a rough edge in this dissertation.

Randall Cofield

Ocean Springs, Mississippi

May 2022

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Churches throughout history have demonstrated a tendency toward plateau, decline, and death. From the earliest churches dotting the Mediterranean Basin to the North American churches of the twenty-first century, local churches have experienced the lifecycle of birth, growth, plateau, decline, and closure.<sup>1</sup> Harry L. Reeder, citing Win Arn's 1988 publication, asserts that churches in the United States are cumulatively experiencing a death-rate of 3,500-4,000 churches each year.<sup>2</sup> In a significantly more recent scientific study, Simon G. Brauer discovered that some 5,000 congregations in the United States closed each year between 2006 and 2012.<sup>3</sup>

In the Southern Baptist Convention, recent studies point to the likelihood that as many as nine out of every ten of our churches are either plateaued or in decline.<sup>4</sup> Worse still, more than 1,000 Southern Baptist churches close each year—with no sign of the trend abating.<sup>5</sup> For the sake of perspective, this means that statistically speaking, last

---

<sup>1</sup>William David Henard, *Can These Bones Live?* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 166. Henard plots this lifecycle on a nine-stage Bell Curve with the stages consisting of birth, goals, ministry, structure, plateau, decline, questioning, polarization and death.

<sup>2</sup>Harry L. Reeder and David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2004), 7.

<sup>3</sup>Simon G. Brauer, How Many Congregations Are There? Updating a Survey-Based Estimate, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56 no. 2 (2017): 444.

<sup>4</sup>Tom Cheyney and Larry Wynn, *Preaching towards Church Revitalization and Renewal* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2015), xvii-xviii.

<sup>5</sup>Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 5. In 2016, Clifton here states that nine hundred SBC churches are closing each year, but has recently, on the North American Missions Board website and in lectures and conversations, revised the number upward to more than 1,000. Some ambiguity exists concerning this number as the possibility remains that some of

Sunday, nineteen Southern Baptist Churches (SBC) churches held their final worship service, offered their final prayer, and closed and locked their doors for the final time. The plateau, decline, and death of our churches is approaching epidemic proportions.

A troubling possibility appears when the closure rate for Southern Baptist churches—1,000 per year—is compared to Brauer’s study showing 5,000 church closures per year across all denominational lines. Some forty-six thousand SBC churches exist in the United States, while Brauer estimates 384,000 congregations across all denominations in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Southern Baptist churches make up approximately twelve percent of the total churches in America, yet our churches account for twenty percent of church closures each year. If Brauer’s numbers are accurate, it is possible that SBC churches may be, on average, closing at a higher rate than most other denominations.

Years of gradual spiritual erosion, mission drift, living in the past and an increasingly internalized focus are all contributing factors in the current milieu of church degeneration and death. Churches seldom die a swift death, but rather suffer the death of a thousand, often self-inflicted wounds in a form of ecclesiocide over a number of years or even decades. Increasingly pragmatic programs slowly supplant Kingdom priorities, pursuit of social and cultural relevance gradually supersedes the mission of gospel advancement, and buildings and budgets, rather than souls and salvation, increasingly consume the energy of the church. As decline sets in, many of these churches begin to pine for and attempt to return to the “glory days” when the church appeared to flourish. Such attempts seldom produce meaningful results, and the deadening effects of gradual decline continue, exacting a terrible toll upon pastors, church members and the lost community in which the church resides.

---

these churches are not closing, but are simply discontinuing their affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention.

<sup>6</sup>Brauer, *How Many Congregations Are There*, 444.

Concern over this rising tide of church decline has spawned a veritable cottage industry of fresh-off-the-press books and newly-minted consultation services aimed at remedying the decline of our churches. These offerings range in nature from revisited church-growth practices from decades gone by, to fresh perspectives on New Testament principles for church renewal. From the North American Mission Board of the SBC to many local Southern Baptist associations, entities, personnel, and finances are being organized to combat the growing problem of church decline and death.

A survey of contemporary ecclesiastical literature and church consultation services might lead one to assume that the pressing need for church renewal and reformation is a modern phenomenon. Such is not the case. A careful survey of the NT points to the reality that an entropic principle has been warring against the church of the Lord Jesus from the very beginning of her existence. The church as a vital, healthy, spiritual organism does not naturally flourish in a fallen world. Simply put, even the earliest churches were not inexorably inclined toward health and growth, but toward unhealth, division, decline, and even death. Not a single church established in the NT still exists today.

Whereas the church is indeed built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, a viable and sustainable paradigm for church reawakening must find formulation in the inscripturated word of God. Andrew M. Davis highlights this reality well when he asserts:

The powerful Word of God has been building Christ's kingdom since the beginning of redemptive history. It has never been defeated, and it never will be. . . . God's Word (from the beginning) has been destroying Satan's kingdom, pushing back the darkness and rescuing the elect captives. Satan has never been able to tame the Word, to chain the Word, to stop the Word, or to make the Word extinct. And the Word of God alone will revitalize a church if it is to be revitalized.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 78.

Because Christ is the Redeemer and Head and Health of the church for which he died, his Word alone possesses the power to breathe life into plateaued, declining, dying churches. Any practicable model for church renewal, therefore, must claim for its foundation, structure and implementation the pith and marrow of the inspired, infallible, eternal Word of God.

The purpose of this study is to establish, through a consideration of the New Testament (NT) literature, that church degeneration and decline was a concern from the very beginning of the Great Commission enterprise. Additionally, this study will focus on the Pauline corpus in an attempt to establish an inspired paradigm for church revitalization that is grounded in Scripture and is sustainable throughout the church age.

### **Consideration of the Literature**

The escalating crisis of church decline has prompted a plethora of descriptive and prescriptive literature related to the reform, renewal, and revitalization of the local church. Virtually all of the offerings aimed at this problem articulate a bleak and jolting description of the ecclesiastical landscape of the twenty-first century. That the North American church is in a season of sharp decline is a well-studied and well-established factual reality. While description of the problem of church decline is fairly consistent across the literature, the prescriptive thrust of church revitalization literature demonstrates far less homogeneity.

Categorization of church revitalization literature falls out along four general lines. The first category of such works is church-growth-oriented approaches to revitalization, while a second category may be labeled church-health-oriented. A third classification of church revitalization contributions is that of works which analytically describe actual cases of church revitalization. Finally, the fourth category of literature is that of Scripture-centric methodologies for the renewal of the church.

Church-growth oriented methods of revitalization often seek to integrate the principles of the Church Growth Movement (CGM) that dates to approximately 1955 and the publication of *The Bridges of God* by Donald McGavran.<sup>8</sup> Church growth approaches generally appropriate sociological, anthropological and business-model philosophies, offering these principles as the keys to transforming the twentieth and twenty-first century church in North America.

Literature falling into the church-health category generally avoids Church Growth Movement (CGM) principles, choosing rather to focus on the metrics of biblically-mandated church practices to address the need for church revitalization. Such works attempt to identify characteristics of church health in Scripture, exegete the biblical principles underlying those characteristics, and offer the reader methods of application whereby the health of the church may be measurably improved. Ostensibly, church-health approaches to church renewal presuppose that alignment with specified elements of church health will produce church revitalization.

A third category of church revitalization literature is that of works which are largely descriptive of churches that have experienced revitalization. Through well-structured analytic study of a broad range of churches across denominational lines, these works seek to identify the underlying principles which enable churches to move from plateau and decline to renewal and revitalization.

Finally, works that maintain Scripture-centrism in their approach to church revitalization focus on the time-honored truths of the Bible to promote reform, renewal, and revitalization in plateaued or declining churches. Such offerings tend to view church revitalization as more than promotion of church growth and more than a renewal of

---

<sup>8</sup>James E. Carter, *Outreach Theology: A Comparison of Southern Baptist Thought and the Church Growth Movement* (Baptist History and Heritage, 13.3, 1980), 34.

church health. One identifiable characteristic of these Scripture-centric offerings is the tendency toward an anecdotal approach to church revitalization that arises from the personal experience of the authors. Such works tend to focus on specific aspects of church unhealthiness, and are often quite helpful to many who are laboring in the trenches of church decline.

The following sections will consider the contribution of some works in each of the categories of church-growth centric, church-health-centric, analytic-descriptive, and Scripture-centric literature on church revitalization.

### **Church-Growth Centric Works**

Aubrey Malphurs penned *ReVISION: The Key to Transforming Your Church* as an exploration of the characteristics of transformational pastors.<sup>9</sup> After a rather dismal diagnosis of the state of pastoral leadership in North America, Malphurs asserts that church revitalization is contingent upon a re-envisioning of revitalization leadership in the church. The need of the hour, according to Malphurs, is a nationwide movement to train pastors for the revitalization of plateaued and declining churches. After delineating the characteristics and behavioral temperament of turnaround leaders, the author offers instruction for pastors on how to cast a compelling vision for the church. A hallmark of this work is the expansive appendix wherein the reader is presented with an array of tools for assessing the temperament, personality type, leadership style, personal characteristics, and success probability of prospective revitalization pastors.

In *Can These Bones Live?*, William David Henard frames the work of church revitalization in the classic terminology of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones.<sup>10</sup> After offering a rubric for assessing a church's need for renewed health and growth,

---

<sup>9</sup>Aubrey Malphurs, *Re:vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>Henard, *Can These Bones Live*, 1.

Henard offers insight into the reality that many churches do not recognize their need for revitalization, noting several intuitive barriers to such recognition. The author then explores the landscape of internal church practices and traditions that prohibit revitalization and offers a dual-axis “change matrix” for effecting the changes necessary for renewal and revitalization.

C. Peter Wagner, though long resistant to the purported social aspects of Kingdom advancement, seeks to join church health to social justice concerns in *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*.<sup>11</sup> Wagner maintains that church growth advances most effectively when the church engages concerns for justice, peace, oppression, racial equality and other significant social issues.<sup>12</sup> According to Wagner, marriage of the Great Commission to the Cultural Mandate produces a consecrated awareness of social justice, resulting in a holistic mission that makes the gospel more attractive to the unconverted. Churches that structure themselves to engage social issues, therefore, experience greater measures of growth, according to Wagner.<sup>13</sup>

These three offerings, along with Gary L. McIntosh’s *There’s Hope for Your Church*,<sup>14</sup> Malphurs’ *Advanced Strategic Planning*<sup>15</sup> and Henard’s *Reclaimed Church*,<sup>16</sup> are reasonably representative of the body of church revitalization literature oriented toward church-growth principles. We turn now to literature that focuses on church health.

---

<sup>11</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 3.

<sup>12</sup>Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 3.

<sup>13</sup>Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 23.

<sup>14</sup>Gary McIntosh, *There’s Hope for Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

<sup>15</sup>Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013).

<sup>16</sup>Bill Henard, *Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization* (Nashville: B&H, 2018).

## Church-Health Centric Works

Stephen A. Macchia penned *Becoming a Healthy Church* for the purpose of identifying ten traits of vital church ministry.<sup>17</sup> The thrust of this offering is to move the church beyond church growth to church health. Macchia identifies ten characteristics, ranging from the characteristic of God’s empowering presence to spiritual disciplines to administrative accountability, contending that each of these characteristics are requisite to becoming a healthy church. In unpacking his ten characteristics of a healthy church, the author focuses on ministry effectiveness and ministry efficiency as key elements of church revitalization, contending that this model of church health is duplicable regardless of church location, size, ethnicity, denomination, or community type.

In *The Healthy Church: Avoiding and Curing the 9 Diseases That Can Afflict Any Church*, C. Peter Wagner develops a partial pathology of nine church “diseases” that are particularly detrimental to church growth.<sup>18</sup> The affliction of “ethnikititis” occurs when a neighborhood church, established to attract a certain kind of people, fails to adapt to a changing neighborhood, according to Wagner. “Ghost Town Disease” infects a church in a deteriorating locale where the community is experiencing a mass exodus among its population. A malady identified a “people-blindness” weakens a congregation when it fails to address the important cultural differences that create barriers to the message of the church. “Hyper-cooperativism” occurs when interdenominational evangelistic endeavors undermine and detract from local church evangelism, according to the author. Rounding out the nine deadly diseases of Wagner’s offering are “koinonitis” (fellowship to the exclusion of disciple-making), “sociological strangulation” (attendance outstripping facility capacity), “arrested spiritual development” (lack of spiritual growth), “St. John’s Syndrome” (lukewarm stagnation) and “hypopneumia” (lack of Spirit’s presence). Any

---

<sup>17</sup>Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 1.

<sup>18</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *The Healthy Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996).

one of these disorders is sufficient to stunt the growth of a church, according to Wagner, while multiple such disorders virtually guarantee plateau and decline.

Mark Dever's offering of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* draws from Scripture and rich ecclesiological history a series of characteristics that identify a biblically healthy church.<sup>19</sup> Maintaining that the practice of the contemporary church should reflect the practice of the early church, Dever advances an understanding of first-century church polity and practice, leading the reader to an understanding of how to cultivate these elemental praxes in the church today. The author maintains throughout his offering that these nine "marks" establish the necessary balance of upward, God-centered focus and outward, others-centered focus requisite to church health and wellbeing.

Though presenting significantly different points of emphasis, these works are principally representative of the body of revitalization literature that is church-health centric. We turn now to the more descriptive revitalization literature.

### **Analytic-Descriptive Works**

Analytic-descriptive literature typically consists of studies derived from quantitative research. Extensive data is mined for the purpose of identifying churches that have experienced revitalization. Once turnaround churches are thus identified, the authors usually conduct qualitative inquiries to determine the underlying practices that led to the resurgence of the studied churches.

Predicated upon extensive research into thousands of churches and modeled after Jim Collins' classic *Good to Great*, Thom Rainer's *Breakout Churches* identifies thirteen churches who experienced seasons of struggle and decline prior to experiencing significant revitalization and growth.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, each of these thirteen churches

---

<sup>19</sup>Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, exp. ed., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).

<sup>20</sup>Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

experienced decline and then renewal under the same pastor's leadership. Rainer applied a statistical approach to identifying the key patterns evident in these churches as they experienced significant turnaround. These factors, according to Rainer, range from servant leadership to culture building to the generation of momentum.

In an approach similar to but more expansive than the Rainer offering, Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson's *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* seeks to identify principles from turnaround churches that might guide pastors and churches in the pursuit of revitalization.<sup>21</sup> Stetzer and Dodson devised this book as a study grounded in the collection of quantitative data, measuring factors such as baptism ratios and attendance numbers. From the data, the authors compiled an extensive array of identifiable factors contributing to church comebacks, ranging from visionary leadership to strategic evangelism to intentional discipleship. In summary fashion, Stetzer and Dodson distilled their findings into a list of first-tier revitalization factors, including emphases on prayer, evangelism, and preaching. Significant challenges to church renewal, according to the authors' findings, include attitudes, finances and facilities.

While the body of analytic-descriptive literature associated with church revitalization is notably smaller than the other categories herein considered, *Breakout Church* and *Comeback Churches* represent the general thrust of the better such studies to-date.<sup>22</sup> We turn now to the consideration of Scripture-centric type works.

### **Scripture Centric Works**

Revitalization literature in the Scripture-centric category tends to focus not on church growth or church health, but on discovering biblical principles appropriate for

---

<sup>21</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007).

<sup>22</sup>In a work significantly influenced by their respective research, Rainer and Stetzer co-authored *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H, 2010). This offering fits more comfortably into the Scripture-centric category of revitalization work.

church revitalization. Though somewhat unspoken, implicit in this type of literature is the assumption that church growth and church health develop inherently when primacy is given to scriptural church polity and practice.

Harry L. Reeder and David Swavely's *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* swings the pendulum of revitalization strategy literature in a decidedly biblical direction.<sup>23</sup> Citing distraction from the gospel, a focus on programs, nostalgia for the glory days, and a maintenance mentality as debilitating causes of church plateau and decline, Reeder and Swavely issue a clarion call for Scripture-centric church revitalization. The authors maintain that church-wide repentance, unwavering focus on the gospel of God's grace, humble, supplicatory prayer, faithful ministry of the Word, missional vision, and Great Commission discipleship are among the corrective measures requisite for genuine church regeneration and revitalization. Reeder and Swavely soberly warn their readers concerning the dangers of warmed-over secular methodologies, challenging revitalization leaders to embrace the time-honored truths of Scripture.

In a similar offering, Andrew M. Davis's *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* heralds the indispensability of the Word of God in the work of church renewal.<sup>24</sup> Drawing from his own experience in revitalizing a dying church, Davis urges upon us the centrality of Christ's ownership of the church, the necessity of personal and corporate humility, the needed wisdom of choosing battles wisely, and an unflinching focus on and confidence in the word of God. Revitalization leaders, according to Davis, must eschew techniques for a robust reliance on God, cast clear biblical vision, labor with patience and courage, exercise Spirit-led discernment, and train and establish men within the church as spiritual leaders.

A third work in the category of Scripture-centric revitalization literature is

---

<sup>23</sup>Reeder and Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame*.

<sup>24</sup>Davis, *Revitalize*.

Brian Croft's *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches*.<sup>25</sup> Again, as with Davis, Croft draws from his experience in a declining, dying church to create a roadmap from Scripture to help his readers traverse the pitfalls of church revitalization. Citing the power of God alone as the sufficient and necessary cause of church renewal, Croft urges revitalization leaders to biblically prepare and faithfully persevere in this noble work. Diagnostically, he helps readers biblically assess the issues of church authority, leadership, membership, unity and worship that so often lead to division and dysfunction in the local church. Finally, Croft offers his readers an account of his personal journey in church revitalization, pointing to valuable lessons learned through personal failure and inexperience.

Finally, Mark Clifton's *Reclaiming Glory* is a Scripture-centric work primarily written for pastors with a heart for reclaiming the diminished and dying local churches that dot the landscape of the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>26</sup> Clifton's offering is descriptive, diagnostic and prescriptive of the dying church dilemma, written largely from the perspective of church replanting. Focusing on a compelling admixture of practical and Scripture-centric imperatives, this book prescribes intentional prayer and disciple-making, as well as exegesis of community, a simplified strategy, and a focus on reaching and training young men. This book stands apart from most revitalization literature through its combination of a singular focus on the glory of God coupled with practical, on-the-ground counsel for the work of revitalization.

### **Void in the Literature**

As the degeneration and decline of the North American church continues to worsen, concern to analyze the milieu, understand causation, and identify corrective

---

<sup>25</sup>Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016).

<sup>26</sup>Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*.

measures increases. A direct correlation seemingly exists between the scope of the problem and the burgeoning of works being published to address the plateau and decline of churches.

In the above consideration of the contemporary literature pertaining to church revitalization, four distinct classifications of the literature emerged. As might be expected, a significant portion of the literature coalesces around the church-growth principles of the previous generation's ecclesiological praxis in hopes of reversing the trend toward declension. Still other portions of the literature focus on the always-necessary concern for church health to stem the tide of decline. A third and essential category of revitalization literature concentrates on analytical studies to identify patterns conducive to reversing church deterioration. Finally, a fourth category of works, centered upon Scripture, seek to ascertain biblical principles that will lead to church reformation, renewal, and revitalization.

All of these categories of literature bring helpful information to the table for consideration, yet a void in the literature begs analysis. In the contemporary works on church revitalization, very little attention is given to two specific areas of inquiry. First, is this local-church tendency toward decline, deterioration, and death a phenomenon peculiar to postmodernity, or has this predisposition existed from the very beginnings of the church—and if so, why? Secondly, does the NT contain a full-orbed body of paradigmatic material for addressing church renewal and revitalization? This thesis aims to address this void in the literature by making the case for answering both questions in the affirmative.

### **Thesis Statement**

Given the precipitous decline of the local church in North America, those with a heart for the work of church revitalization are faced with a daunting task. We might appropriate the principles and practices of the CGM to combat this decline. We might

focus exclusively upon the concerns of church health in hopes of leading churches toward revitalization. We might entrust ourselves to the analytic and descriptive studies hoping they will thoroughly equip us for the work at hand. Scripture-centric literature offers a more firm footing (though it is largely anecdotal), but perhaps this genre will avail us of all the tools available to us for church revitalization. Is any one of these categories of literature sufficient, or should we embrace more than one approach, or a combination of all these approaches? The pressing need of our current ecclesiastic milieu drives us further than the literature can take us. We must derive our understanding of church degeneration and decline entirely from Scripture; and we must appropriate a paradigm for renewal and revitalization from those same Scriptures. After all, we are convinced that, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (2 Pet 1:3).

This dissertation will first establish that the apostle Paul recognized an entropic principle of decay and decline at work in the church from the very beginning of his missionary journeys, and that Paul labored exhaustively to ensure the ongoing renewal and revitalization of the earliest churches. Secondly, this work will demonstrate that the Pauline corpus provides for us an inspired, sufficient and timeless paradigm for church revitalization that addresses both diagnostically and prescriptively every cause of church decline present in the contemporary church.

### **Definitions and Delimitations**

In a world gripped by post-modern thought, definition of words is becoming increasingly ambiguous. In the marketplace of ideas it is progressively more common to encounter those who view words as so many wax noses to be shaped and defined by the presuppositions and proclivities of the user. This practice enables proponents of a particular position to dictate debate relative to their position, often privileging the proponent and their position by effectively marginalizing anyone who might disagree

with them. Despite this subtle practice, words have established meanings. Indeed, without fixed definitions of words and phrases, one cannot hope to say anything meaningful. In light of this reality, a work such as this thesis requires the clear definition of terms such as *entropy*, *church*, and *revitalization*.

First, whereas the word *entropy* appears in the title of this thesis, we will begin with its definition and application to our argument. In the field of physics, the Second Law of Thermodynamics observes that in any isolated system, all processes in the system naturally progress in the direction of increasing disorder and degeneration, or *entropy*. For example, when molecules organize to form a living organism, when the entire system—including the environment—is taken into account, there is always a net increase in entropy, or disorder. This is the *entropic principle*. Stated in spiritual terms, because we live in a fallen world under the curse of sin, the normative trajectory of everything within such a system is toward disorder, decline and decay (cf. Gen 3:18; Eccl 1:2; Rom 8:18-25). All of creation is subjected to futility because of the curse of sin, and the church is not exempt from such effects of sin. In a fallen world, everything—including the church—is in constant need of divine renewal because of the seemingly inexorable law of entropy.

In further support of the above assertions concerning spiritual entropy, we note that Jesus proclaimed, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). While we rejoice that the powers of hell will never ultimately prevail against the church, Jesus is clearly teaching his disciples that the powers of hell would certainly wage war against the church.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the Prince of darkness and his minions never sleep in their long war against God and his church! Given

---

<sup>27</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), vol. VI, 927. *TDNT* here maintains that Jesus’s statement concerning the powers of hell working against the church has both ongoing and eschatological overtones.

the reality of Jesus's assertion and the futility under which our sin-cursed world labors, Paul recognized that a principle of entropy threatened every church established from the very beginning of the Great Commission enterprise. Only insofar as the Holy Spirit worked supernaturally through the proclamation and application of the word of God could Paul have hope of the survival and flourishing of the churches laboring beneath the sin-induced law of entropy.

This definition and supporting evidence undergirds this thesis' presupposition that the church is in constant need of renewal and revitalization. Because the law of entropy is at work in the fallen world in which we live, Paul recognized from the very beginning that churches would stand in constant need of being strengthened and further established in the faith.

Secondly, an established definition of the term *church* is necessary for the advancement of the argument of this thesis. This dissertation will hold throughout that a *church* is a "local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel the ends of the earth."<sup>28</sup> This definition supports this study's presupposition that a church is identifiable by her covenant relationship with Christ through the gospel and that her priorities are assigned by the paradigms and imperatives of the inspired word of God.

Thirdly, this thesis is dependent upon a clear definition of the term *revitalization* as used in relation to church renewal and revivification. Davis asserts that the word *revitalization* describes "the effort to restore by biblical means a once healthy

---

<sup>28</sup>The Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message," accessed November 7, 2019, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>. Note: The author recognizes that a relative few passages in Scripture use the term "church" to address the universal church. For the sake of this dissertation, however, we will maintain the majority local congregation use of the term for evident reasons.

church from a present level of disease to a state of spiritual health, as defined by the Word of God.”<sup>29</sup> Davis’s distinction that revitalization must arise from biblical means is particularly pertinent to the thesis of this dissertation, for correctives within the church of Lord Jesus must necessarily find their genesis in the word of God.

Writing from a distinctly European perspective, John James defines church revitalization as “a local church intentionally recovering its calling to make disciples of Jesus. It is a process of deliberate change in order to bring about a new beginning, with the goal of recovering a gospel frontier for mission, and reestablishing gospel growth within a church community.”<sup>30</sup> James’s definition is helpful in that he brings attention to the necessity of methodological change, as well as his focus upon the gospel and the church’s mission.

Throughout this work the term *revitalization* is defined as the process by which the Holy Spirit—working through the preaching and application of the word of God—restores a church to focus upon the vital Kingdom priorities assigned by Christ, such that the church effectively advances the gospel in their community and to the ends of the earth. Support for this definition is partially derived from Paul’s declaration to the church at Corinth, “Your restoration—*κατάρτισιν*—is what we pray for” (2 Cor 13:9). Though *κατάρτισιν* is used only here in the NT, the verb form *καταρτίζω* is more common and is used to convey the idea of refurbishing or restoring that which is lacking, disordered and in a state of disrepair. The object of Paul’s concern for this dysfunctional church was that they experience revitalization. Commenting on Paul’s use of *κατάρτισιν* and its cognates, David E. Garland comments helpfully:

It is used to refer to restoring the walls of a city, preparing fabric so that it is ready

---

<sup>29</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize*, 20.

<sup>30</sup>John James, *Renewal: Church Revitalisation Along the Way of the Cross* (Leyland, England: 10Publishing, 2016), 16.

to wear, preparing a remedy, preparing a vessel (Rom 9:22), or preparing a body for sacrifice (Heb 10:5). It is also used for resetting a dislocated bone, outfitting a boat, equipping a child for adulthood with a solid education, or fully training a disciple to reach his teacher's level (Luke 6:40). The noun *katartismos* appears in Eph 4:12 for equipping the saints for the work of ministry. The verb form also appears in the New Testament with the sense of restoring something that is damaged, such as fishing nets (Matt 4:21; Mark 1:19), supplying what is lacking in a church's faith (1 Thess 3:10), restoring those who have suffered from persecution in this world (1 Pet 5:10), and restoring a church member who is caught in a sin (Gal 6:1). This last usage best fits the context of Corinthians. Paul is not talking about their "perfection" but their "reclamation." The use of this word here assumes that something is not right. The Corinthians need reconditioning, restoring (see the use of the verb in 13:11, "mend your ways" REB). They need to re-knit their relationship with . . . the crucified and resurrected Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Churches in plateau or decline stand in need of *κατάρτισιν*—a thoroughgoing equipping, a significant restoration, a reparative process, a revivification and revitalization of their relationship with the risen Lord Jesus. This understanding of the term *revitalization* stands as a foundational presupposition of this dissertation.

With regard to delimitations, the research and application of this dissertation is limited to the contemporary American church. While the biblical principles and paradigms herein delineated might be applied to any church in any location throughout the church age, the present study focuses on the dynamics of plateaued and declining churches in the American context. Further, though much of the NT literature is conducive to and instructive for the work of church revitalization, this dissertation is limited primarily to the book of Acts and the Pauline corpus.

## Conclusion

The objective of this study is two-fold. First, we will establish from the record of Paul's missionary journeys and from several of his epistles his recognition that a principle of entropy existed in the church from the very beginning. Paul realized that without constant care for the strengthening and ongoing establishing and revitalization of the churches, they would succumb to the cultural, societal and pagan pressures

---

<sup>31</sup>David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 550.

surrounding them and fall away into decline and eventual apostasy.

Secondly, this study will extract from the book of Acts and the Pauline corpus an identifiable paradigm for the revitalization of churches. While the churches to which the apostle wrote and among whom he labored exhaustively often differed in their contexts, the undergirding Kingdom priorities of the church were sufficient to reorder and revitalize even the most dysfunctional and disordered of congregations. From this ancient and inspired record of the apostle's concern and paradigm for revitalization, this dissertation aims to extricate a clear and applicable paradigm for the revitalization of the contemporary North American church.

CHAPTER 2  
ENTROPY AND RENEWAL—THE PAULINE  
CONCERN

Paul the apostle recognized an entropic principle of decay and decline at work in the church from the very beginning of his missionary journeys, and he labored exhaustively to ensure the ongoing renewal and revitalization of the earliest churches.

This chapter will trace through the book of Acts the Pauline practice of consistently returning to already-established churches for the purpose of further grounding them in the faith and encouraging and strengthening them against the principle of entropy wherein the onslaught of cultural antipathy and concomitant spiritual degeneration was ever-present. Additionally, we will briefly consider some of the Pauline epistles wherein he consistently expresses a deep and compelling concern for the revivification, health, wellbeing and faithfulness of all the fledgling churches of the Mediterranean Basin and beyond.

**Strategic Revitalization**

Saul of Tarsus, the inveterate persecutor of the early church, experienced radical conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus. Liberated by the Lord Jesus from the binding strictures of Phariseeism, Saul of Tarsus would become Paul the apostle, the leading missionary and church-planter of the NT.

While the Pauline church-planting enterprise has been the object of intense scrutiny for the better part of two millennia, there remains an aspect of Paul's ministry that has received far less attention. Careful analysis of the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles yields the conclusion that Paul was intentionally and tactically committed to the work of church revitalization and renewal. Indeed, as we will see, church revitalization

was an integral and prominent strategy in all three of Paul's recorded missionary journeys.

### **Revitalization During the First Missionary Excursion**

Commissioned for an initial missionary thrust by the church at Antioch Syria, Paul and Barnabas sailed to Cyprus, accompanied by John Mark. The missionaries traversed the length of the island proclaiming the word of God (Acts 13:4-12). From Cyprus they sailed to Southern Galatia, from whence John Mark abandoned them returning to return Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas trekked inland to Antioch Pisidia where they proceeded to the local synagogue and launched their gospel offensive. After winning a number of converts, witnessing the spread of the word of God throughout the region, and seeing the disciples filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were driven from the district by Jewish opposition (Acts 13:13-52). From Pisidian Antioch they journeyed to Iconium, then to Lystra—where Paul experienced a near-terminal stoning—then to Derbe, enjoying successful church-planting in each location (Acts 14:1-22).

Having completed an extensive expedition of travel and missional labor, the terminal point of this first excursion at Derbe was only about 200 miles by land from their sending church at Antioch Syria. Rather than returning by the shortest route, however, Paul and Barnabas reversed course and retraced their steps to all the cities they had visited in Southern Galatia. This reversal of course tripled the distance of their return to Antioch Syria, extending the grueling journey from a mere 200 miles to roughly 600 miles! Why would this missionary duo take such a circuitous return route and traverse three times the distance necessary to arrive at their home-base? Luke gives us the answer in clear, evocative language in Acts 14:21b-23:

They returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch (Pisidia), *strengthening the souls of the disciples*, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had

appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (emphasis added)

Notice that the first city to which they returned was Lystra, the site of Paul’s stoning experience! Paul and Barnabas were so convinced of the necessity of encouraging and strengthening these fledgling churches that they were willing to risk being put to death and were willing to travel three times the necessary distance.

The Lukan employment of the present, active participle ἐπιστηρίζων—strengthening—here in Acts 14:22 emphasizes the importance of this aspect of Paul’s missionary work.<sup>1</sup> The root verb στήριζω means to cause someone to become stronger in the sense of more firm and unchanging in attitude or belief.<sup>2</sup> Coupled with the preposition ἐπί, forming ἐπιστηρίζων—found only in Acts 14:22, 15:32, 41, and 18:23—the participle indicates an addition to that which already exists.<sup>3</sup> Though the individuals comprising these new churches were already converted and established in the rudiments of the faith, Paul was compelled to return and further ground and strengthen them in their fledgling belief. It is notable that three of only four NT usages of ἐπιστηρίζω occur in the context of Paul’s practice of returning to further strengthen already-established churches (Acts 14:22, 15:41 and 18:23). The fourth usage appears in Acts 15:32: “And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened (ἐπεστήριξαν) the brothers with many words.” Here, Luke pairs ἐπιστηρίζω with παρεκάλεσαν—to encourage, exhort—in relation to Judas and Silas’ prophetic ministry to the church at Antioch of Syria. Judas and Silas strengthened and encouraged the Antiochene Christians “with many words” to establish and settle them in their faith. Fledgling churches filled with

---

<sup>1</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 663.

<sup>2</sup>J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based On Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), vol. 2, 228.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 945.

new converts to the faith needed intensive instruction in the commands of Lord Jesus (cf. Matt 28:20).

Further, ἐπιστηρίζω was used in agrarian contexts to signify the propping up of a vine-branch by a supporting stake or stick for the purpose of increasing the fruitfulness of the branch. In Greek medical literature, ἐπιστηρίζω also connoted the use of medicinal means to strengthen the body.<sup>4</sup> The former readily images the work of a vinedresser working to increase the productivity of the vine by careful, supportive attendance. The latter offers us the etymology of medical steroids.<sup>5</sup> Just as the vinedresser carefully added supporting strength to a drooping branch, so Paul was concerned to strengthen the fledgling churches throughout the Mediterranean Basin. Not unlike a medical doctor who prescribes treatments to invigorate a patient’s weakened body—in modern contexts including the administration of steroids—Paul was concerned to prescribe robust theological teaching and training and encouragement to revivify the earliest churches lest they fall away from the grace of Christ and turn to a “different” gospel (cf. Gal 1:6ff).

Usage of στήριζω elsewhere in the NT offers further insight. Luke informed us concerning Jesus that, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, (he) set (ἐστήρισεν) his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Jesus intentionally and firmly fixed his sight and direction toward the agonies of the cross. After warning Peter of Satan’s desire to sift the disciples as wheat,<sup>6</sup> Jesus added, “but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen (στήρισον) your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). The disciples would soon witness the life-altering events of Christ’s

---

<sup>4</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), vol. VII, 653-54.

<sup>5</sup>Robert E. Van Voorst, *Building Your New Testament Greek Vocabulary*, 3rd ed., Resources for Biblical Study (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 75. Van Voorst maintains that “steroids” is derived from the Greek στήριζω.

<sup>6</sup>“You” in verse 31 is ὑμεῖς, second person plural, while “you” in verse 32 is σου, first person singular in both instances.

death and resurrection, and Jesus prayed for Peter that he would strengthen their shaken faith after he recovered from his own crisis of faith.

In writing to the Romans, Paul asserted, “I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen (στηριχθῆναι) you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Rom 1:11-12). Here, the means of strengthening was the impartation of spiritual understanding and mutual edification. In his closing exhortations to the church at Rome, Paul commended them to the Lord thus: “Now to him who is able to strengthen (στηρίξει) you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” (Rom 16:25). The means of the Romans’ strengthening, according to the apostle, was rootedness in the gospel of the Lord Jesus. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, “We sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish (στηρίξαι) and exhort you in your faith” (1 Thess 3:2). Here again, an already-established church stood in need of continued strengthening and establishment in their faith.

Paul was not alone in his concern to strengthen the churches. To the spiritual aliens scattered throughout Asia Minor, after exhorting them to make their calling and election sure, Peter wrote: “Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established (ἔστηριγμένους) in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder” (2 Pet 1:12-13). Peter was concerned to constantly remind these believers of the rudiments of the faith, though they were already established in them.

We see, therefore, that Jesus, Paul, Peter, James (cf. James 5:8), and John (cf. Rev 3:2) were concerned that the churches be constantly strengthened, fixed, established and revitalized in the faith lest they fall away into decline and eventual apostasy. The language consistently employed in this strengthening process included strong appeals, exhortative encouragements and intensive teaching. Paul’s strengthening ministry to the churches of Southern Galatia during his return to Antioch Syria no doubt included these

same strong appeals, exhortative encouragements, and intensive teachings to remain steadfast in the faith delivered to them at their conversion.

I. Howard Marshall, in commenting on Acts 14:21-23, astutely calls attention to this two-phased nature of Paul's first missionary tour:

So the mission moved into its *second phase*. Paul's regular practice was to *revisit* the churches which he had founded, or at least keep in touch with them by means of his colleagues or correspondence. In the present case he and Barnabas *revisited* each of the churches, despite the knowledge that they were returning to cities which were hostile to them; it would presumably have been possible for them to travel on overland eastwards and to reach Antioch instead of going back the way they had come. . . . Rather the missionaries were able to encourage the young believers (in the already-established churches) to continue in their belief and not fall away back into Judaism or paganism, and to give them realistic warnings based on experience, that the way to the kingdom of God is not an easy one. (*emphasis added*)<sup>7</sup>

Pauline missional practice clearly included not only the establishment of churches, but also the intentional follow-up necessary to ensure the ongoing vitality, spiritual health and advancement of the churches. The most direct route in returning to Antioch of Syria would have been to proceed from Derbe to the coastline of Cilicia. From there, the missionaries could have secured the relatively short sea-passage to Antioch of Syria, shortening the return journey by several hundred miles. Instead, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps back through the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia—despite having suffered persecution in every one of these cities.

Paul's efforts here were more than justified. A cacophony of aberrant belief systems abounded in the first-century A.D., threatening the faith and health and even the very existence of the churches, and Paul and Barnabas were careful to buttress the faith of the early churches lest they fall away into heterodoxy. In the first century A.D., even as we are experiencing the twenty-first century, the marketplace of ideas was the battleground of the gods, and idolaters preferred that Christians leave their God at home

---

<sup>7</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Acts (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 241.

(cf. Acts 17). Paul recognized that without an unflinching commitment to Christ and a clear, bold proclamation of the gospel of grace in the face of such cultural and societal pressures, ecclesiastical entropy would take over and churches would naturally degenerate, decline and even cease to exist. This priority of strengthening and encouraging and building up the health of the churches outweighed all danger, even the danger of death by stoning.

In summary, Paul's concern in his initial missionary excursion to preach the gospel, establish churches and quickly ground them in the rudiments of the faith was accompanied by an equal concern to return to those same churches and ensure their continuance in the faith. We turn now to the scriptural evidence that Paul continued his strategy of continued church revitalization during his second missionary tour.

### **Revitalization During the Second Missionary Excursion**

The narrative of Acts 15:36-16:5 follows on the heels of the Jerusalem Council's conclusion concerning the non-binding nature of circumcision in relation to Gentile believers. Prior to this Council, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned for the above-mentioned missionary thrust by the church at Antioch of Syria. Through the preaching of the gospel, they established churches on the island of Cyprus, in Antioch of Pisidia, at Iconium, in Lystra, and at Derbe (Acts 13:4-14:20). Paul and Barnabas then retraced their steps, encouraging and strengthening the disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch before returning to Antioch in Syria where they gave report of their activities to their sanctioning church (Acts 14:21-28).

During this furlough at Antioch, the missionaries occasioned and confronted men from Judea who were teaching a Judaism-influenced doctrine of circumcisonal regeneration. This confrontation led to a delegation of men—including Paul and Barnabas—traveling to Jerusalem to address the question of circumcision with the apostles and elders there. The testimony of Paul and Barnabas concerning God's work of

grace to the Gentiles through their ministry of the gospel—which likely included testimony concerning their revitalization work on their return journey—won the day. The Jerusalem Council formulated a letter to the Gentile churches conveying their decision against the Judaizers’ requirement of circumcision, tasking Paul and Barnabas with communicating their conclusion (Acts 15:1-35).

After what was likely an extended period of pastoral and evangelistic labor in Antioch of Syria,<sup>8</sup> Paul appealed to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36b). Paul’s use of the emphatic particle δὴ—Ἐπιστρέψαντες δὴ ἐπισκεψώμεθα—communicates a sense of urgency that the missionary partners embark upon a joint-oversight visit to πόλιν πᾶσαν—every city—where they had proclaimed the gospel and planted churches during their first missionary excursion. This visit would serve the purpose of allowing Paul and Barnabas to ἐπισκεψώμεθα—that is, to carefully inspect and look after the wellbeing of these fledgling churches.

Paul’s appeal to his co-laborer reveals a concern already evidenced in their first missional endeavor. Now, on the eve of his second missionary journey, Paul’s primary and stated concern was to visit yet again every city where churches had been established. His stated purpose for these visitations was that he and Barnabas might ἐπισκεψώμεθα—pastorally examine their progress in the gospel, to exercise oversight of their spiritual wellbeing, and to strengthen them in the faith (cf. Acts 14:21-23; 15:36, 41; 16:4-5).<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 661. Schnabel maintains that the imperfect διέτριβον (“remained”) suggests an extended period of time.

<sup>9</sup> Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 378.

Though disagreement arose between the two missionaries over John Mark, leading to a parting of ways between Paul and Barnabas<sup>10</sup> and the forming of the Paul and Silas partnership, the church at Antioch appears to sanction Paul's desire for oversight visitation. Paul and Silas were "commended by the brothers to the grace of God" as they departed with such visitations as the stated purpose of their mission (Acts 15:40). Paul was still intensely and emphatically concerned about the spiritual health of the fledgling churches established in his first missionary excursion, despite the fact that he and Barnabas had already revisited these congregations during their initial return trip. The sending church at Antioch of Syria endorsed this concern by means of their commendation, establishing a precedent of church revitalization in a proto-associational context.

Further, it should be noted here that the churches who were the object of Antiochene and Pauline concern were not without leadership. Paul and Barnabas had been careful to appoint elders within these churches prior to their departure (Acts 14:23). Paul and Barnabas undoubtedly vetted these elders before appointing them, aiming to buttress the health and vitality of the churches. Although these newly-established churches enjoyed duly-appointed leadership from within their own ranks, their need for apostolic oversight clearly remained a priority for the missionaries and their sending church. Thus, we have here an identifiable and intentional effort by Paul and Silas and their sending church to examine and strengthen the health of sister churches, again, in a proto-associational setting.

---

<sup>10</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts: The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 341. Polhill speculates concerning the Paul and Barnabas rift: "It is possible that there was an additional source of tension between Paul and Barnabas. Galatians 2:11–13 speaks of an incident that took place in Antioch, evidently after the Jerusalem Conference, in which Peter and Barnabas gave in to pressure from 'certain men' from James and withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles. Paul sharply confronted Peter on that occasion for his 'hypocrisy' and was none too happy with Barnabas for following Peter's example."

Employing this encouraging and strengthening paradigm—again, a paradigm sanctioned by the sending church at Syrian Antioch—Paul and Silas departed and, “. . . went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41). Notably, though Paul did not personally return to Cyprus, Barnabas and John Mark did (cf. Acts 15:39), again, for the stated purpose of strengthening and revitalizing the church there. While Luke makes no specific prior mention of the establishment of churches in the regions of Syria and Cilicia (other than Antioch of Syria), Paul’s account of his initial preaching of the faith in Galatians 1:21-24 includes these two regions. Commenting on this passage, F. F. Bruce asserts, “It is probably implied that Paul’s apostolic work during this period in Syria and Cilicia was more fruitful than his witness in Nabataean Arabia had been; at any rate enough was happening for news of Paul’s activity to get back to Judaea.”<sup>11</sup> Whether these churches were established by Paul or by someone else, the Jerusalem Council addressed its letter of recommendation in-part to the Gentile churches in Syria and Cilicia. Whereas Cilicia adjoins the terminal point of the first missionary thrust, Paul and Silas’ strengthening ministry began very naturally with these regions.<sup>12</sup>

After ministering in Syria and Cilicia, the duo returned to Derbe, then Lystra, continuing through the cities of South Galatia<sup>13</sup> wherein churches were established in the first missional excursion, delivering the contents of the letter from the Jerusalem Council at each stop (Acts 16:1, 4). Luke’s summary statement informs the reader, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (Luke 16:5). The Lukan formulation αἱ μὲν οὖν ἐκκλησίαι—“indeed, therefore, the churches”—

---

<sup>11</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 103.

<sup>12</sup>C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, International Critical Commentary 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 758.

<sup>13</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, 666. Schnabel notes, “It is curious that Luke reported extensively about Paul’s missionary work in Pisidian Antioch (13:14-50), mentioning his pastoral visit on the return journey (14:21), but does not mention the city and its congregation here. Paul’s subsequent travels (v. 6) leave little doubt that he visited Pisidian Antioch.”

emphatically links the strengthening and growth of these churches to the intentional ministry of Paul and Silas detailed in verses one through four.<sup>14</sup> This Pauline and Antiochene paradigm of intentional and ongoing church-health maintenance yielded stronger, healthier churches capable of withstanding the onslaught of Judaism and paganism. Further, Luke describes the results of Paul's ministry in terms strikingly similar to the growth of the churches in Jerusalem and Judea (cf. Acts 6:7; 9:31)—the churches increased in numbers and influence.<sup>15</sup> Strengthened, revitalized, healthy churches produced healthy evangelism, which, in turn, resulted in growth of the churches through new converts.

In summary, Acts 15:36-16:5 provides a demonstrably effective proto-associational model of intentional maintenance of local church health in the sending-church-sanctioned missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. Concerned for the health of these fledgling churches, Paul launched his second missional thrust with Silas having expressly stated that his intention was to revisit and strengthen *in every city* the churches established on his first excursion. The sending church at Antioch Syria sanctioned this intention by means of their commendation, establishing a precedent of church-health maintenance in a proto-associational context. Before moving into new territory, Paul and Silas visited and strengthened the churches in Syria, Cilicia, and South Galatia. This intentional strengthening of already-established churches yielded the fruit of significantly increased church health and subsequent numerical growth through renewed evangelism.

We turn now to consider the continuation of this strategy in the third of Paul's missionary excursions.

---

<sup>14</sup>David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England: Eerdmans, 2009), 452.

<sup>15</sup>Marshall, *Acts*, 261.

### **Revitalization During the Third Missionary Excursion**

After extensive work in the new territories of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth, Paul returned to Jerusalem and then went down to Syrian Antioch (Acts 18:22). After doubtlessly regaling the believers at Antioch with reports of the rigors and successes of his second missionary journey, Paul again, “. . . departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, *strengthening* (ἐπιστηρίζων) *all the disciples*” (Acts 18:23, emphasis added).

The region of Galatia and Phrygia encompassed the now-familiar churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. Here again, just as with the return trip on the first missionary excursion and the initial thrust of the second missionary journey, the Pauline concern was to first strengthen and revitalize already-established churches. It is notable here that many of these churches—if not all of them—had already experienced at least two such visits from the revitalizing apostle! While the new horizons of Ephesus, Macedonia, and Greece beckoned Paul, he ventured not thereto until he once again sought to further revitalize these now-familiar churches.<sup>16</sup>

Further, after the Apollos excursus of Acts 18:24-28, Luke reports that “Paul passed through the inland (ἀνωτερικά—upper, or highland) country and came to Ephesus” (Acts 19:1). Schnabel offers a compelling insight here:

The . . . comment in 19:1 that Paul “passed through the interior regions” before reaching Ephesus seems to indicate that he traveled from Pisidian Antioch to Apamea (cf. 16:6) and continued on the traverse of the hill road running from Apamea to the valley of the Kaystros River north of the Messogis Mountains and to Ephesus. The journey from Antioch, the capital of Syria, to Ephesus, the capital city of Asia Minor was about 800 miles, . . . requiring nine weeks of walking if we assume one day of rest per week. The fact that Paul did not sail from Antioch (Syria) to Ephesus but walked via an arduous inland route confirms his concern for the consolidation of the churches he had established. If he indeed passed through

---

<sup>16</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary On the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 358.

Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, this would have been his third visit after establishing the churches in these cities.<sup>17</sup>

Here again is evidence that Paul's strengthening and revitalizing efforts were intentional and strategic. He clearly viewed such efforts as warranting a rigorously circuitous journey that could have been avoided had his only aim been to return to Ephesus. The 800 mile journey by foot, much of it through the northern hill-country of the Messogis Mountains, replaced a comparatively easy sea-voyage from Syrian Antioch to Ephesus. We see, therefore, that the continued rooting and grounding and revitalization of the churches remained a high priority in Paul's third missionary journey.

In conclusion, close consideration of the book of Acts reveals that Paul was committed to the revivification and strengthening of churches long after their establishment. He recognized that the principle of entropy existed even in the redeemed church, and that the church as an organism does not naturally flourish in a fallen world. Throughout all three missionary journeys Paul employed a dual strategy of church planting and church revitalization, and he did so at the personal expense of much-extended and rigorous travel.

We turn now to a consideration of Paul's oft-expressed agonies for the early churches that they constantly be renewed in their faith.

### **Epistolary Agonies**

The consistent Pauline focus upon the continued revitalization of already-planted churches is powerfully evidenced throughout his epistolary addresses. Often in evocative and eloquent language, the apostle reminds the churches of his intense concern that they continue steadfastly in the faith and go on the maturity that was their calling in Christ Jesus. In this section we will consider a few of the more expressive of these concerns.

---

<sup>17</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 783.

## **Corinthians**

In enumerating his sufferings to the church at Corinth, Paul related a litany of hardships that accompanied his work in serving the churches, and he punctuates these with the poignant declaration, “And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28). In addition to the clear and present physical dangers of the missional enterprise, Paul suffered daily from ἡ ἐπίστασις—the deep emotional stress and pressure he felt in relation to his personal oversight of the spiritual health of all the churches. That Paul set this stress apart from the rather appalling list of dangers he faced points to the exceeding weight of his burden for the churches. The following verse exposes the depth of his burden: “Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (2 Cor 11:29). So vitally connected to the health and wellbeing of all the churches was the apostle that anytime one became weak and unhealthy, Paul suffered the pangs of weakness and unhealthiness. When churches—or factions within the churches—fell into sin and disobedience, the apostle bore the burden of becoming indignant over such falleness. Paul maintained deep sympathy and concern over spiritual unhealthiness and decline in any of the churches of the New Testament.

## **Galatians**

Paul further expresses a visceral concern for the health of these early churches in his correspondence to the Galatian congregations. The apostle’s agitation and indignation over the profane heterodoxy threatening these oft-revisited churches of Southern Galatia appears early in his epistolary address: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal 1:6). Indeed, as Longenecker points out, Paul foregoes his customary

thanksgiving section and proceeds directly to the *exordium* of verses six through ten.<sup>18</sup> That this fledgling group of churches would embrace the Judaizers' teaching of justification by works of the law—over against the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone—presaged a serious decline into unhealthiness. Paul was immediately concerned to warn them of the pending danger.

After expressing fear that he had labored over the Galatians in vain (Gal 4:11), Paul pens the cry, “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (Gal 4:19). His warm heart toward them appears in the vocative *τέκνα μου*—my little children, or my dear children—reminding the Galatians of his original and ongoing, tender care for them. Paul then asserted that his current agony at their retreat from the gospel was like unto *πάλιν ὠδίνω*—being *again* in the travail of childbirth. Having birthed them spiritually, Paul experienced the anxiety and travail of childbirth *again*, lest they be drawn away from the pure gospel. Indeed, his agony remains *μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῆ Χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν*—until Christ is formed in them. Until Christ and his gospel and its fruits are manifest in the Galatian believers, the apostle suffers anguish and distress. Again, these are established churches with duly-appointed leaders within them,<sup>19</sup> yet the Antioch-commissioned apostle's care for their spiritual health and well-being was undiminished.

## Thessalonians

Paul and Silas's time in establishing the church in Thessalonica during the second missionary journey was shortened by rabble-rousing Jews (cf. Acts 17:1-9), and

---

<sup>18</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41 (Dallas: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1990), 13.

<sup>19</sup>Robert K. Rapa, *Galatians*, In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, *Romans-Galatians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 550-52. If the South Galatian hypothesis holds, the churches addressed in this letter are likely the churches established and revisited and vested with ordained leadership (Acts 14:23) by Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary excursion.

Paul was understandably concerned for their spiritual well-being. After proceeding through Berea and Athens, Paul arrived at Corinth where he penned his first letter to the Thessalonians. The warmth of the apostle's heart toward the church at Thessalonica is everywhere evident in this letter. He reminded them of his gentleness among them "like a nursing mother taking care of her own children" (1 Thess 2:7). His exhortation and encouragement among them was "like a father with his children" (I Thess 2:11). Because his time with them had been all too abbreviated, Paul longed to see them face to face, but was hindered by Satan (I Thess 2:17-18).

Finding the separation unbearable, Paul sent Timothy from Athens "to establish—στηρίξαι—and exhort (them) in (their) faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions" (I Thess 3:2-3). Of first note here is the fact that Paul had already commended the strength of their faith in his salutation, indicating that reports of their faith had "gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything" (I Thess 1:8). Indeed, the reports from other believers in Macedonia and Achaia asserted that the Thessalonians were serving "the living God" and waiting "for his Son from heaven" (I Thess 1:9-10). Although their faith seemed evident, Paul experienced a compelling need to send Timothy to them, and he uses the now-familiar στηρίζω to express his purpose for sending him—Timothy was to further strengthen and establish them in their already-evident faith.

Secondly, Paul expresses his concern that they not be moved by "θλίψεσιν ταύταις—these afflictions." Here the apostle is pointing back to his assertion in 1 Thess 1:6 that the Thessalonian church had received the gospel "in much affliction." It appears that the persecution that arose so quickly upon their receiving of the gospel in Acts 17:1-9 had continued (cf. 1 Thess 3:4), and the apostle was anxious to ensure that they remained grounded in their faith and not be moved away from the gospel.

James A. Frame suggests Paul's concern here was two-fold in nature:

It is to be observed that Paul not only states the prophecy (concerning affliction) and its fulfillment, but also appeals to the knowledge of the readers in confirmation of his statement. This appeal, in light of the similar appeals in 2<sup>1-12</sup>, suggests that Paul

is intending not only to encourage the converts but also at the same time to rebut the cajoling insinuations of the Jews who would coax the converts away from the new faith on the pretence [sic] that persecution is evidence that the gospel which they welcomed is a delusion.<sup>20</sup>

First, the letter to the Thessalonians and Paul's sending of Timothy was intended to encourage and strengthen them in their faith. Secondly, these actions by the apostle were calculated to refute the subtle arguments of the Judaizers who sought to frame Paul and his gospel as deceptive (cf. 1 Thess 1:2-3). Here again we see Paul in much anguish to ensure that the church in Thessalonica not be ensnared by vain philosophies and cultural pressures and thus drawn away from the gospel. To that end, the apostle sought to provide everything necessary for the ongoing revitalization of the church.

In summary, as the gospel frontier expanded to new regions and new congregations, Paul maintained a rigorous concern for the health of already-established churches. Not satisfied with merely bringing the gospel to yet-unreached provinces, Paul yearned for, prayed for and labored for the spiritual well-being and revitalization of all the congregations of believers formed from the fountainheads of Jerusalem and Antioch.

### **Conclusion**

The NT record clearly indicates that Paul retained concern for the ongoing renewal and revitalization of the churches from the very beginning of his missional endeavors. He recognized that a principle of spiritual entropy was at work against the advancing church of the Lord Jesus wherein societal, cultural and philosophical pressures combined to threaten the very existence of the ecclesiastical enterprise necessary for the propagation of the gospel. To that end, the apostle Paul expended significant energy and effort to insure that these early churches were renewed and revitalized. From his first missional excursion with Barnabas to his third recorded journey with an expanded

---

<sup>20</sup>James A. Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970), 128-29.

entourage, the strengthening and revitalization of already-existing churches was a prominent and integral strategy in the labors of the apostle Paul.

Further, even a cursory review of the Pauline epistles yields the portrait of a church planter and church revitalizer whose heart was keenly attuned to the need for churches to continually pursue spiritual vitality and healthiness. Paul expressed the depth of his concerns for the churches in terms of a deep and daily emotional stress, even framing his trepidations in the language of the agony of childbirth. So vitally connected to the well-being and health of the churches was the apostle that he lived and died together with them (cf. 2 Cor 7:2). The ongoing renewal and revivification of the fledgling churches' faith so drove Paul that his entire ministry of traveling, preaching, teaching, praying, church-planting and letter-writing was characterized by a longing for and striving after church revitalization.

The apostle recognized that just as with our sanctification, church revitalization is an ongoing process that never reaches its terminus this side of eternity. The law of entropy introduced into creation because of sin requires a never-ceasing pursuit of spiritual renewal and revitalization, lest the health and vitality of the church give way to degeneration, decline and death. The powers of hell never give quarter in their long war against God and his redeemed church. Societal, cultural and philosophical pressures are constantly at work to undermine the vibrancy and effectiveness of the church's witness. Paul recognized this tension between entropy and renewal, and his career-long efforts to revitalize already-existing churches reminds us that we too must wage a ceaseless war for the renewal and revitalization of churches. Just as the popularized Barthian phrase *ecclesia semper reformanda* called attention to the reality that the church must always be in the process of reforming, so must the church be always pursuing the revivification and revitalization of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The fact that not a single church established in the NT still exists today stands as a sobering reminder of this reality.

We turn now to a consideration of the origin of Paul's paradigm for church revitalization.

CHAPTER 3  
THE PRIORITIES AND PRACTICE OF THE  
JERUSALEM CHURCH

The Jerusalem church described in the book of Acts stands, in many ways, as an exemplar for the church of all ages. Incubated in the womb of the Holy City, graced with the effusion of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and led by the apostles who were disciples by Christ, the Jerusalem church experienced a remarkable outpouring of the blessing of God upon its worship and witness. The Lukan description of the Jerusalem church at the end of Acts chapter two, coupled and compared with Acts 4:32-27 and 5:12-16, is a cogent and instructive description of the priorities and practices of the earliest church in the NT.

Acts 2:42-47 describes the inner life of the church wherein the work of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel, produced a progressive development and expansion of the original one hundred and twenty disciples (cf. Acts 1:15). In the words of David G. Peterson, “Luke was (in Acts 2:42-47) . . . commending the positive example of the earliest community of Christians to his readers. This was . . . the true Israel, where his Spirit was powerfully at work, fulfilling God’s end-time promises.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Luke’s commendation here is supported by his punctiliar declaration, “And the Lord added to their number *day by day* those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b, emphasis added). The Jerusalem church did not merely experience the occasional blessing of God, they enjoyed a daily, divine affirmation of their priorities and practice.

Peterson further notes, “Luke does not hide its (the church’s) weaknesses (cf.

---

<sup>1</sup>David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England: Eerdmans, 2009), 158-59.

5:1-10; 6:1), but he implies that the church in Jerusalem was a model of what could happen when people were bound together by a belief in the gospel, an understanding of its implications, and an enjoyment of its blessings.”<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce similarly affirms the exemplary nature of the Jerusalem church when he asserts, “Luke presents in this paragraph an ideal picture of this new community, rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> C. K. Barrett further points to the archetypal implications of Luke’s summary, noting, “Luke wished his readers to see what the life of Christians looked like in the apostolic period in order that they might imitate it.”<sup>4</sup> Given that we have no other record of a church in the NT where God was so pleased to inundate with blessing as the Jerusalem church, Luke’s summary of that church’s priorities and practices stands as an instructive, paradigmatic description of a healthy, vibrant church. The Jerusalem church, its weaknesses notwithstanding, here appears as the ideal and model to which the churches of all ages should aspire.

Before considering the ecclesiological parameters of Acts 2:42-47, we must address the hermeneutical concern of whether this passage is merely descriptive or didactically prescriptive. Given the narrative genre of the passage, was the Lucan intent—and more importantly, the Holy Spirit’s intent—that the practices delineated be accepted as normative for the church? J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays frame the question thus:

Should we take Acts as *normative* so that the church of all times should imitate the experiences and practices of the early church? Or should we read Acts as merely *descriptive* of what was valuable and inspiring in the early church, but not necessarily binding on us today? Without a doubt this is the most significant issue we face as we learn to interpret Acts. . . . The difficulty lies in knowing what is normative for the church today and what is not. On what basis should we make

---

<sup>2</sup>Peterson, *Acts*, 159.

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

<sup>4</sup>C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, International Critical Commentary 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 160.

these decisions?<sup>5</sup>

Some hold that the narratives of Acts are merely descriptive of what happened in the early church, and that unless a passage is explicitly didactic it should never be taken as normative for the church.<sup>6</sup> Others maintain that while the narratives in Acts are not as directly instructive as other didactic literature, some narrative portions of Acts do indeed have theological implications, and the expectation is that the reader will interpret them accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

Given the continuity of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts and the stated purpose of this dual volume—that Theophilus “may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (cf. Luke 1:4; Acts 1:1)—Luke clearly intended much of Acts to be didactic in nature. To that end, Duvall and Hays offer some helpful principles for determining which portions of Acts are didactic—and therefore normative—and which are not:

(1) look for what Luke intended to communicate to his readers; (2) look for positive and negative examples in the characters of the story (e.g., the selection of Matthias to replace Judas; Acts 1:15-26); (3) read individual passages in light of the overall story of Acts and the rest of the New Testament; (4) look to other parts of Acts to clarify what is normative (e.g., giving away all of one’s possessions is not normative, according to 5:3-4); and (5) look for repeated patterns and themes.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 43-44.

<sup>6</sup>Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 97.

<sup>7</sup>Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 44-45. Allison goes on to even more strongly assert, “I affirm the normativity of the book of Acts . . . Acts is a thoroughgoing theological writing of narrative genre, Luke’s inspired presentation of the growth of the early church. The Holy Spirit, who spoke and acted so as to create, empower, direct, and expand the early church, and who inspired Luke to write the authoritative narrative of his (i.e., the Spirit’s) work, continues to speak and act today in the church through this canonical writing. Because of its inspiration and its inclusion in the canon of Christian Scripture, Acts is intended for the authoritative instruction of the church from its inception at Pentecost until the Lord returns in the future” (46).

<sup>8</sup>Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 264-67. Duvall and Hays recommend: “(1) look for what Luke intended to communicate to his readers; (2) look for positive and negative examples in the characters of the story (e.g., the selection of Matthias to replace Judas; Acts 1:15-26); (3) read individual passages in light of the overall story of Acts and the rest of the New Testament; (4) look to other parts of Acts to clarify what is normative (e.g., giving away all of one’s possessions is not normative, according to

Principles three and five are particularly helpful when considering Acts 2:42-47, both because the priorities therein delineated find support throughout the NT and because Luke repeats these themes throughout the book. On these grounds—and additional grounds that will become evident throughout this dissertation—we maintain that Luke’s description of the practices and priorities of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2:42-47 is normative for the church of all ages.

The focus of this chapter will be an exegesis of Acts 2:42-47 wherein the Kingdom priorities and practices of the early church emerge from the text with clarity and simplicity. This consideration of the prevailing practices of the early church will yield a six-fold rubric of Kingdom priorities under which much of the diagnostic and prescriptive writings of Paul pertaining to church revitalization may be efficiently coalesced. We will further contend that an identifiable paradigm for church revitalization emerges from this coalescence of priorities and practices in the Pauline corpus, wherein the apostle consistently calls the churches of the NT back to these essential priorities.

We proceed now to an exegetical consideration of Acts 2:42-47.

### **Kingdom Priorities**

Acts 2:42-47 is the second of six summary statements Luke uses to establish the historical life and function of the early church (cf. Acts 1:12-14; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 6:7; 9:31).<sup>9</sup> The consistency of the summaries indicate that the author wishes to present an apologetic for the priorities of the earliest church that would shape the readers’ understanding of ecclesiastical practice.<sup>10</sup>

---

5:3-4); and (5) look for repeated patterns and themes.”

<sup>9</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 174.

<sup>10</sup>Peterson, *Acts*, 158-59. As noted earlier, Peterson further asserts that, “. . . Luke was also commending the positive example of the earliest community of Christians to his readers . . . he implies that the church in Jerusalem was a model of what could happen when people were bound together by a belief in the gospel, an understanding of its implications, and an enjoyment of its blessings.”

Theologically, the evident purpose of these summaries is to call attention to the continued, powerful and renewing presence of God among the community of believers. Luke's ecclesiological purpose for these statements is apparent in that he records the essential characteristics and practices of the community. Theophilus, the initial recipient of Luke-Acts, needed assurance of the veracity of the things he had been taught, and Luke provided historic ecclesiological evidence to buttress Theophilus' Christian formation (cf. Luke 1:4).

Eckhard J. Schnabel rightly observes of these summaries that they "function to generalize and thus make the experience of individuals normative."<sup>11</sup> John B. Polhill likewise points to the normativity of these texts when he posits, "Luke's summaries present an ideal for the Christian community which it must always strive for, constantly return to and discover anew if it is to have that unity of spirit and purpose essential for an effective witness."<sup>12</sup>

Given Luke's stated purpose in writing to Theophilus, the didactically repetitive nature of these summaries, the evident Divine blessing upon this early church, and the relative consensus among conservative scholars, the following exegesis of Acts 2:42-47 presupposes the practices herein discovered to be normative for the church of all ages.

### **A Praying Community**

The Jerusalem church was incubated in the womb of an intentional, upper-room prayer meeting, and was birthed on the Day of Pentecost by an effusion of the Holy Spirit. As the 120 followers of Jesus prostrated themselves in tarrying, expectant prayer per Jesus's command, the promised Holy Spirit imbued them with power from on high

---

<sup>11</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 175.

<sup>12</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 122.

per Jesus’s promise (cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 2:1-4). The miracle of *γλώσσαις* ensued, enabling the believers to proclaim the redeeming work of God in the native languages of all those gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:4, 6, 11). Some mocked them, thinking them inebriated, but Peter arose and declared the event a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel wherein God promised precisely such an outpouring of his Spirit (cf. Acts 2:13-21; Joel 2:28-32). Peter then proclaimed the gospel of the risen Christ, urging his hearers to repentance and faith, and 3,000 souls heeded his proclamation and were baptized and added to the church (cf. Acts 2:41). The narrative of Luke’s account then moves to the following description of the community life and practice of the enlarged church:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Luke describes the community of believers as committed to a number of spiritual disciplines and priorities in this pericope, but we will focus first on the practice of prayer. Luke testifies, “ἦσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες . . . ταῖς προσευχαῖς—and they devoted themselves to . . . the prayers.” Several important issues appear in this assertion. First, the conjunction *δὲ* is a logical connective that ties this verse to verse forty-one. Both the already existing church of at least 120 disciples *and* the 3,000 souls added on the Day of Pentecost devoted themselves to the prayers. Secondly, the believers were *προσκατεροῦντες*—*devoted* to the prayers. Prayer in this church was not merely routine recitation of prescribed prayers, but was a priority in which they persisted, adhered to with resolve and perseverance, and practiced with diligence.<sup>13</sup> Thirdly, they devoted

---

<sup>13</sup>Barrett, *Acts*, 1:162.

themselves to *ταῖς προσευχαῖς*—the prayers. The unusual construction of the plural with the definite article is taken by some to mean formal or set prayers as was customary in Judaism (cf. 3:1).<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Bock argues that Luke’s construction here is likely broad enough to include extemporaneous prayers, but specific enough to call attention to set times and forms of prayers as was practiced in the Temple and synagogues.<sup>15</sup> Barrett, however, asserts that we are left only to plausibly guess at Luke’s intention, yet he adds a parenthetical comment, “unless the plural is an intensive—they prayed more than others were accustomed to do.”<sup>16</sup> Barrett’s parenthetical comment is the more likely explanation of Luke’s unusual construction of *ταῖς προσευχαῖς*—they devoted themselves to intensive prayer—especially given the Lukan emphasis on prayer throughout Luke-Acts. Taken together, these textual nuances indicate that all of the believing community, including the newly-baptized, gave themselves persistently and devotedly to the practice of intensive prayer.

Luke is careful throughout the dual volumes of Luke-Acts to call attention to the primacy of prayer in the life of the believing community. The noun *προσευχή* appears thirty-six times in the NT, and twelve of those appearances are in Luke-Acts, with nine of the twelve appearing in Acts. Similarly, the verb form—*προσεύχομαι*—occurs eighty-five times in the NT, thirty-four times in Luke-Acts, with sixteen of those in Acts. Clearly Luke, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wishes to call attention to the

---

<sup>14</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, *Luke-Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 757. Longenecker asserts, “Luke’s use of the definite article and the plural in speaking of ‘the prayers’ (*tais proseuchais*, GK 4666) suggests formal prayers, probably both Jewish and Christian.” He later adds, “In addition, it is not difficult to envision them as praying extemporaneously, with those more informal prayers being built on past models—such as can be seen in Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Zechariah’s Benedictus (Lk 1:67-69), and Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis (Lk 2:28-32).”

<sup>15</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 151.

<sup>16</sup>Barrett, *Acts*, 1:166.

priority of prayer in the life of the early church. Indeed, the Lukan narrative in Acts is punctuated regularly with accounts of the prayer-life of the Jerusalem church and the mighty acts of God which accompanied their prayers.

Following immediately upon the closing pericope of Acts chapter two, the opening narrative of chapter three relates the account of Peter's healing of the lame beggar at the Temple gate. Luke informs us that this took place as Peter and John "were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1). In Judaism, the ninth hour, or 3 p.m., was one of three prescribed hours of prayer and the hour of the afternoon sacrifice, a time when the largest crowds would have gathered at the Temple.<sup>17</sup> While the act of prayer is only incidentally related to the healing of the lame man, this event points to the fact that the leaders of the Jerusalem church were committed to regularly appointed times of prayer. Such commitment led, in this case, to the powerful Petrine proclamation of the gospel to the marveling crowd gathered in Solomon's Portico, and five thousand men believed (cf. Acts 3:11-26; 4:4).

Peter's healing of the lame man and accompanying proclamation of the gospel of the resurrected Christ stirred the ire of the Temple authorities, and they arrested Peter and John and organized a hastily-called court to interrogate them the next day (cf. Acts 4:4-7). Although the boldness of the apostles astonished the rulers and elders, they threatened the duo with severe punishment if they continued to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. Upon Peter and John relating to the church the details of their arrest and interrogation, the church responded as follows:

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said,  
"Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

'Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?'

---

<sup>17</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 125.

The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (Acts 4:24-30)

Note the unity of their prayerful response—“ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἤραν φωνήν—together they lifted their voices.” Luke here uses language identical to Act 1:14 and 2:46 to highlight the togetherness wherewith they prayed to God. In unison the church acknowledged God’s sovereign rule over nature, nations and history. With one voice they confessed that the persecution they now faced was predestined by the good providence of God (cf. Acts 4:24-28).

Two petitions were offered by the church in this prayer. First, they besought God to “ἐπίδε ἐπὶ τὰς ἀπειλὰς αὐτῶν—look upon (or consider) their threats.” Here the church calls upon God to consider the threats of the Jewish authorities and act accordingly.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, the church petitions God for grace and courage to “μετὰ παρρησίας πάσης λαλεῖν τὸν λόγον σου—with all boldness continue speaking (God’s) word.” When the church prayed thus, Luke informs us, “the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). Here again we find the Jerusalem church committed to and unified in prayer as a first priority, resulting in yet another powerful outpouring and equipping work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke’s narrative in Acts repeatedly calls attention to the primacy of prayer in the life of this primitive church. In chapter six, the apostles task the church with selecting seven men of good reputation and full of the Spirit to attend the daily charitable

---

<sup>18</sup>Peterson, *Acts*, 201.

distribution. The compelling purpose for the selection of these assistants to the apostles was that the apostles might continually “devote themselves to *prayer* and the ministry of the word” (cf. Acts 6:2, 4). Again, note the Lukan use of the verb *προσκαρτερέω*—the apostles would devote themselves to prayer as a priority in which they would persist and persevere with all diligence (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42). Notice again the Lukan summary which informs us that “the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” subsequent to this action by the church that allowed the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the preaching of the word. The primacy of prayer is evident both in the leadership and the laity of the Jerusalem church.

Luke informs us of Peter and John going down to Samaria (that place to be avoided at all costs by every self-respecting Jew) to pray for those converted under Philip’s ministry (Acts 8:14-15). Saul of Tarsus was found praying immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:11). Peter prayed beside the corpse of Tabitha in Joppa and she was raised from the dead (Acts 9:40). Again Peter was praying on the rooftop of Simon the tanner in Joppa when Cornelius’ men came to fetch him to the centurion’s house for gospel purposes (cf. Acts 10:9-20; 11:5-18). When Peter was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa, the Jerusalem church prayed earnestly for him and God delivered Peter from prison and brought him to the very house where the church was praying (Acts 12:1-17). Saul and Barnabas were commissioned for their first and historic missionary excursion by the church at Antioch Syria after fasting and prayer (Acts 13:1-3).<sup>19</sup> Schnabel’s observation that “Luke points out repeatedly that the prayers of the church were a significant factor in the life and ministry of the earliest Christians” is an understatement.<sup>20</sup> Persistent, unflinching devotion to prayer was the heartbeat and driving force of the ministry and expansion of the church throughout the book of Acts.

---

<sup>19</sup>See also Acts 14:23; 16:13, 16, 25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 27:29; 28:8.

<sup>20</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 180.

In summary, the Jerusalem church was incubated and birthed during times of intensive, intentional prayer. This church was imbued with the immense power of the Holy Spirit through the medium of prayer. Both the laity of the church, including new converts, and the leadership were devoted to persistent, regular, and rigorous prayer. Prayer prefaced and buttressed every aspect of their ministry and growth. Prayer was their first and primary Kingdom discipline, and God was pleased to hear, answer and pour out his blessings upon the faithful prayer life of this fledgling community of believers.

The first church was undeniably a praying church.

### **A Worshiping Community**

The Lukan description of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 reveals a community of believers focused on the resurrected Lord Jesus and the prophetic Scriptures, celebrating their redemption through prayers, praise, service and fellowship. In a word, the Jerusalem church was a worshiping church whose collective adoration of the resurrected Christ Luke desired to commend to the church of all ages.

While the contemporary church tends to view worship as the distinctive activities engaged when the church meets together as a corporate entity, Luke's narrative here seems to describe the whole of their community life as believers. David Peterson supports this view when he asserts,

Some commentators regard the four elements specified in this verse (the apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer) as a primitive liturgical sequence, implying that their meetings regularly involved instruction, [table] fellowship, then the Lord's Supper and prayers. Acts 2:44-47, however, appears to be an expansion on this initial summary and some of the things mentioned here clearly took place at different times and in different places. Luke is giving a description of the ministry of these disciples to one another in a variety of contexts, not simply telling us what happened when they gathered for what we might call 'church.' Here is a brief portrayal of their community life as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 152. Peterson cites J. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pp.118-122, followed by I. H.

Whereas verse forty-two certainly describes elements of a liturgical form of worship, the following verses seem descriptive of worship that encompassed the whole life of the whole community. For these believers, worship and adoration of the risen Christ was a continual and characteristic function of how they conducted their entire lives.

The first form of this Christian worship noted by Luke is their devotion to “τῆ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων—the teaching of the apostles.” Both the apostles and the church regarded this function as a primary responsibility (cf. Acts 6:1-6). Such teaching was considered authoritative precisely because of its apostolicity. The leaders of the early church were the disciples who had followed Christ from the time of his baptism until the day of his ascension (cf. Acts 1:21-22). They were, therefore, intimately familiar with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Bruce rightly asserts, “The apostles’ teaching was authoritative because it was delivered as the teaching of the Lord *through* the apostles.”<sup>22</sup> Longenecker helpfully adds, “It (the apostles’ teaching) undoubtedly included a compilation of the words of Jesus (cf. 20:35), some account of his earthly ministry, passion, and resurrection (cf. 2:22-24), and a declaration of what all this meant for man’s redemption (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-5).”<sup>23</sup> This Christ-centeredness of the apostolic teaching is evident throughout the book of Acts as a feature of early church worship.<sup>24</sup> Coupling this Christo-centricity with the Christotelic treatments of the OT throughout the book of Acts

---

Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, pp. 204-206, and *Acts*, p. 83 as commentators who hold to Acts 2:42-47 representing a primitive liturgical order.

<sup>22</sup>Bruce, *Acts*, 100.

<sup>23</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 85.

<sup>24</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 178. Schnabel identifies the following Christocentric themes in the preaching in the book of Acts: “Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and Lord; the Son of David and God’s Servant; the holy and righteous Savior; the prophet like Moses and the judge of humankind; the necessity of repentance in view of God’s revelation in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus and in the bestowal of the Spirit of prophecy; God’s offer of salvation through Jesus, who is Israel’s Messiah and Lord, available only in personal allegiance to Jesus.”

(cf. 2:14-36; 7:2-53; 8:30-35; 13:15-41; 15:13-21), we can reasonably determine that early church worship centered upon the apostolic, Christocentric teaching of the completed OT canon and the developing NT canon.

Secondly, Luke informs us that the Jerusalem church worshiped by devoting themselves to “τῇ κοινωνίᾳ—the fellowship.” The inclusion of the definite article here indicates a uniqueness in the gatherings of the early church. Doubtless, their burgeoning size as a community set them apart in Jerusalem, but even more so, their commitment to Christ as the Messiah and Lord distinguished them as a group unlike any other in the city. Sharing the common experience of the promised and realized infilling of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8; 2:1-4), the Jerusalem church participated together in a life whose locus was anchored in the redemptive work of the crucified and risen Christ. Their common salvation found worshipful expression in the intimate sharing of their lives, their experiences, and their possessions (cf. Acts 2:44-45).

Thirdly, the Lukan narrative highlights the church’s worshipful posture by asserting that they “προσκατεροῦντες . . . τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου—devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread.” While scholarship is somewhat divided as to whether there is any eucharistic import in the author’s wording here, the community’s devotion to the practice likely indicates that the Lord’s Supper was observed. Longenecker maintains that Luke’s placement of this phrase between the religiously loaded terms “fellowship” and “prayer” indicates more than an ordinary meal.<sup>25</sup> Given this placement, Luke was likely indicating that the church shared common meals together in which they observed the Lord’s Supper during the course of the meal, much as Jesus did when introducing the Lord’s Supper during the Passover meal (cf. Luke 22:7-22; Acts 2:46). We see, therefore, that even common meals were infused with table fellowship and worshipful meaning as the early church remembered the sufferings of Christ with thanksgiving and praise.

---

<sup>25</sup>Longenecker, *Acts*, 86.

Finally, the historian characterizes the worshipful deportment of Christian community in terms of their devotion to “ταῖς προσευχαῖς—the prayers.” As noted above, the unusual use of the plural with the definite article emphasizes the primacy of prayer as a form of worship in which the fledgling community persistently prostrated themselves in a posture of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. While their prayer-life doubtlessly followed the Jewish tradition of appointed times and forms of prayer, it is also evident that extemporaneous, circumstance-driven prayers also characterized their worship and were powerfully influenced by the passion, resurrection and ascension of the Christ (cf. Acts 4:24-30).<sup>26</sup> Clearly, prayer was a characteristic and vital form of this fledgling community’s worship.

In conclusion, the book of Acts is replete with examples of these four elements of worship so essential to the multiplication and expansion of the Jerusalem community of believers. Indeed, Luke closely associates the outpouring of God’s blessings on the church with their worship. He closes the concluding pericope of Acts chapter two with the declaration that they were “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). In the similar summary following the shocking demise of Ananias and Sapphira—whose deceit would have undermined the purity of the church’s worship—Luke asserts, “None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And μᾶλλον—more than ever; to a greater degree—believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:13-14).

Again, in chapter six, the worship and unity of the body was threatened by the complaint of the Hellenists, and the apostles were immediately concerned to maintain the

---

<sup>26</sup>Bruce, *Acts*, 71. Bruce asserts, “As for the prayers in which they participated, the primary reference is no doubt to their own appointed seasons for united prayer, although we know that the apostles also attended the Jewish prayer services in the temple (cf. 3:1). The community’s prayers would follow Jewish models, but their content would be enriched because of the Christ-event.”

worship elements of the preaching of the word and prayer (cf. Acts 6:2-4). They counseled the church to select seven Spirit-filled men for administrative purposes, thus freeing the apostles to give all their attention to the worship in word and prayer. Luke summarizes the results of this worship-protecting directive, asserting that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). These summaries bear significant testimony that God was pleased to bless the Jerusalem church’s devotion to the worship of the risen Christ.

The first church was undeniably a worshipping church.

### **A Fellowshiping Community**

In addition to their devotion to the Kingdom priorities of prayer and worship, Luke highlights a third priority, namely the church’s “προσκαρτεροῦντες . . . τῇ κοινωνίᾳ—devotion to the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). The *κοινωνία* words in Greek typically signify a sharing or participating with someone in something that is greater than the relationship itself. Used in the context of the church, τῇ κοινωνίᾳ refers to the joint participation of believers in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:9), in the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 13:14), in the propagation of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:5), and in fellowship with one another (cf. 1 John 1:3).<sup>27</sup> Additionally, as evidenced in verses forty-four and forty-five, the fellowship of believers in the Jerusalem church included the voluntary selling and distribution of their possessions to provide for one another’s needs. In sum, the fellowship to which this church devoted herself was a fellowship of unity, sharing and joint participation in the glories of the risen Christ, the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, the propagation of the gospel, relationship with one another and ministry to one another.

Taken in context, the fellowship of the Jerusalem church centered upon several

---

<sup>27</sup>Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 153-54.

notable practices. First, the Lukan description indicates a church-wide unity and participation in the hearing and practice of the apostles' teaching (cf. Acts 2:41-42). Such fellowship around the word of God resulted in an increase in the influence of the word of God in the life of the church and in the lives of those outside the church hearing the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Acts 6:7; 12:24. See also 19:20; Col 1:5-6).

Secondly, their fellowship included the practice of breaking bread together daily in their homes with accompanying thanksgiving and praise (cf. Acts 2:42, 46-47). As argued above, this table fellowship likely included both the sharing of common meals and the concurrent observation of the Lord's Supper in emulation of Christ instituting the Supper during the Passover meal (cf. Acts 2:42, 46-47; Luke 22:7-22). We see, therefore, that their fellowship—wherein their hearts were bound more intimately together— included both the ordinary practice of eating meals together and in the remembering the sufferings of Christ and his New Covenant on their behalf.

Thirdly, their fellowship found expression as they devoted themselves to praying together corporately as a church (Acts 2:42). Luke offers several examples of the prayer fellowship of this early church. Upon Christ's ascension, the disciples joined together "with one accord . . . devoting themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (cf. Acts 1:14). They prayed corporately for guidance in seeking Judas' replacement among the twelve (cf. Acts 1:24-25). In obedience to Christ's command and in hope of Christ's promise, the church was praying together on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit powerfully filled every believer among them (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1-4). When threatened, the church prayed together for gospel boldness (Acts 4:24-30). The occasion of Peter's imprisonment by Herod drove the church to earnest corporate prayer (Acts 12:5, 12). The fellowship of prayer united the hearts and lives of these first Jesus-followers in an extraordinary way, and God was pleased to hear and answer their prayers.

Fourthly, these believers "εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινὰ . . . καὶ διεμέριζον αὐτὰ πᾶσιν

καθότι ἄν τις χρείαν εἶχεν—held all things in common . . . and were distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Such was their fellowship and unity that the believers gladly sold land and possessions as occasion arose to meet the needs of others within the church. Given the joyful and exuberant context, this was no communist impulse seeking material utopia, but was rather a function of their mutual care for one another in Christ. Their fellowship of mutual edification included ministering to one another’s material needs so that none among them lacked any necessary sustenance.

Fifthly, the Jerusalem church participated together in a fellowship of joy-filled thanksgiving and praise (cf. Acts 2:46-47). Their gatherings were marked by “ἀγαλλιᾶσαι . . . καρδίς—glad heart(s)”—that is, hearts filled with joy and exuberance and exultation. Doubtless, this joyfulness of heart arose from their mutual assurance of salvation through the crucified, resurrected, ascended Christ, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and newly-formed relationships with one another as a result of these soteriological realities.<sup>28</sup> Such joyful exuberance spilled over in them, and they were “αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν—praising God” daily in the Temple and in their homes (cf. Acts 2:47). Theirs was a fellowship of joyful praise as they glorified God in prayer, practice and proclamation of the good news of salvation.

In summary, the Jerusalem community of believers enjoyed fellowship around the table of God’s word, the table of shared meals that included regular observance of the Lord’s Supper and corporate, unified, circumstantial prayer. Additionally, their fellowship included ministry to one another’s needs and the fellowship of mutual, joyful and public thanksgiving and praise directed Godward. Again, God was pleased to continually multiply their numbers as the church practiced the Kingdom priority of Christian fellowship (cf. Acts 2:47).

The first church was undeniably a fellowshiping church.

---

<sup>28</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 183-84.

## A Ministering Community

Luke's compact account of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2:42-47 is pregnant with descriptors of a church vitally engaged in the work of ministry. From the signs and wonders performed by the apostles (cf. Acts 2:43) to the communal sharing of their personal possessions (cf. Acts 2:44-45) to the favor this church gained with those outside of her fellowship (cf. Acts 2:47), the Jerusalem church was a church purposefully engaged in the work of ministry. We will treat each of these passages individually to develop a more in-depth perspective of the nature of their ministry.

First, as this community of believers exploded onto the scene of life in the holy city, Luke informs us that “*Ἐγένετο πάσῃ ψυχῇ φόβος*—fear came upon every soul” (cf. Acts 2:43). The word fear here likely carries more the connotation of awe rather than stark terror, though some terror may have existed (cf. Acts 5:1-13). It seems apparent that Luke is setting “every soul” in contradistinction to “all who believed” in verse forty-four. While one might question whether every soul in Jerusalem was in awe of the Christian community—Luke is speaking in marginally hyperbolic terms here—it is hardly questionable that most who were aware of the divine activity taking place among this community of believers were awed and regarded with reverence the mighty hand of God upon them.<sup>29</sup>

We learn that at least part of the reason for such awe was the ministry of the apostles as they performed “*πολλά τε τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα*—many wonders and miracles” (cf. Acts 2:43).<sup>30</sup> Doubtlessly, given Luke's assertion that the wonders and miracles were

---

<sup>29</sup>Longenecker, *Acts*, 86. Longenecker asserts, “‘Everyone’ (*pase psyche*), in contradistinction to ‘all the believers’ (*pantes hoi pisteusantes*) of v. 44 refers hyperbolically to nonbelievers in Jerusalem who knew of the events of Pentecost and were observing the life of the early congregation in the months that followed.”

<sup>30</sup>Bruce, *Acts*, 71. Bruce notes, “God was at work among them; they were witnessing the dawn of the new age. This impression was intensified by the wonders and signs performed through the apostles. The words of Joel which Peter had quoted at the outset of his address declared that the ‘great and notable day’ would be heralded by ‘wonders in heaven above’ and ‘signs on earth below.’ . . . And just as the miracles of Jesus when he was on earth were ‘signs’ of the kingdom of God, those performed through his apostles partook of the same character (cf. 3:6).” While the examples of the accompanying miraculous signs and wonders considered in this section should not be expected in the post-apostolic age, the miracle

“many,” he recorded but an exemplary few of these supernatural acts, but the few he does record give us insight into the power of the ministry of this first church. In Acts chapter three, Peter miraculously ministered to and healed a lame beggar—who then leaped and walked and praised God—at the gate of the Temple (cf. Acts 3:1-10). This event filled the crowd with wonder and yielded a stunned audience for Peter’s fruitful ministry of the gospel of the risen Christ in Solomon’s Portico (cf. Acts 3:11-26; 4:4).

After being arrested, threatened and released—and experiencing a house-shaking manifestation of the Spirit as the church prayed for gospel boldness—Luke informs us that “δυνάμει μεγάλη ἀπεδίδουν τὸ μαρτύριον οἱ ἀπόστολοι τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ—with great power the apostles continued giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). Here we see apostolic faithfulness to continue ministering the gospel in the face of real and present danger, and their ministry of the gospel was graced with exceeding (μεγάλη) power.

Yet again the Sadducees sought to silence the gospel ministry of the apostles, arrested them, and placed them in the public prison (cf. Acts 5:17-18). An angel of the Lord appeared in the night, opened the doors of the prison, and instructed the apostles to return to the Temple and continue proclaiming the gospel. When the sun rose the next morning, the apostles, to the consternation of their antagonists, were found in the Temple teaching the gospel (cf. Acts 5:19-21).<sup>31</sup> Here again we find the ministry of the gospel advanced through miraculous intervention.

Secondly, Luke informs us that the members of the Jerusalem church “ἦσαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινά—were together and had all things in common” (cf. Acts

---

of the new birth that accompanies the proclamation of the gospel should still inspire awe in those who observe this transformative, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>31</sup>Polhill, *Acts*, 164. Polhill comments, “The Sanhedrin was totally thwarted in its designs, totally helpless to control the situation. All was in God’s hands. The only reason the apostles finally appeared before the Council was their own willingness to do so. And they were willing to do so because the events of the night had convinced them once more that they were very much in God’s hands.”

2:44). A sense of togetherness (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ—see Grk. Acts 1:15; 2:1)<sup>32</sup> in the providences and mighty acts of God produced a ministry of mutual care among these believers. While a pooling of resources and joint ownership of possessions was not uncommon among ancient sects, the first Christian fellowship practiced a distinctive, needs-based ministry approach.<sup>33</sup> Both verse forty-five of chapter three and Acts 4:34-37 indicate that possessions were voluntarily sold as need arose, and distribution was, initially, made by the apostles themselves. The depth of this church's fellowship and unity found expression in the entire community using their material possessions to minister to the needs of one another so that none of the thousands of their members lacked any necessary sustenance.

Predictably, given the continual increase of the number of disciples, a dispute arose between the Hellenists—the Greek-speaking Jews—and the Hebrews because the Hellenists' believed their widows were being slighted by the apostles in the daily distribution of food (cf. Acts 4:34-35; Acts 6:1). The apostles counseled the church to set aside seven men of good reputation to administer the daily distribution and thus relieve the apostles of this monumental task (cf. Acts 6:2-4). Being pleased with this counsel, the entire church chose men for the daily distribution, and this vital ministry of the church was thus rescued from factionalism (cf. Acts 6:5-6). Note the evident pleasure of God

---

<sup>32</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 151. Bock acknowledges the difficulty of translating the phrase: “The expression of their being “together” (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ, *epi to auto*) recalls the unity depicted in 1:15 and 2:1. This expression is repeated in verse 47 (4:26 completes the occurrences in Acts, five of ten in the NT). It is disputed how to translate this phrase, but “together” or “at the same place” is likely (BDAG 363 §1cβ).”

<sup>33</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 87. Marshall asserts, “The first impression we get, then, is that of a society whose members lived together and had everything *in common* (4:33). This would not be surprising, since we know that at least one other contemporary Jewish group, the Qumran sect, adopted this way of life (1QS 6); in their descriptions of the Essenes (with whom the Qumranites are usually identified) Philo and Josephus say the same thing . . . It appears from the account in 4:32–5:11, however, that the selling of one's goods was a voluntary matter . . . What actually happened may have been that each person held his goods at the disposal of the others whenever the need arose.”

that this ministry continued unabated as Luke informs us that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7).

Thirdly, Luke records that the congregation of believers was “ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν—having favor with all the people” (cf. Acts 2:47). The favor shown the early church by the inhabitants of Jerusalem speaks to their observable piety and generosity of ministry. Externally, as noted above, the apostles ministered the word and the gospel unwaveringly. Internally, the Jerusalem church modeled a ministry of mutual care and provision that elicited respect from all who observed. Internal factions failed to derail the congregation’s ministerial commitment to serve the needs of one another. Externally, the continued, congregation-wide commitment to the ministry of the gospel elicited yet another outpouring of God’s blessing: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (cf. Acts 2:5-12; 2:47).

The first church was undeniably a ministering church.

### **An Evangelizing Community**

The evangelistic commitment of the Jerusalem church is evidenced at least twice in the descriptive pericope of Acts 2:42-47. First, the congregation was “καθ’ ἡμέραν τε προσκαρτεροῦντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ—daily attending the Temple together” (cf. Acts 2:44; 3:1, 11; 5:12, 20-21, 42). Temple attendance reflected their Jewish context, but the first Christians were using the Temple precinct as a platform for proclamation of the gospel of the risen Christ. Secondly, the Christian congregation “ἔχοντες χάριν—had favor or respect” with all the people observing them, resulting in the Lord adding to their number daily (cf. Acts 2:47; 5:12-13). We will treat these brief Lukan assertions in reverse order.

First, the favor or respect enjoyed by the Jerusalem congregation finds its genesis in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit experienced on the Day of Pentecost. When the 120 disciples were filled with the Spirit, they spilled out of the upper room and into

the streets of Jerusalem. To the astonishment of the gathering crowd, Jesus's disciples began proclaiming the mighty, redemptive works of God in the native languages of the remarkably diverse gathering (cf. Acts 2:6, 11).<sup>34</sup> Luke identified no less than fifteen different dialects who were hearing the gospel in their native language (cf. Acts 2:9-10). While some desired to know the meaning of this phenomenon, others mocked and claimed the disciples were inebriated (cf. Acts 2:12-13). Peter answered both groups by explaining the phenomenon by means of exegeting the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, and from that text proclaiming the gospel of the risen Christ (cf. Acts 2:14-36). Three thousand souls repented, received baptism, and were added to the church (cf. Acts 2:41). Doubtless, the evangelistic proclamation of the gospel by the 120 disciples and subsequent conversion of such a significant number gained the favor and respect of the throngs present in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:47; 5:12-13).

Additionally, Luke's entire description of the Jerusalem church points to a spiritual wholesomeness that necessarily produced a gospel winsomeness. Their transformative community-life of prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry and discipleship was a visible and compelling element of their gospel witness.<sup>35</sup> The faithful practice of these Kingdom priorities produced a spiritually salubrious community that quickly gained the favor and respect of God-fearing Jews (cf. Acts 2:47; 5:13; 6:7). In a word, the first church's spiritual vitality gained for them an audience receptive to their evangelistic message.

---

<sup>34</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 120. Schnabel comments concerning the content of the disciples' proclamation in these variegated languages: "The second part of v. 11 describes the content of what the believers were saying, miraculously, in the languages of the diaspora Jews who had come to Jerusalem from all corners of the earth. They speak about "the mighty deeds" (τὰ μεγαλεῖα) of God, i.e., they proclaim God's new intervention in history—the powerful salvation through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Israel's Messiah."

<sup>35</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 155. Bock observes: "Their life as a community was a visible part of their testimony. In sharing Christ, they also gave of themselves. One can share Christ not only by what one says about him but also by showing the transformation that following him brings about."

Secondly, while Luke does not give us the exact location in Jerusalem where this first church-wide proclamation of the gospel took place, he does reveal that a pattern of gospel proclamation in the Temple precincts developed shortly thereafter. The congregation's practice of “καθ' ἡμέραν τε προσκαρτεροῦντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ—daily attending the Temple together” gave them a platform from which they proclaimed the mighty, redemptive works of God (cf. Acts 2:11, 45; 3:1, 11; 5:12, 20-21, 42). We recall that Luke's account in Acts 2:42-47 is descriptive of the activity of the whole congregation, therefore we may reasonably surmise that the entire church participated in the proclamation of the gospel both in the streets and *agoras* of Jerusalem and in the Temple precincts. Though the Temple was the scene of increasing hostility by the authorities to their proclamation of the gospel, these first disciples did not relent. Indeed, they counted their suffering for the sake of the gospel an honor, and they refused to cease proclaiming that Jesus was the Christ (cf. Acts 4; 5:17-20, 40-42).

Further, the gospel impulse of the church is evidenced in Stephen's sermon that led to his stoning, Philip's gospel outreach in Samaria that led to much joy and conversion, and his individual encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (cf. Acts 7; 8:1-8, 26-38). In fulfillment of Jesus's assertion that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, the Jerusalem church—indeed, the whole Jerusalem church—was evangelistically fervent and irrepensible.

The first church was undeniably an evangelizing church.

### **A Discipling Community**

While all the practices of these first disciples were formative for believers, Luke's assertion that they were “προσκαρτεροῦντες τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων—devoted to the apostles' teaching” points us to the most formative aspect of conformity to Christ (cf. Acts 2:42). As noted above, the leaders of the early church were the apostles who had followed Christ from the time of his baptism until the day of his ascension (cf. Acts 1:21-

22), and were, therefore, intimately familiar with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. These first Christ-followers demonstrated a single-minded fidelity to the teachings of Christ as transmitted through the twelve apostles.

The apostles' daily teaching certainly included anthologies of the words of Jesus (cf. 20:35), didactic accounts of his earthly ministry, passion, and resurrection (cf. 2:22-24), and declarations of the redemptive import of Christ's cross-work and resurrection (cf. Acts 3:12-26). This Christ-centeredness of the apostolic teaching is evident throughout Luke's record.<sup>36</sup> Coupling this Christo-centricity with the Christotelic treatments of the OT throughout the book of Acts (cf. 2:14-36; 7:2-53; 8:30-35; 13:15-41; 15:13-21), we can reasonably determine that early church discipleship centered upon the apostolic, Christocentric teaching of the completed OT canon and the developing NT canon.

Luke's imperfect periphrastic construction indicates that the early believers persistently and constantly devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.<sup>37</sup> That is, they committed themselves to a continually increasing understanding and diligent practice of what they heard the apostles teach. Instruction was integral to the formation of this new community of Christ-followers, and Luke indicates that all members were thus instructed for this new life and witness as the living church of Jesus Christ. One cannot but recall the Great Commission Jesus delivered to his disciples as he instructed them to make disciples, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20). The apostles served as living, instructive conduits, transmitting the teachings of Christ to

---

<sup>36</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 178. Schnabel identifies the following Christocentric themes in the preaching in the book of Acts: "Jesus is Israel's Messiah and Lord; the Son of David and God's Servant; the holy and righteous Savior; the prophet like Moses and the judge of humankind; the necessity of repentance in view of God's revelation in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus and in the bestowal of the Spirit of prophecy; God's offer of salvation through Jesus, who is Israel's Messiah and Lord, available only in personal allegiance to Jesus."

<sup>37</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 177.

the now-burgeoning congregation of believers. When we consider that for the span of approximately three years the Lord Jesus taught his disciples both day and night, we may easily surmise that the apostles were bursting with instructions for the new believers comprising the Jerusalem church.

Further, as the Jerusalem church practiced the Kingdom priorities delineated in Acts 2:42-47, the practice of these priorities was itself didactic in nature. Devotion to prayer disciplined new believers to commune with and supplicate the almighty, sovereign God (cf. Acts 1:14, 24-25; 4:24-30; 12:12). Devotion to the fellowship of believers disciplined new believers in the joys of Christian unity and participation together in the blessings of the New Covenant. Breaking bread together in observance of Christ's sufferings disciplined new believers concerning the glories of Christ's salvific suffering and resurrection. Faithful evangelism disciplined new believers to become powerful witnesses to the gospel of the risen Christ. In a word, the Jerusalem church was a school of Christ wherein every function of the church trained new believers to become disciples of Christ.

The first church was undeniably a discipling church.

In summary of early church practice, the Jerusalem church was a praying congregation, a worshiping congregation, a fellowshipping congregation, a ministering congregation, an evangelizing congregation and a discipling congregation. When these Kingdom priorities are considered, it is not incidental that both individually and as a collective they find their genesis in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

When pressed to identify the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus responded with a concise summary of the first table of the Ten Commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

mind. This is the great and first commandment” (cf. Matt 22:37-38; Deut 6:5).<sup>38</sup> Given the Christocentric emphasis of the apostles’ doctrine and the Jerusalem church’s devotion thereto delineated above, the congregation’s attentiveness to prayer and worship doubtless arose from Jesus’s postulation of the first and greatest commandment so central in the OT documents. Consistent, exultant, dependent prayer and regular, adulatory, reverential worship encompassing all their faculties characterized the Jerusalem church’s engagement with God.

After identifying the Great Commandment, Jesus further asserted, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” efficiently summarizing the second table of the Ten Commandments (cf. Matt 22:39; Lev 19:18, 34).<sup>39</sup> The Jerusalem church practices of fellowship and ministry reflect the imperative of Jesus’s second-table summary concerning love for neighbors. Intimate fellowship and selfless ministry characterized this congregation’s love for their neighbors and reflected their obedience to Christ’s assertion of the second commandment that is like unto the first.

Finally, speaking from the basis of his supreme and all-encompassing authority after his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus gave to the church of all ages the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name

---

<sup>38</sup>John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 909. Commenting on this passage, Nolland rightly asserts: “The call to love God has a strong OT pedigree; it occurs no fewer than ten times in Deuteronomy alone (admittedly a place of special concentration). In the Gospel pericope, ‘“Your heart” denotes a response to God from the innermost personal center of one’s being; “your life” (“soul”) conjures up the role of the life force that energises us; ... “your mind” signals the inclusion of the thinking and planning processes. The challenge is to a comprehensive engagement with God with the total capacity of all of one’s faculties.’”

<sup>39</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 558. Morris helpfully comments: “Wholehearted love for God means coming in some measure to see other people as God sees them, and all people as the objects of God’s love. Therefore anyone who truly loves God with all his being must and will love others, and this is expressed in the commandment, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*,” a commandment that is repeated in the Pentateuch . . . The combination was not unknown in Judaism; thus we find, for example, “Keep the Law of God, my children.... Love the Lord and your neighbor” (Test. Iss. 5:1–2; see also 7:6; Test. Dan 5:3) . . . But, of course, Luke tells us of a lawyer who gave much the same summary (Luke 10:25–28).”

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (cf. Dan 7:13-14; Matt 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-48). Whereas the making of disciples both presupposes and includes evangelism,<sup>40</sup> the early church practices of evangelism and discipleship, as delineated above, flow out of the timeless fountainhead of the Great Commission given to the church by her Lord, Jesus Christ.

We see, therefore, that this six-fold panoply of Kingdom priorities practiced by the first congregation at Jerusalem emerges from the imperatives of both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. When we combine the imperative nature of these disciplines, the early church practice of these disciplines, and the apparent blessing of God upon the practice of these disciplines, we are convinced that the recovery of these disciplines is paradigmatic for church revitalization in the twenty-first century. We turn now to an introductory consideration of the Pauline appropriation and advancement of this paradigm.

### **The Pauline Paradigm**

The apostle Paul’s understanding of the priorities and practices of the Jerusalem church is integral to the thesis of this dissertation. While Scripture nowhere explicitly states such, two evident realities point to the strong probability that Paul did indeed observe this original congregation’s practice of the Kingdom priorities above delineated. First, he clearly had intensive interaction with the Jerusalem church both prior

---

<sup>40</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 432. Blomberg rightly points to the evangelism necessitated by the Great Commission in commenting on this passage: “The verb ‘make disciples’ also commands a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: ‘baptizing’ them and ‘teaching’ them obedience to all of Jesus’s commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.”

to and shortly after his conversion wherein he would have closely observed their practices. Additionally, significant portions of the Pauline corpus address in explicit detail each of these six priorities. We will treat each of these points individually to make the case that Paul both appropriated and significantly advanced the paradigm evidenced in Acts 2:42-47.

As an inveterate persecutor of the early church, Saul of Tarsus was present and consented to the execution of Stephen (cf. Acts 7:58; 8:1). Because the witnesses against Stephen in his trial before the Sanhedrin for the charge of blasphemy laid their garments at the feet of Saul, we know he was likely an eyewitness to the trial, and, therefore, to the nature of the dispute between the Jewish authorities and the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 7:58; 2:20).<sup>41</sup>

Subsequent to Stephen's stoning, Saul ravaged the church by entering their homes and arresting both men and women, even going so far as to obtain letters of authority from the high priest to extend his zealous persecution to the synagogues and Christian homes of Damascus (cf. Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 26:10, 12; Gal 1:13). As a co-conspirator in the persecution and prosecution of Christians, Saul was likely well-informed of the contention of the Jewish authorities with the Jerusalem church concerning their remarkably successful evangelism and discipleship (cf. Acts 4:1-21; 5:17-42; 8:58; 26:11).<sup>42</sup> Additionally, having often entered their houses to arrest believers, Saul would have almost certainly been exposed to their practice of prayer, Christ-worship, fellowship and ministry. As a commissioned agent of the Jewish leaders,

---

<sup>41</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 315.

<sup>42</sup>Bruce, *Acts*, 164. Bruce maintains that the evangelistic message of the Jerusalem church was the source of Saul's bitter angst against the church: "A zealot for the ancestral traditions of his nation, he saw that the new faith menaced those traditions. Drastic action was called for: these people, he thought, were not merely misguided enthusiasts whose sincere embracing of error called for patient enlightenment; they were deliberate impostors, proclaiming that God had raised from the tomb to be Lord and Messiah a man whose manner of death was sufficient to show that the divine curse rested on him."

tasked with tracking down Christians to arrest, interrogate and punish, Saul was likely thorough in his reconnaissance—and therefore familiar with the practices—of the movement he was persecuting.

Further, after his stunning conversion on the road to Damascus, Saul proclaimed Christ as Messiah and began making disciples (cf. Acts 9:3-20). He quickly grew in the faith to the point of utterly confounding the Jews in Damascus, some of whom covertly planned to assassinate Saul (cf. Acts 9:22-23). Discovering their plot, Saul escaped the city and fled to Jerusalem, having spent approximately three years in Arabia and Damascus (cf. Acts 9:24-26; Gal 1:15-18).<sup>43</sup> For a period of fifteen days Saul met with Peter and James in what was likely an intensive period of discussion, prayer and worship together.<sup>44</sup> Although this visit was brief, the conversations with Peter and James and the consequent meetings with the gathered church would have been more than adequate to acquaint him with the church's paradigmatic emphasis on prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, evangelism and discipleship.

Finally, the Pauline corpus bears significant testimony related to the priorities and practice of the Jerusalem church delineated in Acts 2:42-47. Based on raw word-counts, the apostle Paul is credited with writing approximately twenty-six percent of the NT. Taken on the basis of the number of books, Pauline authorship is evidenced in no less than thirteen of the twenty-seven books comprising the NT.<sup>45</sup> Paul's contribution to

---

<sup>43</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 455. Schnabel dates this Arabia/Damascus period from 32-34 A.D.

<sup>44</sup>Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 127. George notes: "For fifteen days Paul was a house guest of Peter in Jerusalem. How we would like to have been a fly on the wall during their dinner conversations! Paul did not need to be taught the gospel from Peter (1:12); he had already received this message along with his commission from the risen Christ himself. Still, he must have been vitally interested in Peter's account of the earthly life of Jesus, his miracles and teachings, his death and resurrection." Given the practice of the Jerusalem church of meeting together every day, Paul would have been exposed repeatedly to the practice and priorities of the church during this brief visit.

<sup>45</sup>The book of Hebrews is excluded in these calculations.

the NT, therefore, is quite disproportionate when considered in relation to the contributions of the original twelve apostles. This disproportionality is all the more remarkable when one considers that substantial portions of the Pauline corpus *directly address the six Kingdom priorities evidenced in Acts 2:42-47*. While the categories of prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, evangelism and discipleship are admittedly broad, the corpus of the inspired writings of Paul dedicated to these priorities is extraordinary, as we will demonstrate in the following chapters. In a word, it is not coincidental that the apostle dedicated such a significant portion of his letters to addressing these disciplines.

A foundational thesis of this dissertation is that the apostle Paul both appropriated and significantly promoted and advanced the paradigmatic practices of the Jerusalem church. Paul's vision of a healthy, well-grounded church included the right and devoted practice of prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, evangelism and discipleship. Given the entropy present in churches as a result of the fallenness of all creation, Paul was concerned to counter the natural tendency of churches toward plateau and decline with exhortations to faithfulness and consistency in the practice of these six Kingdom priorities. This was Paul's paradigm for church revitalization, and we may reasonably surmise that he began applying this paradigm in his strengthening of the churches during all three of his recorded missionary journeys.

### **Summary**

In summary of this chapter, we have established that the priorities and practices of the Jerusalem church evidenced in Acts 2:42-47 were intended by the author as prescriptive—and therefore normative—for the church of all ages. We have observed that the early church consistently practiced the disciplines of prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, evangelism and discipleship throughout the book of Acts. We have demonstrated that Luke is careful to regularly punctuate his description of the Jerusalem church practices with assertions that God was pleased to bless their faithfulness with both

spiritual and numerical growth. Additionally, we have established that these Kingdom priorities arise self-evidently from Christ's pronouncement of the Great Commandment and Great Commission, and that these practices would have been part and parcel of the apostles' teaching.

Finally, we have presented argumentation that the apostle Paul observed the practices and priorities of the first church both prior to and following his conversion. When coupled with Luke's thorough treatment of these disciplines, Paul's subsequent adoption of these practices and his epistolary emphasis in promoting and refining them raise these disciplines to paradigmatic status for the church of all ages. The apostle consistently calls the churches of the NT back to these essential priorities in his epistolary addresses. Indeed, the Pauline corpus provides for us an inspired, sufficient and timeless paradigm for church revitalization that addresses both diagnostically and prescriptively every cause of church decline present in the contemporary church.

Consequently, the Acts record and Paul's treatment of the disciplines of prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, evangelism and discipleship as the scriptural means of church revitalization and renewal will serve as the structure for the next six chapters of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4  
THE PRIMACY OF PRAYER IN CHURCH  
REVITALIZATION

Prayer is the vital heartbeat of the church by which she communes with her Redeemer and thereby lays her hands on the lever that upholds and moves the universe. Charles Haddon Spurgeon rightly judged the primacy of prayer in the life of the church when he asserted, “The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge of the amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of his absence will be slothfulness in prayer.”<sup>1</sup> Biblically informed prayer is a measure of the Holy Spirit’s presence with a church, and the Holy Spirit’s presence with a church ultimately determines her effectiveness as a church.

Most churches experiencing spiritual and statistical decline have drifted from an intentional congregational prayer-life. Indeed, Aaron Earls reports that only forty-five percent of U. S. Protestant pastors reported still holding Wednesday night prayer meetings.<sup>2</sup> Such drift is usually gradual to the point of being imperceptible, but the effects of prayerlessness are deadly and observable. Richard F. Lovelace presaged the milieu of

---

<sup>1</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best: Over 2200 Striking Quotations from the World's Most Exhaustive and Widely-Read Sermon Series*, compiled by Tom Carter (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 155.

<sup>2</sup>Aaron Earls, *Wednesday Night Still a Church Night for Most Congregations* (Lifeway Research, 2019), <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/09/10/vast-majority-of-churches-still-have-wednesday-night-activities/>. Despite the title of this article, the research cited indicates that very few of the “activities” reported were for the gathered church, but were rather demographically segregated activities that divide rather than unify the fellowship of the church. It is also notable that several of the “activities” reported have little to do with the biblical priorities of the church

the declining twenty-first century church when he wrote in 1979,

Ask evangelicals what the most essential condition of revival is and they are most likely to point to prayer. In much of the church's life in the 20th century, however, in both Evangelical and non-Evangelical circles, the place of prayer has become limited and almost vestigial. The proportion of horizontal communication that goes on in the church (in planning, arguing and expounding) is overwhelmingly greater than that which is vertical (in worship, thanksgiving, confession and intercession). Critically important committee meetings are begun and ended with formulary prayers, which are ritual obligations and not genuine expressions of dependence—when problems and arguments ensue, they are seldom resolved by further prayer, but are wrangled out on the battlefield of human discourse.<sup>3</sup>

It is undeniable that the marginalization of prayer in the life of the church that was “almost vestigial” in the later quarter of the twentieth century has become characteristic of many churches in the twenty-first century. Writing in 2016, J. Gary Millar voiced a troubling concern that many sense—but seldom articulate—when he stated flatly, “I am concerned that the evangelical church is slowly but surely giving up on prayer.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, given the lamentable condition of so many churches today, we would argue that spiritual plateau and decline are directly correlational to the marginalization of prayer in the life of the church.

A praying church, conversely, may reasonably expect the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit to consistently refresh, strengthen and revitalize the church. The conclusion that prayer is indispensable to the work of church revitalization is virtually unanimous in the contemporary literature. Andrew M. Davis states, “The more the people of a church pray, the more revitalized the church will become.”<sup>5</sup> In citing the primacy of

---

<sup>3</sup>Richard F. Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 153.

<sup>4</sup>J. Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 231. Millar goes on to argue that evangelical prayerlessness is a product of the relative ease of twenty-first century life, the time-draining effects of the communication revolution, the rise of bible study groups where prayer is marginalized, the abundance and availability of sound teaching that leads to a false sense of independency, the rise of evangelical pragmatism, and the vacuum created by postmodern cynicism.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 99.

preaching and prayer in the work of church revitalization, Brian Croft posits, “The centrality of the ministry of the word must be bathed in prayer for it to have its maximum impact on God’s people and bring true, lasting spiritual life to the church.”<sup>6</sup> Recounting his observations of God revitalizing churches across the United States, Mark Clifton notes, “All of their work and decision making (centers) around prayer. Nothing happens in a dying church until we learn to pray.”<sup>7</sup>

After studying more than 7,000 churches across the country, Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer conclude, “A prayerful dependence is evident in Transformational Churches. These churches are humbly dependent on God for the vitality of the church. . . . Prayer undergirds everything a Transformational Church does. . . . Prayer is the engine of Transformational Churches.”<sup>8</sup> After reviewing the efficacy of prayer in Scripture, Harry L. Reeder concludes, “If you want to see (God’s) awesome power at work in revitalizing your church, you must pray.”<sup>9</sup> Survey respondents from “Comeback Churches” rated prayer as the most instrumental factor in their revitalization.<sup>10</sup> One would be hard-pressed to find a contemporary church revitalization author that does not identify prayer as an essential element of revitalization and renewal. More importantly, Scripture is clear that prayer is crucial to the health and vitality of the local church.

The objective of this chapter is to establish the primacy of prayer in the work

---

<sup>6</sup>Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 54.

<sup>7</sup>Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 23.

<sup>8</sup>Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 125.

<sup>9</sup>Harry L. Reeder and David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2004), 95.

<sup>10</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 200.

of church renewal and revitalization. First, we will establish a working definition of prayer and an apologetic for why we must pray. We will secondly consider the preeminent role of prayer—and the astonishing results thereof—in the first church at Jerusalem. Thirdly, we will demonstrate from the Pauline corpus the supremacy of prayer in the thought, practice and exhortations of Paul. Finally, we will consider the necessity of prayer in relation to the revitalization of churches in the twenty-first century.

### **The What and Why of Prayer**

To pray is a virtually universal human impulse. This reality is not surprising from the Christian perspective, for all humankind was created to bear the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). We were created for dependent relationship with our Creator, and in some sense prayer is the instinctive cry of the dependent creature to the omnipotent Creator. John Calvin noted this *divinitatis sensum*, this instinctive sense of the divine, when he wrote, “That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself . . . has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead” (cf. Rom 1:18-20).<sup>11</sup> Despite the Fall, this remaining vestige of the *divinitatis sensum* compels men everywhere to cry out to a higher Being, regardless of how uninformed men may be of that Being’s nature and character.

Timothy Keller, working from the *divinitatis sensum*, defines prayer as “a personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God.”<sup>12</sup> Edward M. Bounds grounded his definition of prayer in faith when he asserted, “In the ultimate issue, prayer is simply faith, claiming its natural yet marvelous prerogatives—faith taking possession of its illimitable inheritance.”<sup>13</sup> John F. MacArthur emphasizes the relational aspect of

---

<sup>11</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1.3.1.

<sup>12</sup>Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 45.

<sup>13</sup>Edward M. Bounds, *The Necessity of Prayer* (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2018), 1.

prayer when he states, “The essence of prayer is talking to God as you would to a beloved parent. It is intimate and loving communication.”<sup>14</sup> R. Albert Mohler similarly asserts, “(Prayer) is our opportunity to commune with the Creator and Redeemer who loves us.”<sup>15</sup>

These definitions are helpful, but each is limited in its perspective. Keller’s definition rightly offers the perspective of knowledge of God in relation to prayer, but mentions nothing of faith in relation to prayer. Bounds’ definition maintains the perspective of faith, but offers no insight into the relational aspect of prayer. MacArthur highlights the perspective of relational intimacy in prayer, but mentions nothing of the knowledge and faith aspects of prayer. Taken comparatively, these definitions of prayer—all of which are profoundly insightful insofar as what they articulate—demonstrate the definitional elusiveness of prayer. As always, we must turn to holy writ for a clear and comprehensive definition of prayer.

Prayer has a long and distinguished history in Scripture, dating to the antediluvian period when sin had begun to permeate creation. The first evident reference to prayer appears in Genesis 4:26—“To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.” It is not coincidental that Moses’ assertion is tightly connected to the *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 wherein God promised a Satan-crushing, sin-conquering Seed of the woman.

The birth of Seth, son of Adam and Eve, and the subsequent birth of Enosh, grandson of Adam and Eve, came on the heels of the dark days of Cain’s murderous hatred of Abel. The war between the offspring of Satan and the godly offspring of the woman began in earnest as the consequences of our first parents’ sin and rebellion against

---

<sup>14</sup>John F. MacArthur Jr., *Lord, Teach Me to Pray: An Invitation to Intimate Prayer* (Nashville: J. Countryman, 2003), 9.

<sup>15</sup>R. Albert Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 17.

God began to emerge in subsequent generations. Cain murdered Abel and was consequently driven from the face and presence of God (cf. Gen 4:1-16). Cain's descendants began to urbanize the earth, but were characterized by their father's bloodlust (cf. Gen 4:17-24). The hope of Genesis 3:15 seemed lost—until the birth of Seth, and then Enosh. The godly line of the offspring of the woman was resumed and the hope of redemption revived. In this context, Moses informs us, people began to call upon the name of *Yahweh*.<sup>16</sup>

What, precisely, does the phrase “call upon the name of יהוה? (*Yahweh*)” mean? The contexts of the first and subsequent uses of the phrase in the OT are instructive. People began to call upon the name of *Yahweh* in Genesis 4:26 in renewed hope of the promise of a sin-conquering Redeemer (cf. Gen 4:26; 3:15). In a word, the first overt mention of prayer in Scripture depicts people crying out to God to accomplish that which he had already promised in the *protoevangelium*. The first prayers in Genesis were gospel-centric.

The next two occurrences of someone calling on the name of *Yahweh* are Genesis 12:8 and 13:4. In the former, Abraham built an altar and prayed to *Yahweh* in response to his redemptive promises. In the latter, Abraham renewed his faith-commitment to the covenant promises by calling on the name of *Yahweh* (cf. Gen 12:1-3, 7-8; 13:1-4). Later, Abraham planted a memorial tree in Beersheba and “called there upon the name of *Yahweh*” when he received title to land in Canaan from Abimelech—

---

<sup>16</sup>Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 293. Mathews rightly asserts, “‘Called on the name of the LORD’ in 4:26b unites the Lord of the patriarchs and of Moses with the Lord of the antediluvian line of promise through Seth and shows thereby that the spiritual ancestors of Abraham’s family were those descended through Noah, the survivor of the flood’s purge. Whereas Cain was alienated from the “LORD’S presence” (4:16), the Sethite clan practiced and declared the word of the Lord.<sup>339</sup> The account infers that the Cainite family perished altogether in the catastrophic flood, but the tiny remnant of the Sethite line emerged from the ark to perpetuate its spiritual birthright (9:1–17). This final note in the *tōlēdōt* section of 2:4–4:26 offers at last a bright spot among the dim accounts of sin and death that have dominated the garden story. There is yet hope for sinful humanity.”

again crying out to the God of the *protoevangelium* (cf. Gen 3:15; 12:1-4; 22:25-33). In the only other occurrence of the phrase in Genesis, Isaac built an altar in Beersheba and “called upon the name of *Yahweh*” in response to God’s restatement of the covenant promise made to Abraham (Gen 26:25). In the words of J. Gary Millar, “To call on the name of *Yahweh* in Genesis, then, is to respond to God’s promise-making initiative by asking him to act to fulfill his promises.”<sup>17</sup>

Each occurrence of the phrase “called upon the name of *Yahweh*” in the OT appears in connection with the redemptive, covenant promises of God. At the Mount Carmel face-off between God’s prophet and the false prophets of Baal, Elijah challenged his opponents, “You call on the name of your god, and *I will call upon the name of Yahweh*” (1 Kgs 18:24). His prayer in verses thirty-six and thirty-seven—answered by fire from heaven—was predicated entirely upon God’s redemptive covenant with Israel and her forebears. David penned a dedicatory psalm of thanksgiving when the Ark—the furniture-piece of God’s redemptive, covenant presence with Israel—was returned to Jerusalem. The opening verse of this psalm exhorts the people, “Oh give thanks to *Yahweh; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples*” (1 Chr 16:8). This same exhortation to prayer was urged upon Israel by the prophet Isaiah in the context of calling on God to remember his promises and act salvifically on their behalf (Isa 12:1-6).

Further, to “call upon the name of *Yahweh*” becomes the distinguishing mark of those whom God redeems and saves: “And it shall come to pass that everyone who *calls on the name of Yahweh* shall be saved” (Joel 2:32). Indeed, in Zephaniah 3:9 *Yahweh* proclaims that he will cause the nations of the gentiles to call on his redeeming name! Millar rightly asserts,

When this phrase is used in the Old Testament, it is asking God to intervene

---

<sup>17</sup>Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord*, 23.

specifically to one thing—to come through on his promises. . . . there is a clear connection between Yahweh’s prior covenantal commitment to save his people and “calling on the name of Yahweh.” . . . to “call on the name of Yahweh” is not simply to “pray” in any generic sense. To call on the name of Yahweh is to cry to God to come through on his promises, and specifically to rescue and give life to his covenant people. It is a prayer for salvation, or an expression of the fact that one is relying on God *for* salvation. To put it anachronistically, “calling on the name of Yahweh” in the Old Testament denotes “gospel-shaped prayer.” . . . the primary biblical trajectory of prayer is not praise, or lament, or intercession, or meditation on the word of Yahweh. *Prayer begins in the Bible as a cry for God to do what he has promised—to deal with the reality of sin by delivering on his covenant promises.*<sup>18</sup>

The verity of Millar’s assertion—that the primary trajectory of prayer in the Bible is a cry for God to act salvifically in keeping with his promises—finds further support when we consider the recorded prayers in Scripture. Prayers in the Pentateuch coalesce around God creating a covenant people for himself, rescuing them from the bondage of Egypt, protecting and providing for them in the wilderness, and bringing them safely to the promised land (e.g. Gen 17:18; Exod 2:23-25; Num 14:11-20; Deut 3:23-26). Prayers in the Former Prophets invariably center upon pleas for God to forgive, rescue and presence himself with his people (e.g. Josh 7:6-9; Judg 1:1-2; 1 Sam 2:1-10; 2 Sam 7:18-29; 1 Kgs 8:27-53). The Latter Prophets record prayers characterized by longings for God to restore his covenant people to a right relationship with himself (e.g. Isa 26:8-13; Jer 12:1-12; Lam 3:40-48; Ezek 9:8; Mic 7:18-20; Joel 2:17; Jonah 2:7-9; Hab 3:2). Exilic, post-exilic and poetic literature prayers in the OT center upon a deep yearning by God’s covenant people for a New Covenant and delivering Messiah (e.g. Ezra 9:5-9; Neh 9:1-38; Pss 2:1-12; 22; 90; 102:12-17; 110:1-4; 118:22-29; Dan 9:4-19). *The consistent trajectory of prayer throughout the OT is toward crying out to God to act, forgive, redeem and save on the basis of his covenant promises.*

As the NT shifts perspective from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant with the in-breaking Kingdom of God in Christ, the trajectory of prayer remains the same as

---

<sup>18</sup>Millar, *Calling On the Name of the Lord*, 26-27 (emphasis added). See also Pss 79:6; 80:18; 99:6; 105:1; 116:1-4, 13, 17; Isa 41:25; Jer 10:25; Lam 3:55; Zech 13:9.

that of the OT with the added element of dawning realization. Mary's Magnificat was a prayer-song in which her soul magnified *Yahweh* and she rejoiced in the coming of the sin-conquering Seed of the woman (Luke 1:46-55; cf. Gen 3:15; Gal 4:4). Zechariah's exultant, prophetic prayer praises God for his covenant-promised "horn of salvation" who brings knowledge, mercy, peace and "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:68-79; cf. Gen 3:15; 12:1-3).

The public teaching of Jesus on prayer in the Kingdom-manifesto Sermon on the Mount was consistent with the above-delineated trajectory of prayer in the OT (Matt 5:5-15). Jesus taught that our prayers are addressed to "Our Father in heaven," acknowledging the intimacy of the New Covenant whereby God forgives our sins, writes his law on our hearts, adopts us as his sons and daughters, and instills in us intimate knowledge of himself (Matt 6:9; cf. Jer 31:31-34; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4-7). We are to pray "hallowed be your name," reminding us that God has cleansed us by the washing of water, replaced our stone-hard hearts with pliant hearts of flesh, written his law upon our hearts, and caused us to obey him—all for the sake of preserving the holiness of his name (Matt 6:9; cf. Ezek 36:21-27). In a word, our prayers are to acknowledge that God has acted savingly on our behalf to forgive us, cleanse us, regenerate us and redeem us on the basis of his covenant promises.

Further, Jesus instructed us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). James M. Hamilton has convincingly argued that the unifying theme of Scripture is God's glory revealed in salvation through the judgment of sin.<sup>19</sup> Jesus's prayer instruction here holds forth this grand reality. We pray rightly when we pray for the in-breaking, eschatological rule of God in Christ through the outworking of his self-glorifying, sin-reversing, redemptive purpose as established in the

---

<sup>19</sup>James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 56-58.

council chambers of heaven. Again, we see continuity of prayer-focus from the OT to the NT—the display of God’s glory in covenant salvation through the judgment of sin. It is no surprise that a biblical theology of prayer is consistent with biblical theology.

The remaining elements of the Lord’s Prayer are laden with redemptive significance—creaturely dependence upon God, forgiveness of trespasses, avoidance of temptation, and deliverance from evil. Every aspect of Jesus’s teaching on prayer accords with the OT trajectory of prayer—a crying out to *Yahweh* to intervene, act, forgive, rescue and save. The Christ-added elements of intimacy with the Father and the appeal for the advancement of the in-breaking Kingdom of God—both tightly connected with God’s redemptive purpose—continue to characterize prayer throughout the NT.

Upon consideration of the trajectory of prayer in the OT and the opening Gospels of the NT, we propose the following definition of prayer. *Prayer is the cry of the dependent creature to the omnipotent Creator, asking God, on the basis of his covenant promises, to intervene, forgive, rescue, redeem and save.* In a word, biblical prayer is gospel-shaped. The gospel informs right prayer and the gospel shapes right prayer. Biblically informed prayer acknowledges the holiness of God, the fallenness of the creature, the righteousness of God’s judgment, the need for forgiveness, and the glory of God’s redemption in Christ. This definition of prayer holds throughout the book of Acts and in the Pauline corpus, as we will demonstrate in the following sections.

While prayer certainly takes many forms in Scripture (e.g. praise, lament, intercession, meditation), the fundamental gospel-centricity of prayer shapes each of these types of prayers. Prayers of praise give glory to God for his redemptive work. Prayers of lamentation acknowledge sin and its consequences. Prayers of intercession appeal to God to intervene savingly. Prayers of meditation reflect on the mighty, redemptive acts of God revealed in his word. Because we are fallen creatures living in a sin-cursed world, everything and everyone stands in need of redemption and renewal—and this reality regulates all forms of authentic prayer.

A biblical theology of prayer as detailed above—wherein the propositional truth-claims of Scripture define prayer—helps us understand why we need to pray. Prayer is requisite because we are creatures utterly dependent upon our Creator. We must pray because we are creatures created for relationship with our Creator. Further, we need to pray because we are sinful and we live in a fallen world radically impacted by the effects of sin. Our desperate need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God compels us to pray. Prayer is essential because we need God to rescue us from sin. Our need of a righteousness we could never achieve constrains us to pray. We must pray because the God who created us commands that we pray. The God who intervenes, forgives, redeems, rescues and saves has promised he will hear and answer our gospel-informed prayers—and we are thus encouraged to pray.

Having considered the what and the why of prayer, we turn now to a consideration of the revitalizing efficacy of prayer in the life of the church.

### **The Primacy of Prayer in the Jerusalem Church**

Prayer was the verbal expression of the first church's utter dependence upon the redemptive power and presence of God among them. Incubated in the womb of obedient, post-ascension devotion to prayer, the Jerusalem church was birthed through the fiery baptism of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4). The prayer so instrumental to her birth characterized the church throughout the book of Acts. Prayer was part of the Jerusalem congregation's DNA. The genesis of their prayer-devotion, however, somewhat preceded the Ascension of Christ.

The Lord's Prayer, considered briefly above, warrants further consideration due to its influence on the prayer-life of the church at Jerusalem. In the Gospel of Luke the disciples, after observing Jesus praying, approached him and requested, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The occasion is notable because it is the only record in the Gospels where the disciples explicitly asked Jesus to instruct them. Their request that

Jesus teach them to pray seems unusual, especially when we consider all the disciples had heretofore witnessed.

If we follow the Lukan narrative, in the synagogue at Capernaum they had watched Jesus cast out a demon with astonishing authority (Luke 4:31-37). Later that same afternoon at the home of Simon Peter, Jesus alleviated the lethal fever<sup>20</sup> of Peter's mother-in-law, healed myriad diseases with the touch of his hand, and cast out numerous demons (Luke 4:38-41). On another occasion, Peter, James and John—after a fruitless night of fishing—let down their nets at the command of Jesus and caught a net-rendering multitude of fish (Luke 5:4-11). In this same region of Galilee they witnessed Jesus's astonishing cleansing of a leper and healing of a paralytic (Luke 5:12-26).

The restoration of a man's withered hand and the long-distance healing of a centurion's servant soon followed (Luke 6:6-10; 7:1-10). They saw Jesus raise the widow of Nain's son from the dead, then calm a raging sea-storm with a word of rebuke, then transform the Legion-infested Gadarene demoniac (Luke 7:11-17; 8:22-25; 8:26-39). Jesus astonished the disciples further by feeding the Bethsaida multitude of five thousand men with five loaves and two fish (Luke 9:10-17). While these examples are not exhaustive of all the mighty works of Jesus witnessed by the disciples, they will suffice for our argument.

Why, after witnessing all these astonishing works, did Jesus's disciples ask only that he teach them to pray? Why not ask him to teach them how to have authority over demons? Why did they not request lessons on the healing of deadly diseases, or bestowing sight to the blind, or bequeathing hearing to the deaf? Instructions on how to raise the dead, calm raging storms with a mere word, or multiply bread and fish might have been helpful, but the disciples did not request such training. They implored the Lord

---

<sup>20</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 195. Marshall maintains that Luke's use of relatively technical medical terminology—coupled with the disciples' appeal for Jesus to intervene—indicates the illness was dire.

Jesus to teach them how to pray. Why?

The answer likely lies in the disciples' observance of our Lord's prayer-life and his consequent power-imbued ministry. Luke informs us that after forty days of fasting, prayer and temptation in the wilderness, “ὑπέστρεψεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πνεύματος εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν—Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee” (Luke 4:14). Forty days of prayer clothed Jesus with immense power and might (δυνάμει) in the Spirit such that his ministry elicited wide-spread attention and praise (Luke 4:14-15). In the strength of this prayer-endowed spiritual power Jesus taught with astonishing authority, cast out demons and healed terminal diseases (cf. Luke 4:16-40).

Again in Luke 4:42 and 5:16 we are informed that Jesus withdrew to an isolated place to pray. He then returned to the populace, taught with great power, healed a paralytic, confounded the Pharisees and healed a man with a palsied hand (cf. Luke 5:17-6:11). We notice a pattern forming in the narrative.

Luke then informs us that Jesus spent an entire night in the mountains praying to the Father (Luke 6:12). Upon returning from this intensive night of prayer, our Lord chose his inner-circle of disciples and then engaged a great throng who gathered from Jerusalem, Judea and Tyre and Sidon. Many diseased and demon-possessed souls from the crowd sought to touch him, for “power (δύναμις) came out from him and he healed them all” (Luke 6:13-19). Jesus then proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom to the multitude with profound authority, healed the centurion's servant from a great distance, and raised the widow of Nain's son from the dead (Luke 6:20-7:17). Before important seasons of ministry our Lord spent significant time praying—and was thereby imbued with immense power to accomplish his ministry.

The pattern seems clear.<sup>21</sup> Luke was concerned to communicate that the Lord of the church was a man of prayer. Not only so, when Jesus withdrew to desolate places

---

<sup>21</sup>See also Luke 9:18, 28; 11:1-8; 22:39-44.

to pray for a season, he invariably returned brimming with divine power and authority. The disciples made the connection. It comes then as no surprise that the disciples of our Lord desired that he teach them to pray as he prayed. Charles E. Lawless frames this well when he asserts:

Think about Jesus's disciples. They saw him heal the sick, but they didn't ask him to teach them about healing. They listened to him speak like nobody else spoke, but they didn't ask for lessons in public speaking. They watched him minister to all types of people, but they didn't ask for ministry training. Instead, they wanted him to *teach them to pray like he prayed*. They knew that Jesus prayed, and they knew that his prayers made a difference.<sup>22</sup>

Given this pattern observed by the disciples and their subsequent request that Jesus teach them how to pray, it comes as no surprise that the Jerusalem congregation in the book of Acts was a prayer-driven church. Jesus planted the seed of the church's prayer-devotion in the minds and hearts of his disciples as he modeled prayer before them and as he taught them how to pray. Luke's gospel—more so than Matthew, Mark or John—emphasizes the primacy of prayer in the life of Jesus. Indeed, Luke not only accentuated prayer in Jesus's ministry, he tightly connected seasons of intensive prayer with seasons of power-infused ministry. Whereas Luke-Acts is a dual volume, Luke continues this emphasis on prayer when he records the narrative of the first church. As we will argue, the historian also retains the demonstrable connection between prayer and Holy Spirit-imbued power when he records the book of Acts.

The apostolic leaders of the Jerusalem congregation understood the primacy of prayer in the life of the church from having observed—and from having been taught by—none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Theirs was a gospel ministry, and Jesus taught his disciples to pray gospel-centric prayers. The apostles understood that prayer is a discipline unto itself that enables and empowers all other work we are commanded to

---

<sup>22</sup>Charles E. Lawless, Jr., *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 9.

do—and they understood this from having personally observed the ministry of our Lord. The apostles built prayer into the DNA of the first church because our Lord inculcated in their minds and hearts the preeminence of prayer.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of gospel-centric prayer in the life of the church. Gospel-centric prayer is axiomatic for the church. As we have observed, the first mention of prayer in Scripture is in response to the *protoevangelium*. Prayers throughout holy writ are demonstrably shaped by the desperate human need for the sovereign God to intervene, forgive, rescue, redeem and save. Churches who neglect the discipline of prayer cannot reasonably expect anything other than powerless plateau and decline. Conversely, churches who dedicate themselves to pray with gospel-intentionality have scriptural warrant to expect the power, presence and blessing of God. The first church in Jerusalem bears ample testimony to this axiom.

The preeminence of prayer in the life of the Jerusalem congregation is immediately evident in the narrative of Acts. Luke concluded his gospel with Jesus’s command to the disciples, “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The historian opens Acts by reminding the reader of this command, adding that Jesus said, “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). Notice the promise of power transmitted by means of the Holy Spirit. We recall that Jesus returned from forty days of prayer, fasting and temptation in the wilderness “. . . in the power of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:14). Likewise, Luke informs us that the disciples then returned to Jerusalem and began “προσκαρτεροῦντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν τῇ προσευχῇ--devoting themselves with one mind to prayer” (Acts 1:14).<sup>23</sup> The disciples knew the pattern

---

<sup>23</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 84. Schnabel captures the Lucan emphasis on the primacy of prayer and its connection with their source of power when he observes, “Luke’s first summary of the life and the activities of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem focuses on prayer, highlighting the fact that the apostles were not focused on themselves, nor on their task, but on God whose power sustains their life and assists them in their mission. The meaning of the verb (προσκαρτερέω) which denotes “to be busily engaged

because they had observed Jesus—devotion to prayer leads to the infilling of the Spirit which leads to divine empowerment for the work of ministry. They had not long to wait and pray. When the Day of Pentecost was fully come they experienced the power-imbuing effusion of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised.

We observe from the narrative that the 120 prayerful believers were clothed with divine power by the Holy Spirit, and we recall that Jesus himself, after seasons of intensive prayer was likewise filled with the Holy Spirit and power. The Spirit-filled believers immediately discovered themselves in possession of the power to speak in “*ἐτέραις γλώσσαις καθὼς τὸ πνεῦμα ἐδίδου ἀποφθέγγεσθαι αὐτοῖς*—other languages as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).<sup>24</sup> The Spirit-endowed power with which they spoke was evidenced not only in their ability to speak in other languages, but also in the nature of their Spirit-given *ἀποφθέγγεσθαι* (utterance). This rare term implies that their speech was imbued with the power of inspired, supernatural knowledge brimming with compelling truth and reason (cf. Acts 2:14; 26:25).<sup>25</sup> In a word, the praying congregation was imbued with power from on high to competently, truthfully and rationally proclaim the mighty, redemptive works of God.

This powerfully inspired gospel proclamation—issued in the native languages of all who heard—quickly attracted a large crowd (Acts 2:6). Peter seized the opportunity and with the same inspired, supernatural, knowledgeable, truthful and rational power preached the gospel to the throngs (Acts 2:14-40).<sup>26</sup> The result of the first church’s Spirit-

---

in, be devoted to,” and the imperfect tense, both underscore the persistent and continuous nature of their prayers.”

<sup>24</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 100. Polhill observes, “The word ‘tongue’ may be ambiguous in v. 4, but the word ‘dialect,’ or ‘language’ (*dialektos*), in vv. 6, 8 is not. It can only refer to a known language or dialect.”

<sup>25</sup>C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, International Critical Commentary 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 117.

<sup>26</sup>Note the Lucan employment of *ἀποφθέγγεσθαι* again in 2:14 to describe the nature of Peter’s sermon.

empowered gospel testimony was astonishing: “Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41).

Luke quickly informs the reader yet again of the first church’s commitment to prayer: “ἦσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες . . . ταῖς προσευχαῖς—and they were devoting themselves to . . . the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The conjunctive δὲ connects verse forty-two to verse forty-one, indicating that all the believers—both the original 120 and the newly-baptized 3,000—devoted themselves to prayer. The Lucan employment of the participial form of προσκατερέω indicates that prayer was a discipline which this church practiced with intentionality, resolve and perseverance. Further, their devotion, Luke informs us, was to “ταῖς προσευχαῖς—the prayers.” This unusual construction of the plural with the definite article is likely an intensive, meaning that these believers prayed more than was customary.<sup>27</sup> Clearly Luke constructed this verse carefully to highlight the church-wide devotion to prayer that characterized this first congregation. Emulating the example and teaching of her Lord, the church prayed regularly, intensively and devotedly, recognizing that their power to advance the gospel was dependent upon the outpouring and equipping ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Following immediately upon the close of chapter two, Luke records the Petrine healing of the lame beggar at the Temple gate—when the disciples were going up to the Temple to *pray*. This healing again drew a crowd, Peter proclaimed the gospel in power, and five thousand men were converted (Acts 3:1-4:5). We see here Luke’s continued emphasis upon the prayer-devotion of the church and the corollary empowerment of the church’s gospel witness.

Peter’s healing of the lame beggar and subsequent gospel preaching stirred the ire of the Temple authorities and led to another notable occasion of prayer in the life of the Jerusalem church. Unable to refute Peter and John’s bold proclamation of the gospel,

---

<sup>27</sup>Barrett, *Acts*, 1:166.

the Sanhedrin ordered the apostles to cease speaking in the name of Jesus, threatened them, and then released them. The duo reported the threats to the church,<sup>28</sup> which in turn voiced a unified and remarkable prayer in response to the threats (Acts 4:23-30). The Jerusalem church's prayer is worthy of recalling in its entirety:

They lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (Acts 4:24-30)

Several aspects of this prayer warrant consideration. First, Luke informs us that "ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἤραν φωνὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν—together they lifted their voices to God" (Acts 4:24). With a unity reminiscent of Acts 1:14 the church offered their petition to God with a single mind. In unison the church acknowledged God's sovereign rule over nature, nations and history. With one voice they confessed that the persecution they now faced was predestined by the good providence of God (cf. Acts 4:24-28). In keeping with our above-delineated biblical theology of prayer, the church voiced the cry of the dependent creature to the sovereign Creator. The community of believers was clearly thinking and praying theologically about the circumstances in which they found themselves threatened.

Secondly, we notice that the gospel informed and shaped their prayer. Citing

---

<sup>28</sup>Most commentators take Luke's use of τοὺς ἰδίους (their friends) in Acts 4:23 to mean the church at-large (e.g. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, 148 and C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, 1:248).

Psalm 2:1-2, the church asserts that Gentiles, kings, rulers and even Jews (cf. Acts 4:27) have futilely arrayed themselves against “*τοῦ κυρίου καὶ . . . τοῦ Χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ . . . τὸν ἅγιον παῖδα . . . Ἰησοῦν*—the Lord and . . . his Christ (Anointed) . . . the holy servant, Jesus” (Acts 4:25-27). The church locates their antagonists among those who foolishly set themselves against God’s redemptive purpose as revealed in his Messiah, Jesus, who came to save his people from their sins (cf. Matt 1:21-23). The gospel is at stake here, and the church is praying a gospel-centric prayer.

Thirdly, the prayer of the church here contains three petitions, all of which are gospel petitions. They pray, “*κύριε ἔπιθε ἐπὶ τὰς ἀπειλὰς αὐτῶν*—Lord, look upon (or consider) their threats” (Acts 4:29). This constitutes a cry to God to contemplate the threats of the Jewish authorities and intervene accordingly, yet again demonstrating a biblical theology of prayer that appeals to God to intervene and act according to his covenant promises. The church’s second petition is equally gospel-driven as they beseech God to “*δός τοῖς δούλοις σου μετὰ παρρησίας πάσης λαλεῖν τὸν λόγον σου*—grant to your servants all boldness to continually speak your word” (Acts 4:29). They desire courage to continue boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus’s redemptive life, death, burial and resurrection.

The congregation’s final petition is likewise oriented to the gospel. As they evangelize with boldness, they petition God to “stretch out (his) hand to heal” and perform “signs and wonders . . . through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:30). Their appeal for continued signs and wonders was a request for God to buttress and advance their gospel witness by supernatural means. We see, therefore, that this remarkable prayer of the first church is thoroughly gospel-centric in both its perspective and petitions.

Such gospel-focused prayer elicited a profound answer from heaven: “And when they had prayed the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with

boldness” (Acts 4:31). Again we see the pattern—prayer elicited divine power, and divine power led to gospel proclamation. The Jerusalem congregation was a praying congregation, and the gospel informed and shaped their corporate prayer-life.

Luke’s narrative in Acts repeatedly calls attention to the primacy of prayer in the life of this primitive church. In chapter six the apostles task the church with selecting seven men of good reputation and full of the Spirit to attend the daily charitable distribution. The compelling purpose for the selection of these assistants to the apostles was that the apostles might continually “devote themselves to *prayer* and the ministry of the word” (cf. Acts 6:2, 4). Again, note the Lukan use of the verb *προσκαρτερέω*—the apostles would devote themselves to prayer as a priority in which they would persevere with all diligence (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42). Notice again the Lukan summary which informs us “the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” subsequent to this action by the church that allowed the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the preaching of the word. The primacy of prayer is evident both in the leadership and the laity of the Jerusalem church.

Luke apprises us of Peter and John going down to Samaria (that place to be avoided at all costs by every self-respecting Jew) to pray for those converted under Philip’s ministry (Acts 8:14-15). Saul of Tarsus was found praying immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:11). Peter prayed beside the corpse of Tabitha in Joppa and she was raised from the dead (Acts 9:40). Again Peter was praying on the rooftop of Simon the tanner in Joppa when Cornelius’ men came to fetch him to the centurion’s house for gospel purposes (cf. Acts 10:9-20; 11:5-18). When Peter was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa, the Jerusalem church prayed earnestly for him and God supernaturally delivered Peter from prison and brought him to the very house where the church was praying (Acts 12:1-17). Saul and Barnabas were commissioned for their first

and historic missionary excursion by the church at Antioch Syria after fasting and prayer (Acts 13:1-3).<sup>29</sup> Schnabel observes, “Luke points out repeatedly that the prayers of the church were a significant factor in the life and ministry of the earliest Christians.”<sup>30</sup> Persistent, unflinching devotion to prayer was the heartbeat and driving force of the ministry and expansion of the church throughout the book of Acts.

In summary, the Jerusalem church was incubated and birthed during times of intensive, intentional prayer. This church was imbued with the immense power of the Holy Spirit through the medium of prayer. Both the laity of the church—including new converts—and the leadership devoted themselves to regular and rigorous prayer. Prayer prefaced and buttressed every aspect of their ministry and growth. Prayer was their first and primary Kingdom discipline, and God was pleased to hear, answer and pour out his blessings upon the faithful prayer-life of this fledgling community of believers. The first church was undeniably a praying church—and their commitment to prayer is paradigmatic for the work of church revitalization.

Having often entered their houses to arrest believers, Paul would have almost certainly been exposed to their practice of their Kingdom priorities and disciplines, including their unusual devotion to and intensity in prayer. We proceed now to a consideration of the Pauline observance and application of the discipline of prayer in relation to the health of the local church.

### **The Primacy of Prayer in the Pauline Corpus**

In chapter three of this dissertation we argued that the apostle Paul, both prior to and after his conversion, observed the community life of the Jerusalem church. As an appointed agent of the Sanhedrin’s persecution of the church Paul likely did

---

<sup>29</sup>See also Acts 14:23; 16:13, 16, 25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 27:29; 28:8.

<sup>30</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 180.

reconnaissance on the practices of the church (cf. Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 26:10, 12; Gal 1:13). Additionally, his brief visit in Jerusalem after his conversion doubtlessly exposed him to the practices of the early church. As we argued, the Pauline corpus certainly bears significant testimony related to the priorities and practice of the Jerusalem church delineated in Acts 2:42-47. It is therefore unsurprising that the primacy of prayer is a recurring theme in the Pauline literature. He adopted the paradigmatic discipline of prayer evident in the first church and, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, composed several exemplary prayers in his epistles, as well as numerous exhortative injunctions to prayer.

### **Pauline Salutatory Prayers**

Each of Paul's ecclesial letters—with the notable exception of the Epistle to the Galatians<sup>31</sup>—include salutatory prayers of thanksgiving and petition. These prayers are didactic and exemplary on the grounds of their content. Further, Paul's greeting prayers were thoroughly gospel-centric and pointedly revitalization-oriented.

In Romans, the crux of the apostle's greeting prayer was gratitude for their faith and a petition that his longing to see them—and to impart some spiritual gift to strengthen them—might come to fruition (Rom 1:8-11). First Corinthians records Paul's prayer of gratitude for their having received God's abounding grace and thanksgiving for the abundance of their spiritual gifts flowing from divine grace (1 Cor 1:4-7).<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 80. Bruce attributes the lack of a prayer of thanksgiving in the Galatian epistle to Paul's urgency, stating, "The most probable account of the omission of any thanksgiving here is that Paul was impelled by a sense of overmastering urgency to come straight to the point. Evidently he had just received the news of his Galatian converts' abandonment of the gospel of free grace which he had preached to them, and he reacts to that news on the spot."

<sup>32</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 55. Schreiner is helpful in understanding the seeming tension between Paul's gratitude for the Corinthians' spiritual gifts and the forthcoming reprimands when he asserts, "Since the 'testimony about Christ' was confirmed among the Corinthians, it follows that they do not lack any spiritual gift. Nevertheless, there is an eschatological proviso in that they await the coming of

In 2 Corinthians Paul gives thanks to God as the source of all comfort as he prepares to urge the congregation to comfort their repentant incestuous brother (cf. 2 Cor 1:3-5; 1 Cor 5:1-2; 2 Cor 2:5-8). Ephesians 1:15-23 records the apostle's prayer of thanksgiving for their faith in Christ and their love for one another, as well as his petition for their enlightened understanding of their glorious inheritance in Christ.

Paul gives thanks for the Philippians' partnership with him in the gospel, and prays for the Colossians' increased knowledge and ongoing sanctification. (Phil 1:3-11; Col 1:3-14). Writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul offers prayers of thanksgiving for their faith, their exemplary spiritual conduct, and their steadfastness under persecution (1 Thess 1:2-3; 2 Thess 1:3-4).<sup>33</sup>

The apostle's salutatory prayers also included revitalization elements. We recall his constant concern for the wellbeing of the churches: "And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure (ἡ ἐπίστασις) on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor 11:28). Paul suffered daily from ἡ ἐπίστασις—the deep emotional stress and pressure he felt in relation to his apostolic oversight of the spiritual health of all the churches. This concern is evident in several of his salutatory prayers aimed at the restoration and revitalization of churches in danger of plateau and decline. For example, knowing the entropic cultural and societal pressures faced by the Roman church, Paul prayed that he might visit and "τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικὸν εἰς τὸ στηριχθῆναι ὑμᾶς—impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you" (Rom 1:11). The strengthening and revitalization of the church at Rome was the object of the apostle's

---

Jesus Christ on the last day. The word for *gift* (*charisma*) anticipates again the discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12–14, where the word is used five times to refer to spiritual gifts (12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31). Despite the abuse of spiritual gifts in the congregation, Paul continues to see their presence as evidence of divine grace. Indeed, Paul emphasizes that no gift is missing in the Corinthian church; God's grace among them has been lavishly dispensed.

<sup>33</sup>Paul's second letter to Timothy and his letter to Philemon also contain prayers for the recipients.

prayer.

If the evangelistic zeal of the Ephesian church had begun to wane during Paul's lifetime—as we will argue in chapter seven—his salutatory prayer in the Ephesian epistle was aimed at invigorating their evangelism.<sup>34</sup> He prayed that their hearts might be “enlightened” to comprehend their rich inheritance in Christ and the “immeasurable greatness of (God's) power toward (them)” in order to reignite their passion for the gospel and its advance (cf. Eph 1:17-22; 6:15). Here again we see Paul's commitment to the paradigm of prayer for the revitalization of a declining church.

In the Colossian epistle Paul was seemingly concerned that a form of mystical asceticism—possibly a type of Jewish pre-Gnostic philosophy as practiced by the Essenes—was making inroads in the churches (cf. Col 2:8).<sup>35</sup> His salutatory prayer for the church petitioned for their increased knowledge of God's will, spiritual wisdom and understanding, strength, endurance, patience and joy in the preeminent Christ. Again, the apostle's concern for the restoration of the Colossians to the fullness of the gospel of Christ is evident in the salutatory prayer of his epistle (cf. Col 1:9-20; 2:8-15). Paul's desire was for their renewal, and the objective petitions of his prayer were aimed at their restoration.

As we have observed, Paul's recognition of the entropic principle at work in the churches gave him occasion for deep concern. In keeping with the apostolic paradigm of the primacy of prayer, his epistolary addresses were prefaced with revitalization-specific petitions on behalf of the churches. For Paul, the recovery of declining churches

---

<sup>34</sup>G K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 231. Commenting on Revelation 2:1-7, Beale contends, “Although they were ever on guard to maintain the purity of the apostolic teaching, the Ephesian Christians were not diligent in witnessing to the same faith in the outside world . . . This is what is meant when Christ chastises them for having left their ‘first love.’ . . . The idea is that they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus *by witnessing to him in the world.*”

<sup>35</sup>Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary, Vol. 32, (Nashville: B&H, 1991), 173-76.

began with constant, intensive, issue-specific prayer that preceded his epistolary exhortations.

We notice as well a gospel-centricity in Paul's salutatory prayers. In keeping with our above-delineated biblical theology of prayer, Paul's thanksgiving often exulted in his recipients having received the gospel (cf. Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; Eph 1:15-16; Phil 1:6; Col 1:3-4; 1 Thess 1:2-5). For the church at Ephesus Paul prayed salutatorily that their hearts might be enlightened to the glories of the gospel so that they might be better equipped to proclaim the gospel (cf. Eph 1:15-23; 6:15).

The apostle's opening prayer for the church at Philippi expressed gratitude for their faithful partnership with him in advancement of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:3-5, 12). Paul's greeting prayer for the church at Colossae reminded them of their deliverance from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light by means of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Col 1:13-14). These salutatory prayers were clearly shaped and informed by the gospel of God's intervening, forgiving, rescuing, redemptive purpose based on his covenant promises.

In summary, Paul's ecclesial letters typically included salutatory prayers that were gospel-centric and revitalization-specific. While his epistles were remedial and exhortative in nature, the apostle consistently prefaced and buttressed his injunctives with prayer for the recipients.<sup>36</sup> Paul clearly viewed the discipline of gospel-driven prayer as a

---

<sup>36</sup>Galatians is the only Pauline epistle lacking a prefatory prayer. Commentators vary in their explanation of Paul's omission. For example, F. F. Bruce attributes the lack of a prayer of thanksgiving in the Galatian epistle to Paul's urgency, stating, "The most probable account of the omission of any thanksgiving here is that Paul was impelled by a sense of overmastering urgency to come straight to the point. Evidently he had just received the news of his Galatian converts' abandonment of the gospel of free grace which he had preached to them, and he reacts to that news on the spot" (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 80). Peter Thomas O'Brien asserts, "Because the Galatians have departed from the gospel of Christ there can be no (introductory prayer of) thanksgiving; instead, a curse is pronounced on anyone who brings another message" (Peter Thomas O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977], 141).

primary means for the recovery of plateaued and declining churches.

### **Pauline Exhortations to Prayer**

The apostolic and ecclesial paradigm of prayer as a primary spiritual discipline in the Jerusalem church is explicitly reflected in the Pauline corpus. Not only did Paul model the discipline of prayer in his correspondence to the churches, he consistently urged the discipline upon his readers. The entropic principle of spiritual complacency and decline threatened every church to which the apostle wrote, and he pressed upon these early congregations the entropy-counterbalancing discipline of prayer. Dependent, gospel-driven, Scripture-informed prayer is requisite to the spiritual renewal and revitalization of churches as they battle the headwinds of cultural, philosophical and demonic resistance to the advancement of the gospel—and this reality was not lost on the apostle Paul. We will now consider several of the exhortations to prayer recorded in the Pauline corpus.

**Spirit-empowered prayer.** The apostle located a rather complex incentive to prayer in the heart of the rich, trinitarian theology of Romans chapter eight. Because we are freed from condemnation through the law-satisfying work of Christ, Christians no longer live according to the dictates of the flesh. We now walk according to the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit, mortifying the desires of our mortal bodies (Rom 8:1-13). As adopted sons of God emancipated from the tyranny of sin, the indwelling Spirit educes our intimate heart-cry “dear Father!” (Rom 8:15).<sup>37</sup> Thus reconciled to the Father by *the* Son, we as sons are joint-heirs with Christ in all that is our Father’s (Rom 8:17).

---

<sup>37</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 419. Schreiner asserts, “Intimacy with God is certainly suggested by  $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha$  (and by  $\pi\alpha\tau\acute{\eta}\rho$  as well), but some scholars have overplayed the intimacy and uniqueness of the term (so Jeremias 1965: 9–40; for a corrective see Haenchen 1966: 492–94; J. Barr 1988a; 1988b). The term is best conveyed not by the word ‘Daddy’ but by ‘dear Father.’”

This intimate, Christ-wrought, Holy Spirit-confirmed relationship with the Father produces in us an eschatological hope, but that hope is held in tension with suffering in a fallen world (Rom 8:18-19; cf. Acts 14:22).

Because of sin, God has “τῇ ματαιότητι ἣ κτίσις ὑπετάγη—subjected the creation to frustration” (Rom 8:20). Paul’s use of ματαιότητι (futility, frustration) recalls the frustration of the preacher in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3: “Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity! What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils?” God’s judgment allowed sin to infect all of the cosmos, rendering the created order incapable of fulfilling the purpose for which it was created.<sup>38</sup> This is the entropic principle we identified in chapter one of this dissertation.

Because we live in a fallen world under the curse of sin, the normative trajectory of everything within the created order is toward disorder, decline and decay (cf. Gen 3:18; Eccl 1:2; Rom 8:18-25). All of creation is subjected to frustration of purpose because of the curse of sin. Disorder, brokenness, sickness, suffering, decline, decay and death prevail because God subjected creation to futility and frustration. In a cursed cosmos, everything—including Christians and the church—is in need of divine renewal because of this seemingly inexorable law of entropy.

This entropic principle against which we struggle in frustration, however, is held in tension with the eschatological hope that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Just as believers have been freed from the bondage of sin, so one day the entire cosmos will be liberated from the entropic principle. We will one day dwell in revitalized heavens and a revitalized earth wherein righteousness reigns supreme (cf. 1 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1ff).

---

<sup>38</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 185n171.

In the meantime, creation groans and we groan with childbirth-like travail beneath the substantial weight of the entropic principle (Rom 8:22-23). We cry out because everything around us—including the local church—is subjected to decline, decay and death. We travail, however, with an unquenchable eschatological hope and assurance. Having become the firstfruits of the revitalizing work of the Holy Spirit, we have in our redemption a foretaste of a guaranteed eschatological future (Rom 8:23-25; cf. 2 Cor 5:1-5). In the *eschaton*, the entire cosmos will be revitalized to accomplish the purpose for which it was created—to love, worship, obey, enjoy and glorify the Creator. *It is in this context that Paul penned a complex, yet, at the same time, reassuring incentive to prayer:*

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:26-27).

The profound work of the Holy Spirit in relation to our prayers is immediately evident in the text. Just as (Ὠσαύτως—likewise) the Spirit enables us to cry Abba, Father and affirms that we are children and heirs of God, the Spirit likewise helps us in the weakness of our prayers (cf. Rom 8:15-17, 26).<sup>39</sup> In like manner to the Spirit inculcating in us a transcendent, eschatological hope for the future while we groan in entropic weakness, so the Spirit buttresses our weak prayers (cf. Rom 8:13-25, 26). The same Holy Spirit who assures us of our sonship instead of slavery, guarantees our inheritance and future glory, and gives us hope in the midst of futility and frustration likewise supernaturally empowers our weak prayers.

The prayer-empowering work of the Holy Spirit is necessary because “we do

---

<sup>39</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 326 (see esp. 326n109). Morris helpfully observes: “. . . ὡσαύτως (here only in Romans, but eight times in Paul out of 17 in the New Testament). It points to a correspondence. It is possible to take this in the sense, ‘Just as hope sustains them, so also does the Spirit.’ But as the Spirit is at work in the time of hope, it is better to see the meaning as joining one work of the Spirit to another.”

not know what to pray for as we ought” (Rom 8:26). The limitations of being finite creatures living in a cosmos subjected to futility—yet graced with eschatological hope—renders us unable to fully grasp what is appropriate when it comes to our prayers.<sup>40</sup> The majestic scope of God’s redemptive purposes is set against the entropic backdrop of sin, brokenness and futility. Indeed, Paul prostrates himself upon this tension when he cries out, “Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33). We can no more comprehend the mind and providences and purposes of God than an insect can comprehend the Encyclopedia Britannica. The extent, complexity and grandeur of the divine purpose infinitely exceeds our capacity for comprehension. Part of the frustration of living in a cosmos subjected to futility, therefore, is that even the prayers of Christians are woefully weak and uninformed. How then shall our prayers be made effectual?

Our impotent prayers, Paul informs us, are aided when “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings inexpressible” (Rom 8:26). We notice the emphatic use of “*αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα*—the Spirit *himself*.” The third person of the God-head interposes before the Father on our behalf and because of our weakness. Not only so, the Spirit thus intercedes with “*στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις*—groanings inexpressible.” Schreiner holds that, “The Holy Spirit takes (our) groanings and presents them before God in an articulate form.”<sup>41</sup> We would further maintain that these Spirit-transmitted groanings thus articulated are beyond the pale of human comprehension in both their complexity and their perfection. Such Spirit-aid in our prayers staggers human understanding.

Further, recalling that the creation groans and that we groan because of the entropic principle, the Pauline assertion that the Spirit also groans is striking (cf. Rom

---

<sup>40</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 435. Schreiner rightly asserts, “The weakness of believers in prayer, therefore, is that they do not have an adequate grasp of what God’s will is when they pray. Because of our finiteness and fallibility, we cannot fully perceive what God would desire.”

<sup>41</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 438.

8:22-23). In all three instances, the groaning is likely metaphorical and refers to longings for which words are inadequate.<sup>42</sup> Creation longs for the perfection of the *eschaton*, believers long for the perfection of the *eschaton*, and the Spirit longs for the perfection of the *eschaton* (cf. Rom 8:22-23; 26). We pray with inexpressible longings for unrealized and incomprehensible glory and the Spirit communicates to the Father our uninformed groanings with supernatural groanings too deep for words.<sup>43</sup> As we wrestle in prayer to express incomprehensible longings, the Holy Spirit empathetically mediates our prayers, transmuting them before the throne of grace with divine perfection.

Our weak prayers thus mediated by the Spirit find especial acceptance with the Father, for he “οἶδεν τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος—knows what is the mind of the Spirit” (Rom 8:27). Because the Trinity exists in perfect unity, the mind of the Third Person is known perfectly by the First Person. In essence, Paul is asserting that our Spirit-mediated prayers gain audience with God because such prayers are themselves transmuted expressions of the mind of God (cf. 1 Cor 2:11). Indeed, this reality is driven home by the final clause, “because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:27). The transmutation of our prayers to the Father by the Spirit results in our weak, uninformed prayers finding perfect expression in accordance with the will of God. From our uninformed, inarticulate groanings to the mediatorial, divinely articulate groanings of the Spirit, our prayers reach the Father in perfect conformity to his will (cf. Rom 8:26-27; John 14:13-14; 1 John 5:14-15).

Paul punctuates this enumeration of the Spirit’s mediatorial prayer-work with one of the most reassuring passages in all of Scripture. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). The manner in which the Spirit

---

<sup>42</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 438.

<sup>43</sup>Mounce, *Romans*, 187. Mounce maintains, “In view of Gethsemane (cf. esp. Luke 22:44) there is no reason to deny emotional/spiritual involvement in prayer to the third person of the Trinity.”

empowers our inarticulate prayers renders this conclusion certain. Even when we do not know how or what to pray because we live in the complexity of a sin-cursed cosmos destined for glory, the Spirit translates our groanings in perfect accord with the will of God. What God has willed is good, and what he has willed he will accomplish. We therefore have the assurance that our Spirit-mediated prayers call to our aid the sovereign arm of the God who is causing every circumstance to work for our good and his eternal glory.

In summary, the manner in which the Spirit empowers our prayers renders this passage a near-unparalleled incentive to prayer. The juxtaposition of living in a cosmos subjected to futility—yet bound for glory—places us in an unimaginably complex milieu. In our finitude we groan inarticulately from the inexpressible longings of our redeemed souls. The omniscient Holy Spirit mediates our stumbling prayers, articulating them in accord with the will of God. Our sovereign God hears our prayers and contravenes the entropic principle by causing all our circumstances to coalesce in a manner most conducive to our good and his glory. Though characterized by weakness and lack of understanding, our prayers are rendered unimaginably powerful by the mediating work of the Holy Spirit.

In this brief instruction on prayer Paul unfolds for us the efficacy of Spirit-empowered prayer. The futility to which the cosmos is subjected is shattered when Christian prayers fly to God's throne on the wings of the omnipotent Holy Spirit. In a word, Holy Spirit-empowered prayer is indispensable to the work of revitalizing plateaued and declining churches who struggle in the entropic ethos of the sin-cursed cosmos. When churches devote themselves to thus cry out in the weakness of creaturely, dependent prayer, God is pleased to hear from heaven and sovereignly build his church according to his immutable will (cf. Acts 4:23-33).

We turn now to a consideration of the expansive scope of prayer in the Pauline corpus. One of the striking features of Paul's exhortations to prayer is the degree to which

he expands the scope of prayer. He urges the churches to pray steadfastly, without ceasing, at all times, in every circumstance and for all people (cf. Eph 6:18; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:18; 1 Tim 2:1-3). The apostle thereby affirms that prayer is of cosmic significance and therefore paradigmatically important in relation to all seasons, circumstances and persons. The scope of God’s redemptive purpose is cosmic, and the efficacy of Spirit-empowered prayer is central to the advancement of his redemptive purpose. Paul’s exhortations to prayer, therefore, echo the scope and grandeur of the model prayer wherein Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

**Constancy in prayer.** In Ephesians Paul demonstrates both the cosmic scope and foundational nature of prayer in the life of the church. He urged the churches of Ephesus to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might (Eph 6:10). They were to stand firm in their warfare against diabolic, cosmic powers by putting on the panoply of Christ-supplied spiritual armor (Eph 6:11-13). To punctuate his elucidation of the Christian’s battle armor, Paul exhorted the Ephesian church to be “προσευχόμενοι ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ ἐν πνεύματι—praying in every season by the Spirit” (Eph 6:18). Several consequential issues are evident in this apostolic exhortation.

First, Paul did not associate prayer with any piece of the Roman soldier’s battle armor or weapon as he did in the previous verses (e.g. truth/belt, righteousness/breastplate, word/sword, etc.). Secondly, the participle *προσευχόμενοι* (praying) is dependent on the antecedent imperative *στῆτε* (stand) in verse fourteen,<sup>44</sup> thereby pointing us to the means by which we must stand—“Stand . . . by praying.” Thirdly, as Clinton E. Arnold rightly maintains, “the theme here ties the passage back to 6:10–11, which calls on believers to depend on the power of the Lord, and it thus

---

<sup>44</sup>Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42, (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 452.

forms an inclusio bracketing the entire passage.”<sup>45</sup> Prayer is both the means by which we access the power (κράτει—vs. 10; cf. 1:19; 3:16) of God and the discipline by which spiritual armor and weaponry are maintained.<sup>46</sup>

Fourthly, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to pray “ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ—in every season” (Eph 6:18). The church must continue in unceasing prayer because the days are evil (cf. Eph 5:16; Eph 6:13), the devil continually schemes and the church incessantly wrestles against cosmic, powerful, demonic spiritual forces (cf. Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:17). Fifthly, the church must pray “ἐν πνεύματι—by the Spirit” (Eph 6:18).<sup>47</sup> Praying by means of the Holy Spirit recalls the mediatorial prayer-work of the Third Person of the God-head delineated above wherein the weakness of the church’s prayers is omnisciently transmuted (Rom 8:26-27).

Paul continued buttressing the primacy of prayer by exhorting the Ephesians, “To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph 6:18). The construction of “εἰς αὐτὸ ἀγρυπνοῦντες—to that end keep alert” is indicative that the purpose for keeping alert is continual prayer. This accords with Jesus’s injunction that the disciples “watch and pray,” that they remain vigilant in prayer lest they enter into temptation through the weakness of the flesh (Mark 14:38). Further, the eschatological hope to which they were called required alertness in prayer lest they become complacent and fall away from that hope (cf. Luke 21:34-36; Rom 8:18-27; Col 4:2). Constancy in prayer was necessary if the churches were to persevere in trials and remain steadfast in their hope. The Pauline remedy for spiritual complacency, plateau and decline, therefore, was devotion to prayer.

---

<sup>45</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 463.

<sup>46</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 484.

<sup>47</sup>πνεύματι is here taken as a dative of means.

Paul concludes this exhortation to prayer by urging the recipients to pray for his gospel witness (Eph 6:19). Such requests for prayer in relation to the advancement of the gospel were characteristic of the Pauline epistles (cf. Rom 15:30-32; 2 Cor 1:11; Col 4:3-4; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1-2; Phil 1:19). Faithful evangelism effectively counters the principle of entropy in churches, and prayer is the engine that drives evangelism. Once again we see the gospel-centricity and revitalization-specific nature of prayer so evident throughout the Pauline corpus.

In summary, the apostle's exhortation to prayer for the Ephesian churches was an injunction to constancy in prayer. Constancy in prayer is the means by which the church stands firm against encroaching evil. Prayer-constancy maintains the efficacy of the Christian's battle armor. Spirit-empowered, consistent prayer imbues the church with the power of God to combat the cosmic spiritual forces of darkness against which she contends. Steadfastness in prayer ensures the advancement of the gospel and the building-up of the church to maturity in Christ. In a word, constancy in prayer is vital to the work of church revitalization.

**Circumstantial prayer.** Paul further expands the scope of the discipline of prayer in the benedictory instructions 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. He pens this stimulating trilogy of prayer-commands: “Πάντοτε χαίρετε, ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε, ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε—rejoice always, pray unceasingly, give thanks in all (things/circumstances).” Each of these prayer-related injunctions are posited in the present tense, indicating that they entail continuous and recurring activities in the assembled church.<sup>48</sup> Indeed the temporal adverbs Πάντοτε (always) and ἀδιαλείπτως (unceasingly) and the adjective παντὶ (all things/circumstances) reinforce the concept that these prayer-functions should characterize the life of the church.

---

<sup>48</sup>D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, New American Commentary, vol. 33 (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 181.

Each of these Pauline injunctions speaks to the circumstance-encompassing nature of prayer. First, the church is enabled to “rejoice always” in prayer. Such unceasing joy is possible because the joy of the church is unshakably rooted in the gospel (cf. Luke 2:10-11; 1 Thess 1:5-6). The fruit of the Spirit wrought in the church is joy, empowering her to “rejoice always” in every circumstance associated with her irrevocable Kingdom citizenship (cf. Gal 5:22; Rom 14:17). Indeed, the church is empowered to “rejoice always” in prayer, even in difficult and vexing circumstances, because she enjoys a present redemption and an unshakable hope of eschatological renewal, reward and glory (cf. Luke 21:28; Matt 5:11-12; 1 Pet 4:13). No temporal circumstance diminishes the unshakable joy of the church, therefore we rejoice in prayer always, giving praise to the God of our redemption and hope.

Secondly, the church is enjoined to “pray unceasingly.” The adverb ἀδιαλείπτως (unceasingly) is not used literally here, but hyperbolically, yielding the same sense as Jesus’s encouragement that his disciples should “always pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1ff; cf. Rom 12:12; Col 4:2).<sup>49</sup> As a spiritually living organism functioning in an entropically-inclined world, the church continually faces circumstances contrary to her mission. The forces of evil never sleep, and this reality necessitates that the church pray unceasingly with an unflinching confidence that God will hear and answer and rescue and advance his cause. Every onslaught by the prince of darkness meets with a constant barrage of hope-filled, joy-saturated prayer in those churches who would experience revitalization.

Thirdly, the apostle charges the church to “give thanks in all circumstances.” Paul’s use of ἐν παντί (in all) is either temporal (at all times) or circumstantial (in all circumstances).<sup>50</sup> We take the latter translation but do not belabor the point because little

---

<sup>49</sup>Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 258-59.

<sup>50</sup>Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek

distinction can be made between thanksgiving at all times and thanksgiving in all circumstances. The church is to prayerfully give thanks in all circumstances because we understand that God is working in every situation according to the counsel of his will and for our good (cf. Eph 1:11; Rom 8:28). Whereas God’s redemptive purpose is comprehensive, the church can pray always with thanksgiving. God’s unthwartable purpose comprehends every circumstance the church faces—even the difficult circumstances—and causes them to work for her good, for the advancement of the gospel, and his glory (cf. Phil 1:5, 12-14, 18, 23-26).

Paul punctuates this trilogy of prayer-injunctions with the confident assertion, “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:18). The apostle’s use of the phrase “θέλημα θεοῦ—the will of God” connotes the moral and spiritual requirements of God for his people (cf. 1 Thess 4:3).<sup>51</sup> God requires of his church the discipline of joyful, constant, thankful prayer. Such prayer is not merely suggested to the church—such prayer is commanded and required of the church.

We find a similar injunction to prayer to that of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 when Paul commands that we not be anxious, but rather “in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6; cf. Matt 6:25-34). The command to “rejoice always” precedes the exhortation in verse four, and the injunction to thanksgiving is likewise conjoined to prayer in the imperative of verse six. Notice again the circumstance-encompassing nature of prayer—we should pray “ἐν παντί—in everything” (Phil 4:6). In prayer we lay every anxiety-inducing circumstance before the throne of grace with rejoicing, petitions and thanksgiving. Paul assures us that when we pray thus, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,

---

Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 200. Wanamaker argues for a temporal sense of ἐν παντί contra a circumstantial sense, but concedes there is little distinction.

<sup>51</sup>Green, *Thessalonians*, 260.

will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7). Churches faced with the daunting task of reversing years of plateau and decline will find no sweeter promise anywhere in Scripture.

We see, therefore, that consistent, joy-filled, thankful prayer is not only commanded in every circumstance—it is rationally possible in every circumstance. Not only so, such circumstance-encompassing prayer is both the antidote to anxiety and the precursor to the surpassing peace that comes only from God. Untrammelled confidence that God is good, that his gospel will be advanced and that his church will be built enables the church to give thanks in all circumstances without exception. Indeed, comprehension of this glorious reality will embolden the revitalizing church and inculcate in her a culture of prayerful, anticipatory, joyful expectation.

**Comprehensive prayer.** Paul further urges that prayer be made in the churches for all kinds of people. “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people” (1 Tim 2:1). The unusual use of *πρώτον πάντων* (first of all) should be taken to mean “of first importance” (cf. 1 Cor 15:3).<sup>52</sup> Prayer and thanksgiving appear early in most of Paul’s letters, and here again we see the primacy of prayer for the life of the church in his thought. The apostle is concerned that prayer be of primary importance in all the churches.

Paul had heretofore instructed that Timothy’s task at Ephesus included the suppression of false teaching (1 Tim 1:3-11), the advancement of the uncompromised gospel (1 Tim 1:12-17), and curtailing the declension of commitment among church leaders (1 Tim 1:18-20). All three tasks are easily subsumed under the stated purpose for which Paul wrote to Timothy: “Remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain

---

<sup>52</sup>George W., Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 114. Knight notes that this is the only use of *πρώτον πάντων* in both the NT and the Septuagint (LXX).

persons not to teach any different doctrine” (1 Tim 1:3). The conjunction οὖν (then, consequently, therefore) of 2:1 indicates a transition to instructions for accomplishing the tasks with which Paul charged Timothy, and prayer heads the list of instructions.<sup>53</sup> Correction of false teaching, the advancement of the pure gospel, and the confrontation of declining leaders—in a word, the revitalization of the Ephesian churches—begins with comprehensive prayer, according to Paul.

This exhortation to prayer is comprehensive in its scope, and the apostle grounds the comprehensiveness of the church’s prayer-obligation in the universality of the gospel. Intercessions, prayers and thanksgivings are to be made “ὕπὲρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων—every kind of people” (1 Tim 2:1). Such prayer is necessary because God “πάντας ἀνθρώπους θέλει σωθῆναι—desires every kind of people to be saved” (1 Tim 1:4). Just as the gospel transgresses every ethnic, economic and authority boundary, so must the intercession, prayers and thanksgivings of the church comprehend every kind of people.<sup>54</sup> The largess of God’s redemptive purpose encompasses all circumstances and all kinds of people, therefore the prayer-devotion of the church must reflect the largess of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ. The heights to which the church’s prayer-discipline is commanded to reach overwhelm the mind, casting us once again upon the indispensability of the Holy Spirit’s mediatorial prayer-work on our behalf (cf. Rom 8:26-27).

The apostle punctuates his exhortation to comprehensive prayer with the appeal, “I desire, therefore, that in every place men should pray, lifting holy hands” (1

---

<sup>53</sup>Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary, Vol. 34 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 87.

<sup>54</sup>Lea and Hayne, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 86. Lea and Griffin assert, “Apparently the false teachers in Ephesus promoted an attitude that presented Christianity as a religion for an elite group. Paul demolished this exclusivist idea and suggested that the object of Christian prayer must be as wide as the object of Christ’s death.”

Tim 2:8).<sup>55</sup> Because the Kingdom-work of the church was comprehensive, the preservation of doctrine vital, and the advancement of the uncompromised gospel essential, Paul urged a single-minded devotion to holy prayer upon the congregations. Comprehensive prayer in all of the churches by devout men void of dissimulation was critical for the recovery of the congregations of Ephesus.

In summary, these exhortations to constancy and comprehensiveness in prayer reveal an urgency on the part of the apostle that churches embrace the discipline of prayer. Indeed, in Paul's thought, any hope of recovery for declining churches rested entirely in the primacy of prayer in the life of the churches.

### **Conclusion**

We are convinced by anecdotal observation, evidentiary studies and, most importantly, by Scripture that prayer is a sure measure of a church's health. The extent to which the church devotes herself to the discipline of prayer is a correlational barometer of God's presence and blessing—or lack thereof—upon her ministry. Prayer is a measure of the Holy Spirit's presence with a church, and the Holy Spirit's presence with a church ultimately determines her effectiveness as a church. When devotion to prayer wanes, the church experiences plateau and decline. When commitment to prayer increases, God is pleased to hear from heaven and invigorate the ministry of the church with power.

A biblical theology of prayer, as we have seen, demonstrates that prayer is the cry of the dependent creature to the omnipotent Creator, asking God, on the basis of his covenant promises, to intervene, forgive, rescue, redeem and save. All true prayer is gospel-centric. Plateaued and declining churches should develop a devotion to prayer that

---

<sup>55</sup>Lea and Hayne, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 95. Lea and Griffin rightly identify the emphasis of the Apostle here when they assert, "Paul's primary emphasis was the attitude that the men were to bring to prayer. The term "holy hands" describes hands that are morally pure. This calls for a devout life-style that seeks passionately to please God (John 4:34)."

embraces the instruction of our Lord that we pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

As Christ modeled prayer in his earthly sojourn and taught his disciples to pray, so the first church in the book of Acts was devoted to prayer. Prayer undergirded and empowered the first church’s ministry of the gospel, and we see throughout the Lucan record the primacy of prayer in the life of the church. This church was imbued with the immense power of the Holy Spirit through the medium of prayer. Both the laity of the church—including new converts—and the leadership devoted themselves to rigorous prayer. Prayer buttressed every aspect of their ministry and growth. Prayer was their first and primary Kingdom discipline, and God was pleased to hear, answer and pour out his blessings upon this fledgling community of believers. The Jerusalem church was undeniably a praying church—and their commitment to prayer is paradigmatic for the work of church revitalization.

Paul located the power of prayer in the omnipotent, mediatorial work of the Holy Spirit. The apostle consistently prefaced the exhortations of his ecclesial letters with instructive, revitalization-targeted, thanksgiving-filled prayers. Didactically, Paul urged upon the churches a rigorous, comprehensive devotion to prayer to counter-balance the entropic inclination to plateau and decline. The apostle clearly envisioned prayer as an efficient and indispensable means of church revitalization.

In conclusion, prayer is the work of the church that enables and invigorates all work for which the church is commissioned. As such, prayer stands at the very center of all that the church is and all that the church does. God simply will not use a church that refuses to pray. Conversely, a church devoted to the paradigmatic discipline of prayer has every reason to expect the salubrious outpouring of God’s blessing and power upon her ministry. In a word, intentional, dependent, devoted, gospel-centric, Kingdom-focused prayer is the most pressing need of churches experiencing the entropic ravages of decay

and decline. To that end, we will, in chapter ten, consider some practical ways in which a church may devote herself to prayer.

CHAPTER 5  
THE WONDER OF WORSHIP IN CHURCH  
REVITALIZATION

The very existence of the church is predicated upon the wonder-inspiring worship of God. Mankind was created to worship God and enjoy him forever, yet sin entered into creation and corrupted the right worship of the Creator. In keeping with his redemptive covenant promises, however, God has from the beginning called out a people unto himself—an *ἐκκλησία*, or church—and restored in them both the impulse and the ability to rightly worship and enjoy him. Because it was from the beginning the purpose for which mankind was created, the worship of God is a supreme and indispensable privilege of the church.

Declension in contemporary churches is typically accompanied by stagnation in wonder-inducing worship. The worship wars of recent decades exposed a significant rift between the imperatives of Scripture and the personal proclivities of postmodern churchgoers.<sup>1</sup> Encroaching therapeutic deism clashed with biblically-informed liturgical practice and the locus of worship shifted from the wondrously worthy God to the felt needs of the worshiper. When awe-filled wonder, worship and adoration of the living God gives way to a celebration of self, churches plateau, decline and eventually die because they have forsaken the very purpose for which they exist.

Churches desiring to reverse spiritual and numeric declension do well to give

---

<sup>1</sup>David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 15. Peterson astutely observes, “. . . sadly, worship is an issue that continues to divide us, both across the denominations and within particular congregations. Even those who desire to bring their theology and practice under the criticism and control of the biblical revelation can find themselves in serious conflict with one another. Most of us are conditioned by custom and personal preference in this matter than we would care to admit!”

attention to the biblically-commanded discipline of worship. In studying three hundred churches whom experienced spiritual and numeric revitalization, Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson learned that these churches rediscovered their passion for God by examining and reordering their worship. Celebrative, orderly, God-centered worship characterized all three hundred churches in this study.<sup>2</sup> Brian Croft identifies the primacy of worship in church revitalization when he asserts, “We are to gather as Christians to worship God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. If God’s word by his Spirit is what breathes new life into a church, a church seeking revitalization must assure that God’s word and the power of his Spirit become the central focus of the gathering.”<sup>3</sup>

Andrew M. Davis contends for flexibility in revitalizing worship, but argues for a flexibility that refuses to compromise the biblical essentials of worship. Revitalized worship is essential to the work of revitalizing the church, but revitalized worship should never compromise the essentials of the faith. Davis rightly asserts,

The timeless aspects of the Christian faith must never be changed: biblical truth about God, humanity, Christ, the gospel, repentance and faith, heaven and hell, etc. Any church that changes these timeless truths to please a disapproving world has signed its own death warrant. So also the church must maintain timeless New Testament patterns of worship broadly defined, such as the preaching the Word; the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; public prayer; the collection of funds for the work of the church; the right exercise of the ordinances of baptism and Lord’s Supper; and the fellowship of the saints.<sup>4</sup>

John S. Hammett contends that worship is foundational to the health and vitality of the local church. Revitalizing churches, however, will not view worship as a wax nose to be shaped by personal preference. True worship, Hammett maintains, is God-centered, Spirit-empowered, Christ-focused, biblically grounded and multifaceted.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 76-97.

<sup>3</sup>Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 95.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 189-91.

<sup>5</sup>John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*

These citations represent a reasonable cross-section of the contemporary literature on church revitalization. The church-growth oriented literature seldom mentions worship as an imperative element of church revitalization. Conversely, the categories of church-health-centric, analytic-descriptive and Scripture-centric literature consistently address the primacy of worship in church revitalization. Whereas both the historical record of the Jerusalem church and the Pauline corpus are pregnant with emphases on worship, we maintain that the wonder-inducing, corporate worship of God is integral to the work of church revitalization.

The objective of this chapter is four-fold. First, we will define worship as discovered in Scripture and consider why the church worships. Secondly, we will examine the primacy of worship in the corporate life of the Jerusalem church. Thirdly, we will assess the role of worship in church revitalization as presented in the Pauline corpus. Finally, we will consider the priority of vibrant worship as a necessary condition for church renewal and revitalization.

### **The What and Why of Corporate Worship**

A thoroughgoing definition of worship is somewhat elusive. Perhaps we struggle with definition because of the existential nature of worship and the immensity of worship's Object. Worship is so fundamental to human existence and experience as to render the absence of worship an impossibility. Simply put, the creature was created to worship, and therefore cannot exist without worshipping something or someone (cf. Deut 6:4-5; Eccl 12:13; Rom 1:18-25). Further, creaturely worship rightly offered to the Creator enters a realm so vast as to have no discernable horizon. Worship of the living

---

(Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 240. Hammett explains the multifaceted aspect of worship thus: "Multifaceted, that is, while the purpose and focus of worship is honoring God, some aspects of worship also inevitably edify believers and proclaim the gospel to nonbelievers."

God encompasses all of existence, all of time, and stretches to the horizonless vistas of eternity—hence the difficulty in satisfactorily defining worship.

Definitional difficulties notwithstanding, wide-ranging attempts at defining worship abound. Ralph P. Martin captures the Trinitarian nature of worship when asserts, “Christian worship is the adoration and service to God the Father through the mediation of the Son and prompted by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> Per Martin’s definition, worship includes both adulation of God and service to God arising from a distinctively regenerate being, a Christian. Further, he rightly indicates that acceptable worship by the creature is dependent upon the internal prompting of the Holy Spirit and the intermediation of the risen, ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

John M. Frame asserts in the very first sentence of his popular work on the subject, “Worship is the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.”<sup>7</sup> Notice Frame’s contention that worship is “work,” a discipline to be practiced by believers. The church is to discipline herself to not only acknowledge, but to praise and extol God for his flawless attributes and his wondrous works issuing from his covenant faithfulness.

Robert G. Rayburn defines worship as “the activity of the new life of a believer in which, recognizing the fullness of the Godhead as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and His mighty redemptive acts, he seeks by the power of the Holy Spirit to render to the living God the glory, honor and submission which are His due.”<sup>8</sup> Rayburn’s definition helpfully identifies the only source from which true worship may issue, namely from the believer who is experiencing the “new life” of regeneration. Furthermore,

---

<sup>6</sup>Ralph P. Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 210.

<sup>7</sup>John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1996), 1.

<sup>8</sup>Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 20.

Rayburn helpfully adds that in addition to rendering honor and glory to God, the believer's worship likewise renders submission to the will and commandments of God (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

While acknowledging the difficulty of a comprehensive definition, Peterson proposes hypothetically that “worship of the living God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way the he alone makes possible.”<sup>9</sup> Peterson's hypothesis is helpful in that he shifts from the specifics of what worship is to the broader proposal that God alone establishes the terms by which he may be acceptably worshiped. This shift in definitional perspective enables Peterson to propose a biblical theology of worship that traverses the entirety of Scripture. Whereas God is the object of true worship, he has, by his self-revelation in his word, established both the definition and acceptable means of worship for the church.

What Peterson articulates in the entirety of his volume on worship, D. A. Carson attempts to distill into a single paragraph worthy of consideration in its entirety:

*Worship* is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, *human worship* of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, *Christian worship* is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers. Such worship therefore manifests itself both in adoration and in action, both in the individual believer and in *corporate worship*, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of the devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation.<sup>10</sup>

With a surprising economy of words, Carson's definition spans the biblical data from creation to consummation.<sup>11</sup> Further, this definition embraces both the individual and

---

<sup>9</sup>Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 20.

<sup>10</sup>Carson, et al, *Worship by the Book*, 26.

<sup>11</sup>Peterson's expansive biblical theology of worship (*Engaging with God*) demonstrates

corporate aspects of worship, reminding us that true worship encompasses all of life for the believer. More importantly for our argument, Carson's definition identifies a receiving aspect of worship notably absent in the abbreviated definitions considered above.

The oft-repeated mantra that we should attend worship only to *give* honor and glory to God rather than to *get* from worship has risen to near shibboleth-status in some Reformed circles. Given the therapeutic impulses of contemporary Christianity, we understand the intention behind this assertion while at the same time holding that it is scripturally imbalanced. Well-meaning commentators often identify worship exclusively as work or activity. While we acknowledge the difficulty of defining worship, we wish to contend that a concept of receiving *from* God as well as a rendering *to* God is vital to a right understanding of worship.

To reduce the worship of God to only that which we do (i.e. ascribe glory and honor to God) is to misunderstand the covenant nature of God. Notice Carson's assertion that we worship God "precisely because he is worthy, and delightfully so." God is delightfully worthy of worship because of who he is *and what he has done and is doing*. What has he done and what is he doing? According to Carson's definition, worship "finds its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers" (cf. 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:13-19). Worship includes *receiving* from God the grace of all he has done and is doing in the covenant of redemption whereby he reconciles us to himself and to one another. God is redeeming for himself an innumerable, united, worshipping throng who will worship *and enjoy him* eternally (cf. Rev 5:8-14). Indeed, the popular Westminster rendering that we were created to "glorify God and enjoy him forever" might be better expressed as our eternal enjoyment of God which results in us worshipping him forever.

---

remarkable congruity with Carson's much-abbreviated definition of worship.

We are called together in corporate worship, therefore, to *get* from God, to *receive* from the means of grace all that he is accomplishing for us and in us through the covenant of redemption. Jeffrey J. Meyer rightly contends that this reality “is crucial. The Lord gives; we receive. Since faith is receptive and passive in nature, ‘faith-full’ worship must be about receiving from God. He gives and by faith we receive.”<sup>12</sup> In corporate worship we receive by faith the grace of God’s forgiveness, we receive the gracious benefits of the gospel, we receive the grace of God’s nourishing word and we receive the grace of God’s benediction. *Only when we have thus received of God’s grace by faith are we able to appropriately respond in informed, grateful adoration and praise.*

We see, therefore, that corporate worship is a getting and a giving, a receiving and a responding. We receive grace through God’s appointed means of grace, and we reciprocate by rendering to him the honor, glory and obedience of which he is therefore eminently worthy. Further, we first *receive* in worship, and only then are we enabled to *render* to God an informed and acceptable praise. The author of Hebrews captures this reciprocity of worship precisely when he writes, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29). As we receive grace upon grace by faith, we worship. As we praise and honor God in reverence and awe, we worship. God gives out of the abundance of his grace, and we receive that grace by faith. Upon receiving God’s grace, we give God the glory, honor, laud and adoration due his holy name. The whole of this reciprocity comprises the biblically mandated worship of the church.

We come now to our attempt at defining worship consciously aware that, as Erasmus once said, every definition is dangerous. Without definitions, however, one

---

<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 94.

cannot make arguments or write dissertations. This definition attempts to comprehend both the why of worship and the what of worship and will regulate the remainder of this chapter: Worship is the native occupation of the regenerate believer whereby, through the God-appointed means of grace, he receives of God's grace by faith and then responds in adoration, praise, honor-giving, glorification, enjoyment and obedience towards God. Worship is God-centered, Christ-focused and Spirit-empowered. It is the chief end for which we were created, is in time both individual and corporate in nature, and will in eternity be our joy-inducing privilege forever.

Church revitalization requires a revitalization of wonder-filled worship. Churches experiencing plateau and decline have often drifted gradually, almost imperceptibly, from a God-centered, grace-receiving, Christ-focused, Spirit-empowered discipline of corporate worship. When this takes place, wonder declines, joy is diminished, and a perfunctory ritual displaces the impassioned worship of our Redeemer-God. Passionless, Spiritless ceremony robs the congregation of growth in grace and knowledge of the truth, faithfulness fades, conversions become rare, and numbers decline. The counterbalance to entropy in worship is a revitalization of worship wherein the church engages with God on the terms he has established in his word. In short, vibrant, biblically-informed worship is a necessary condition for church revitalization.

We proceed now to a consideration of the paradigm of worship apparent in the Jerusalem church and the evident pleasure of God in receiving their worship.

### **The Wonder of Worship in the Jerusalem Church**

In the Lucan account recorded in Acts, the Jerusalem church was a congregation of regularly-gathering believers vitally engaged with the worship of God in accord with the terms of worship God established in his word. The consistent gathering of the church is prominent in the narrative. The followers of Jesus assembled to receive

their final instructions from him before his ascension (Acts 1:6ff).<sup>13</sup> In Acts 1:14 we find the church gathering in a continual devotion to prayer. When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, we discover the church assembled together in one place (Acts 2:1). In Acts 2:42-47 we note that the worshiping church gathered daily in the Temple (cf. 5:42). Peter and John reported the threats of the Sanhedrin to the gathered church and the church responded in unified prayer (Acts 4:23-31). The “full number” of the church gathered to select the first deacons upon the counsel of the apostles (Acts 6:1-7). The Jerusalem church gathered regularly and intentionally, and each of these recorded gatherings evidence that worship was at the center of their gathering.

Luke’s initial summary statement concerning the Jerusalem church gives us extraordinary insight into the nature of the worship of the gathered church: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers . . . and day by day, attending the temple together . . . praising God and having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:42, 46-47).

Some hold that Luke is here describing the church’s community life as a whole as opposed to articulating a liturgical account of their gathered meetings.<sup>14</sup> The summary of Acts 2:42-47 certainly contains elements of general community life (e.g. apostolic signs, sharing of possessions, shared in-home meals), but an exegetical consideration of the passage yields several insights into what can only be ascribed to the corporate worship of the gathered church. Eckhard J. Schnabel maintains that verse forty-two delineates the corporate worship-life of the church, and verses forty-three through forty-seven unpacks the effect of their corporate worship upon the unbelieving general public.<sup>15</sup> Schnabel’s treatment finds some support in the USB Greek text wherein the

---

<sup>13</sup>W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 256. Davies argues that Luke is indicating a group larger than the immediate apostles in Acts 1:6, which seems to accord with 1:12-15.

<sup>14</sup>Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 152.

<sup>15</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament

pericope divides at verse forty-three, leaving verse forty-two as the descriptive conclusion of the Pentecost narrative. Elements of corporate worship certainly seem prevalent in verse forty-two, though, as we will argue, additional descriptors of corporate worship appear throughout the pericope.

The conjunctive δὲ (ἤσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες—and they devoted themselves) connects verse forty-two to verse forty-one. This indicates that all the believers—both the original 120 and the newly-baptized 3,000—devoted themselves to the worship Luke described in Acts 2:42-47. Worship was the practice of the entire primitive church, from the original apostles to the newest converts. The employment of the participial form of προσκατερέω (to devote) indicates that the worship described in this pericope was a discipline practiced with intentionality, resolve and perseverance by the gathered church. Indeed, verse forty-six informs us that they worshiped at the Temple *daily*. The new life of regeneration wrought in these believers by the Holy Spirit elicited a universal response of intense devotion to the worship of the crucified, resurrected, ascended Lord Jesus. Worship in this church was no mere routine, but was rather a joyful, innate preoccupation practiced with regularity and diligence.

Luke’s initial description of the worship of the Jerusalem church contains four elements. They devoted themselves to “τῆ διδαχῆ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῆ κοινωνίᾳ, τῆ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς—the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). We will treat each of these elements individually, and in so doing we will discover that the first church was immediately engaging with God in worship on the terms he has established in his word.

The first noted preoccupation of the church is that of devotion to “τῆ διδαχῆ τῶν ἀποστόλων—the teaching of the apostles.” Apostolic teaching was authoritative on the grounds of their close relationship to the incarnate Christ and the years he spent

---

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 175.

teaching them. As Jesus taught his disciples, so now the apostles taught their disciples (cf. Matt 28:18-20). The apostles clearly understood this ministry of the word to be primary among their responsibilities (cf. Acts 6:1-6), and the worshiping church devoted themselves to this teaching. Further, the congregation's devotion to the apostles' teaching was two-fold. First, they were devoted to the hearing of the apostles' declaration of the word of God, and secondly they devotedly practiced what they heard the apostles teach.<sup>16</sup>

Recalling our definition of worship, we observe that the devotion of the first church to the apostolic proclamation of the word of God answers to several aspects of biblical worship. The preaching and teaching of the word of God is a God-appointed means of communicating grace to his people. The apostles preached and the people received. God's grace communicated by his word elicits the praise of his people, evidence of which we find in verse forty-seven where the church is characterized as "praising God" daily in their worship. The believers rendered to God an appropriate response to the grace communicated by his word. Further, as we noted above, these believers responded to the apostolic proclamation of the word by obeying the word. The Jerusalem church was a worshiping church, devoted to receiving the word of God and responding with praise, adoration and obedience.

The second noted preoccupation of the church is that of devotion to "τῆ κοινωνία—the fellowship." As we noted in chapter two of this dissertation, the κοινόν words in Greek typically signify a sharing or participating in love with someone in something that is greater than the relationship itself.<sup>17</sup> Within the church, τῆ κοινωνία signifies to the joint participation of believers in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:9), in the Holy Spirit

---

<sup>16</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 177. Schnabel insightfully asserts, "The believers practiced what they heard the apostles teach (otherwise they would not 'persistently devote' [the meaning of the periphrastic here] themselves to their teaching)."

<sup>17</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 179. Schnabel describes fellowship as "the participation in the salvation that has been opened up by Jesus; it is the specific social place of this salvation where all are linked with each other, as sinners who have been saved, by the Holy Spirit in *agape*."

(cf. 2 Cor 13:14), in the propagation of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:5), and in fellowship with one another (cf. 1 John 1:3).<sup>18</sup> Further, as evidenced in Acts 2:44-45, the fellowship of believers in the Jerusalem church also included the voluntary selling and distribution of their possessions to provide for one another's needs.

As an expression of worship, the Jerusalem fellowship of believers acknowledged and celebrated the glories of their mutual redemption accomplished by the cross-work and resurrection of Christ. Their Christian fellowship was an active, joint exultation in the unity wrought by the Holy Spirit's mutual indwelling of the individuals collectively comprising the church (cf. Eph 4:1-6). As an act of worship, the Jerusalem believers jointly participated in the fellowship of gospel proclamation and gospel propagation (cf. Acts 2:1-11; 2:47; 4:23-31). This fellowship of believers was a fellowship that worshiped and praised God for making them fellow citizens of the Kingdom of heaven by the blood of Christ (cf. Acts 15:6-18; Eph 2:11-22).

In sum, the worship of fellowship to which this church devoted herself was a fellowship of love, unity, sharing and joint participation in the glories of the risen Christ, the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, the propagation of the gospel, relationship with one another and ministry to one another. Reflection upon the moving causes of her fellowship together in Christ was a mean whereby God continually communicated his grace to the church. The grace-communicating reality of being bound together by such unbreakable bonds of fellowship cultivated in the Jerusalem church a wonder-inducing worship of their one Lord.

The third noted preoccupation of the church is that of devotion to “τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου—the breaking of the bread.” Whether Luke is referencing common meals or the Eucharist is somewhat debated among commentators. Darrell L. Bock argues for the common meal interpretation, though he grants the possibility of a reference to the Lord's

---

<sup>18</sup>Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 153-54.

Table.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, Longenecker argues that Luke's placement of this phrase between the religiously pregnant terms "fellowship" and "prayer" suggests more than an ordinary meal.<sup>20</sup> Luke was likely indicating that the church shared common meals together in which they observed the Lord's Supper during the course of the meal, much as Jesus did when establishing the Lord's Supper during the Passover meal (cf. Luke 22:7-22; Acts 2:46).<sup>21</sup>

Assuming that the table fellowship of the Jerusalem church included both common meals and the Lord's Supper, their breaking of bread together was profoundly significant in relation to worship. A common meal shared with fellow believers would have reminded the church of Jesus's regular practice with his disciples and the intimacy of such occasions. Joint participation in common meals would have served to bind the believer's hearts together as they shared their lived experiences as followers of the risen Christ, reminding them regularly of the glorious dimensions of their shared redemption.<sup>22</sup> Doubtlessly, such celebratory events would have occasioned the offering of thanksgiving and praise to God for his bountiful provisions, both physical and spiritual.

Furthermore, participation in the Lord's Supper at the end of the common meal served as an extraordinary means of grace. C. F. D. Moule reminds us that "to break bread and share a cup together would be to recall not only the unseen presence of the Lord . . . but also the New Covenant which he had inaugurated at that particular meal in the upper room, in the context of his sacrificial self-surrender at Passover-time, in which

---

<sup>19</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 151. See also David Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 155-57.

<sup>20</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 86.

<sup>21</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 121.

<sup>22</sup>Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 157. Peterson asserts, ". . . eating together in Acts was an activity of profound spiritual significance. It was a way of expressing the special relationship which believers had with one another in Christ and the special responsibility to one another involved in that relationship."

they found themselves bonded into God’s people.”<sup>23</sup> The broken body of Christ remembered in Communion reminded the church of her Lord’s incomparable sin-bearing cross-work, and the cup his sin-remitting blood. The whole of their redemption was remembered and celebrated in the table fellowship of the Lord’s Supper. Not only so, the believers’ eschatological hope was invigorated when they recalled that the Lord Jesus himself would one day drink this cup anew with them in the Father’s gloriously consummated Kingdom (cf. Matt 13:43; 26:29). Here again we see the church receiving from God through his appointed means of grace, and the church reciprocating in worshipful thanksgiving and praise to God (cf. Acts 2:46-47). We observe, therefore, that even common meals—punctuated by the Lord’s Table—were infused with worshipful meaning as the early church remembered the provision of God the Father and the sufferings of Christ with thanksgiving and praise.

The fourth noted preoccupation of the church is that of devotion to “ταῖς προσευχαῖς—the prayers.” As we noted in chapter three, Luke’s construction of the plural with the definite article is taken by some to mean formal or set prayers as was customary in Judaism (cf. 3:1).<sup>24</sup> Bock maintains that the construction here is likely broad enough to include extemporaneous prayers, yet specific enough to call attention to set times and forms of prayers common in the Temple and synagogues.<sup>25</sup> Barrett claims that we are left only to plausibly guess at Luke’s intention, yet he adds parenthetically, “Unless the plural

---

<sup>23</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament*, Ecumenical Studies in Worship No. 9 (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 20.

<sup>24</sup>Longenecker, *Acts*, 757. Longenecker asserts, “Luke’s use of the definite article and the plural in speaking of ‘the prayers’ (*tais proseuchais*, GK 4666) suggests formal prayers, probably both Jewish and Christian.” He later adds, “In addition, it is not difficult to envision them as praying extemporaneously, with those more informal prayers being built on past models—such as can be seen in Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Zechariah’s Benedictus (Lk 1:67-69), and Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis (Lk 2:28-32).”

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

is an intensive—they prayed more than others were accustomed to do.”<sup>26</sup> Barrett’s latter comment is the more likely explanation of Luke’s unusual construction of *ταῖς προσευχαῖς*—they devoted themselves to intensive prayer—especially given the Lucan emphasis on the primacy of prayer throughout Luke-Acts. The text indicates that all of the believing community, including the newly-baptized, gave themselves persistently and devotedly to the practice of intensive prayer.

All true worship is directed Godward, and this reality is nowhere more evident than in prayer as an element of worship. As we demonstrated in chapter four, the Jerusalem church was a congregation who gave primacy to prayer. Indeed, the apostles, trained to pray in the school of Christ, identified prayer as a priority on par with the ministry of the word (cf. Acts 6:1-4). Repeatedly throughout the Acts record Luke reiterates the impulse of the church to pray (cf. Acts 1:14, 24-25; 2:42; 3:1; 4:24-30; 12:12). We have observed that the consistent trajectory of prayer throughout the Scripture is toward crying out to God to act, forgive, redeem and save on the basis of his covenant promises, and the prayers of the primitive church followed this trajectory. Their prayer-worship modeled the cry the dependent creature to the omnipotent Creator. Prayer-worship in the Jerusalem was gospel-centric. They prayed on the grounds of God’s covenant promises, and God was pleased to hear from heaven and answer with power (cf. Acts 4:24-30).

The sixth characteristic of worship evident in our text is that of awe-filled wonder. Luke informs that “awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (Acts 2:43). The word *φόβος* (awe/fear) here likely carries more the connotation of awe rather than stark terror, though some terror may have existed (cf. Acts 5:1-5). Richard M. Longenecker contends Luke is referencing the

---

<sup>26</sup>C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, International Critical Commentary 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 166.

unbelieving population of Jerusalem here,<sup>27</sup> but comparison with other such “φόβος” usages in Acts clearly indicates that awe and wonder existed within the church proper (cf. Acts 5:11; 9:31). The powerfully-demonstrated presence of God with the congregation in their worship-life, gospel ministry and apostolic miracles doubtlessly produced an atmosphere of wonder and awe in the gathered worship of the Jerusalem church.

The seventh and eighth characteristics of worship evident in this pericope are joy and praise. The congregation was possessed of “ἀγαλλιάσει καὶ ἀφελότητι καρδίας αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν—rejoicing and humble hearts, praising God” (Acts 2:46-47). Just as Jesus promised, the believers were experiencing his powerful and realized presence among them and their hearts were filled with exuberant joy as they worshiped the risen Lord (cf. John 16:22). Indeed, their joyful worship resounded with praise and commendation to God for his mighty, redemptive work in their midst (cf. Act 2:11; 4:21).

In summary, the worship of the Jerusalem church involved hearing and obeying the word of God, participation in intimate fellowship, eucharistic remembrance, gospel-centric prayer, awe-filled wonder, exuberant joy and resounding praise. Their worship was reciprocal, a receiving of God’s manifold grace through God’s appointed means of grace that elicited a wonder-filled response of adoration and praise. These descriptors all point to a vigorous, salubrious vitality in the worship of the primitive church that elicited the favor of on-looking unbelievers and the outpouring of God’s blessing upon the congregation (cf. Acts 2:47). Such worship is essential for churches in need of revitalization.

In chapter six, the worship and unity of the body was threatened by the complaint of the Hellenists concerning the neglect of their widows. We observe that the

---

<sup>27</sup>Longenecker, *Acts*, 86. Longenecker asserts, “‘Everyone’ (*pase psyche*), in contradistinction to ‘all the believers’ (*pantes hoi pisteusantes*) of v. 44 refers hyperbolically to nonbelievers in Jerusalem who knew of the events of Pentecost and were observing the life of the early congregation in the months that followed.”

apostles' immediate concern was to maintain the church's devotion to worship in terms of the preaching of the word and prayer (cf. Acts 6:2-4). They counseled the church to select seven Spirit-filled men for administering the daily distribution, freeing the apostles to give all their attention to leading the worship of the church in word and prayer. Luke summarizes the results of this worship-protecting directive, asserting that "the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). These summaries bear significant testimony that God was pleased to bless the Jerusalem church's devotion to the worship of the risen Christ.

We see, therefore, that the Jerusalem church practiced a single-minded devotion to the worship of God. While the church was not without problems, the blessings of God's presence and the outpouring of his power upon them affirmed God's pleasure in their devotion to worship. The church enjoyed remarkable unity, advanced an effective gospel witness, grew exponentially and demonstrated a notable degree of spiritual healthiness as they worshiped God exuberantly. We derive from this the paradigmatic nature of worship in the life of the church and understand the salubrious benefits of right worship in relation to the revitalization of plateaued and declining churches. Indeed, wonder-inducing worship of the majesty and glory of our redeeming God lies at the very heart of biblical church revitalization. We turn now to the primacy of worship relative to church revitalization in the thought of the apostle Paul.

### **Worship in the Pauline Corpus**

Having observed that worship of the living God characterized the daily life of the Jerusalem church, we recall that the apostle Paul was an eyewitness of the practices and priorities of this church. From his first missional excursion to his ecclesial epistles written from prison in Rome, the apostle sought to instill the worship DNA of the Jerusalem church in the churches throughout Asia. We recall as well Paul's recognition

of the entropic principle of decay and decline in the churches and the attention he gave to this issue in all three of his recorded missionary journeys. Paul was possessed of a pressing concern for the health and vitality of the churches dotting the Mediterranean Basin and beyond, and we further see in his ecclesial letters persistent exhortations to worship aimed at the continual revitalization of the churches. Consideration of the following texts in the Pauline corpus will demonstrate that the apostle viewed the right worship of God a necessary condition for church renewal and revitalization.

### **Worship in Romans**

The first eleven chapters of Paul’s epistle to the church in Rome are rightly considered the apostle’s soteriological *magnum opus*. Indeed, he graced the recipients of this letter with the most detailed exegesis of the gospel found anywhere in Scripture. In the opening verses of the epistle, Paul articulated his longing to visit the church in order that he might “τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικὸν εἰς τὸ στηριχθῆναι ὑμᾶς—impart some spiritual gift to you to strengthen you” (Rom 1:11). Here again we see Paul’s desire to strengthen and revitalize the churches in his use of στηρίζω. Whereas the first eleven chapters of Roman’s were aimed at strengthening their understanding of the gospel—and thereby strengthening their evangelism, as we will argue in chapter seven—the initial verses of chapter twelve were calculated to strengthen their worship of God.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the opening exhortation of the apostle in chapter twelve is entirely predicated upon the argument of the first eleven chapters. The church’s worship is dependent upon a right understanding of the gospel, further enforcing the principle of reciprocity in corporate worship.

---

<sup>28</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 913. Longenecker asserts, “This section of 12:1–15:13 contains material that Paul viewed as an integral part of his ‘spiritual gift’ (χάρισμα πνευματικόν) to the Christians at Rome, which he referred to earlier in 1:11–12 as his gift to them in order to strengthen and encourage them.”

An initial section focused on orthodoxy followed by exhortations to orthopraxy is something of a pattern in the Pauline corpus.<sup>29</sup> The orthodoxy section of Romans consists of a lengthy exposition of the gospel in terms of justification by faith alone, encompassing the first eleven chapters. The transition to orthopraxy in chapter twelve opens with an appeal to all the apostle had heretofore posited: “Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ—I appeal *therefore* to you, brothers, *by the mercies of God* (Rom 12:1, emphasis added). He prefaces his hortatory material—beginning with a call to worship—with an appeal to the manifest and manifold mercies of God articulated in chapters one through eleven. On the grounds that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, he commands Christians to worship (cf. Rom 1:16; 12:1-2). Because the righteous shall live by faith, the church should worship (cf. Rom 1:17; Hab 2:4; Rom 12:1-2). Whereas the righteousness of God apart from the law has been revealed in Christ, the redeemed must worship (cf. Rom 3:21-22; 12:1-2). The only rational response of the children of God to being justified by faith as a free gift of God is to worship (cf. Rom 3:22-24; 12:1-2).

Because Christ was sacrificed for their trespasses and raised from the dead for their justification, the church should respond in worshipful adoration (cf. Rom 4:25; 12:1-2). Peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ is cause for Christian worship (cf. Rom 5:1; 12:1-2). Unity with Christ in his death and resurrection, freedom from the bondage of sin, release from the law of sin and death, and being made joint-heirs with Christ all compel us to worship (cf. Rom 6:5ff; 7:4-6; 8:1-2; 8:12-16; 12:1-2). Assured future glory and the everlasting, insuperable love of God constrain us to worship (cf. Rom 8:18-30, 31-29; 12:1-2). Christians should wonder and worship because of the fathomless depths of the riches and wisdom of God and because of the undiscoverable nature of his

---

<sup>29</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 431. Morris points out the pattern in Romans, Galatians, Colossians and Thessalonians, noting that the pattern is not so evident in Corinthians and Philippians.

judgments and the inscrutability of his ways (cf. Rom 11:33; 12:1-2). Indeed, we must needs worship God because “from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (cf. Rom 11:36; 12:1-2). Right understanding of the manifold mercies of God’s redemption through the imputed righteousness of Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone is the consummate predicate for the right worship of God, according to Paul.<sup>30</sup>

The ground of worship dictates the nature of worship, and thus the apostle commands, “*παραστῆσαι*<sup>31</sup> τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ—offer your bodies a sacrifice, living, holy, acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1). In view of so great a salvation, Christians are commanded to live a life wholly devoted to our redeeming God. The command is both comprehensive and cultic.

A Christian’s offering of his body envisions a comprehensive sacrifice of worship involving his entire being, body and soul. No aspect of our being lies outside this all-inclusive call to worship, for we are to worship “the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (cf. Matt 22:37; Deut 6:5). Cultically, Paul’s use of *παραστῆσαι* (offer) in relation to our whole being is a technical term that harkens back to OT sacrifice. Israelites would offer their own animal, the animal would be ritually slaughtered, and its blood and body consumed by fire as a sacrifice to God. The corresponding Pauline imagery is intentional and vivid.

The cultic vocabulary continues, and is no less evocative. The nature of the Christian’s sacrifice of worship is to be “ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ—living, holy, well-pleasing to God.” The living (ζῶσαν) aspect of the Christian’s sacrifice of worship

---

<sup>30</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 625. Schreiner posits, “. . . the appeal to God’s mercy grounds the following exhortations in the indicative of God’s grace, which is charted out for us in Rom. 1:16–11:36.”

<sup>31</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 626. Schreiner notes, “The infinitive [*παραστῆσαι*] following *παρακαλῶ* (I urge) has an imperatival sense and should be construed as a command.”

speaks to the reality that we are now dead to sin but alive in Christ. We therefore offer the vibrancy and full energy of our resurrected, obedient life in Christ as a continual burnt offering<sup>32</sup> of worship to God (cf. Rom 6:2, 8, 13; Gal 2:20).<sup>33</sup> This continual sacrifice of worship is to be *ἁγίαν* (holy), consecrated and given over entirely to God (cf. Lev 8:11-12; Num 3:13). Not only so, but our sacrifice of worship must be such as is “*εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ*—well-pleasing to God.” Paul reminds us that God alone prescribes the means and manner of our worship, that rightly-offered worship is a pleasing aroma unto God, and any attempt to offer unauthorized worship is deadly (cf. Exod 29:1-18; Lev 1:1-9; Lev 10:1-3).

Paul further asserts that the Christian’s offering of his entire being as a continual, consecrated and acceptable sacrifice of worship to God constitutes “*λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν*—your rational worship.”<sup>34</sup> Such worship is the rational response of the creature in light of the Creator’s redemption in Christ Jesus, exposing the failure to worship God rightly as the very height of irrationality. Connecting the exhortation of Romans 12:1 with the orthodoxy of Romans 1:16-11:36, Robert H. Mounce rightly posits, “In view of God’s acts of mercy it is entirely fitting that we commit ourselves without reservation to him.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the untrammelled worship of God is the only right and rational response to his mercy and grace extended to us through Jesus Christ.

Paul discloses the manner of our sacrifice of worship by two imperatives, one negative, the other positive. The first constitutes a resistance to worldly conformity, and

---

<sup>32</sup>The aorist tense of the infinitive *παραστήσαι* coupled with *ζῶσαν* emphasizes the continual nature of our sacrifice of worship. See Schreiner, *Romans*, 626.

<sup>33</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 434.

<sup>34</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), vol. iv, 142. *TDNT* notes that in Greek philosophy *λογικός* typically denoted that which is rational, reasonable.

<sup>35</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 232.

the second an embrace of sanctified transformation. Both are functionally derivative of the self-sacrificial worship commanded in verse one.<sup>36</sup>

We must “μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ—not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2). This command urges believers to resist the world’s way of thinking by refusing to allow the world to press us into its mold or pattern of behavior.<sup>37</sup>

Paul’s assertions here in Romans 12:1-2 likely recall his argument in 1:18-32. The wrath of God resounds from heaven because men suppress the truth about God, though his glory-worthy attributes are clearly revealed in creation (Rom 1:18-20). Men refuse to render to God the worship he is due, offering glory to the creatures rather than the Creator (Rom 1:21-23). Such idolatry results in men dishonoring their own bodies through vile passions and sinful, shameless acts (Rom 1:24-27). Those thus refusing to acknowledge God are given over to the judgment of debased reprobation of mind wherein they disobey the ordinances of God (Rom 1:28-32). Notice here that the underlying sin leading to wrath and judgment is refusal to rightly worship God.

Gordon D. Fee maintains that Romans 12:1-2 constitutes a profound reversal of Romans 1:18-32 where failure to worship is the fundamental sin.<sup>38</sup> The mercies of God supplant the wrath of God for those in Christ. Christian worship entails sacrificing our being to God rather than refusing to glorify him, offering our bodies to him rather than giving our bodies to the ravages of sin. Rational worship of God replaces irrational worship of idols, and a renewed mind supplants the reprobate mind. The Christian approves God’s will rather than rejecting God’s ordinances.<sup>39</sup> The reversal is magnificent

---

<sup>36</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 754-55.

<sup>37</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 923.

<sup>38</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 601.

<sup>39</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 625.

and transformative. For those in Christ, the manifold mercies of God supersede the manifest wrath of God. Because of the revealed righteousness of Christ, informed worship of the living God supplants the indolent idolatry of creature-worship. Glad obedience supplants gratuitous rebellion, and the illumined mind displaces the degenerate heart. In a word, the manifest mercies of God in Christ reverse the curse of delusion and degradation and restores intelligent, revitalizing worship of the living God.

In conclusion, according to Paul, worship is the native occupation of regenerate believers whereby, through the God-appointed means of grace emanating from the gospel, we receive God's grace by faith and respond in worshipful, obedient, self-sacrificial adoration. Such worship refuses conformity to the world-system and embraces a lifetime of transformation through the Holy Spirit-induced, Scripture-informed renewing of the mind. In a word, scriptural worship transforms and revitalizes both the individual believer and the collective church. Right and vibrant worship of the living God, therefore, is a necessary condition for the revitalization of the church in every age.

### **Worship in Corinth**

The cosmopolitan city of Corinth during the first century A. D. was a debauched mess both morally and philosophically. In the words of Morris, “‘Corinth’ suggested culture and courtesans. . . . ‘Corinthian words’ implied pretensions to philosophy and letters, and to ‘Corinthianize’ was popular Greek for ‘go to the devil.’”<sup>40</sup> Individualistic pursuit of wealth, education, pleasure and athletic glory prevailed in this culturally diverse gulf city. Worship of the Greek gods Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon, Asclepius, Demeter and Kore was common, and mystery cults such as that of Isis and Sarapis abounded alongside the imperial cult of emperor worship.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the

---

<sup>40</sup>Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 21.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 3.

philosophy of Christ, his gospel, and the church were utterly antithetical to the prevailing cultic and moral impulses of the wicked city of Corinth. The church at Corinth faced immense cultural and societal pressure to compromise the pure worship of the living God.

While theories on the concern and structure of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians are wide-ranging, the analysis of Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner seems most satisfying in light of the larger Pauline corpus. Ciampa and Rosner contend that Paul's ordering of this letter reflects his position that the NT church is the eschatological temple of God wherein the church's purity and concern for God's glory combine to fulfill the Old Testament expectation of the worldwide worship of Yahweh.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the major divisions of 1 Corinthians, namely the grace of God in Christ (1:1-9), the wisdom of God in Christ (1:10-4:21), individual and corporate purity (5:1-7:40), loving God and neighbor (8:1-11:1), worship as a community (11:2-14:40), and the resurrection-hope and continuing work of the gospel (15:1-16:24) all accord well with the structural thesis of Ciampa and Rosner.<sup>43</sup> More to the point of this dissertation, this structural understanding of 1 Corinthians speaks powerfully to the Pauline concern for the primacy of worship in the life of the church.

Class and philosophical divisions in the church at Corinth threatened her unity, and the pure gospel of Christ crucified as the ultimate manifestation of the wisdom and power of God was Paul's solution for these divisions (cf. 1 Cor 1:10-4:21; 11:17-22). Sexual immorality and intramural lawsuits undermined the purity and witness of the church at Corinth, and an understanding of themselves to be the temple of the Holy Spirit—and therefore glorifying God in their bodies—was Paul's response to these

---

<sup>42</sup>Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 21-35.

<sup>43</sup>Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 24-28.

incongruities (cf. 5:1-6:19). Lack of concern for those with tender consciences, increasing idolatry, Communion gluttony, and personal pride in spiritual gifts undermined their worship, and Paul's prescription was the more excellent way of unconditional love (cf. 8:1-14:25). This conflagration of division, immorality, idolatry, inconsiderate practices and pride converged to produce a chaotic and disordered worship in the Corinthian church, undermining her witness to outsiders. Paul addressed the need for a revitalization of the church's worship in the instructive pericope of 14:24-40.

Enthusiasm for the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues<sup>44</sup> characterized the worship gatherings at Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 12:27-31; 13:1; 14:1-25). In their rush to display their perceived spiritual gift, the Corinthians apparently interrupted one another during worship without regard for the need of interpreters to translate their utterances, creating a chaotic, unedifying and even offensive atmosphere in their gathered worship (cf. 1 Cor 14:5-23, 26-28). Paul's corrective for such prideful and disordered displays focused upon the importance of congregational edification during times of worship. Unbridled and uninterpreted utterances in foreign languages served only for the edification of the utterer, leaving the remainder of the gathering estranged and uninstructed, thus circumventing the purpose of worship (cf. 1 Cor 14:2, 4, 6-11).

Conversely, according to Paul, those who by the gifting of the Spirit spoke coherent prophecies that could be evaluated by the entire congregation served to build up the entire church (cf. 1 Cor 14:3-5, 29-33). Anthony C. Thiselton effectively argues that Paul's references to prophesy here allude to "healthy preaching, proclamation, or teaching which is pastorally applied for the appropriation of gospel truth and gospel promise, in their own context of situation, to help others."<sup>45</sup> The apostle's concern for the

---

<sup>44</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 286. Schreiner rightly argues that Paul's use of *γλῶσσαι* throughout these texts refers to human languages rather than ecstatic utterances.

<sup>45</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1084.

Corinthians' worship was that congregants would receive and evaluate intelligible information concerning the mighty, redemptive acts of God and would consequently render to God the praise, honor and glory due his name (cf. 1 Cor 14:29; 2:1-5; Rom 11:33-12:2). Intelligible, rational, ordered worship should characterize the gathered church, according to Paul.

To promote orderly worship at Corinth, Paul makes a startling distinction between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophesy (preaching, proclamation and teaching). He writes, citing Isaiah 28:11-12, "In the Law it is written, 'By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord'" (1 Cor 14:21). The context of this citation is God's judgment against the northern kingdom of Israel. Despite God's repeated warnings through the prophet Isaiah, the people and their leaders refused to heed the word of God and turn from their rebellion, even mocking God's word through Isaiah as infantile (cf. Isa 28:9-10). Because they would not heed the word of God, Isaiah declared their judgment would be that the word of God would seem to them as the unintelligible gibberish of an infant, and they would thereby be blinded to the coming judgment (cf. Isa 28:13). In 722 B.C. God allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel and they were overrun by a people who spoke a foreign language.

Why would Paul cite this passage in relation to the Corinthians' penchant for speaking in tongues? Schreiner is again helpful here, stating, "Presumably because it recounts an instance when the people of Israel heard a foreign language that they did not understand. Hearing the language of the Assyrians was not an occasion of joy but an indication of God's judgment upon Israel."<sup>46</sup> Paul then asserted, "Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers" (1 Cor 14:22). Unintelligible and uninterpreted languages are, according to the apostle, a sign that those who do not believe the word of

---

<sup>46</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 291.

God are under the judgment of God. Without interpretation, unbelievers attending the worship of the tongue-speaking Corinthians would hear only chaotic gibberish, conclude the Corinthians were insane, and leave blinded to the coming judgment of God (cf. 1 Cor 14:23)! Stated succinctly, the disorder of the Corinthians' worship was driving unbelievers away from the gospel rather than leading them to accept and believe the gospel.

Conversely, Paul asserted, "But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face he will worship God and declare the God is really among you" (1 Cor 14:24-25). The intelligible proclamation of orderly corporate worship of the living God—as opposed to gibberish-laden chaos—would result in the conviction and conversion of unregenerate attendees, according to Paul. In contemporary terms, we might say that worship involving insider jargon flung about in a disorderly manner drives unbelievers away from the gospel, whereas worship informed by Scripture and executed in a cogent, orderly liturgy will convict and convert the unregenerate. Given Paul's exhortations to Corinth, we may reasonably surmise that the steep decline in conversions in our churches is correlative to contemporary, unscriptural conventions of worship.

In verses 26-38 the apostle posits several correctives relative to the corporate worship in Corinth. The elements of their worship should be calculated to accomplish mutual edification (vss 26 & 31). Proclamations during worship should be *διακρίνω* (weighed, measured, judged) for their authenticity by the worshiping congregation (vs 29).<sup>47</sup> The common courtesy of non-interruption should be observed (vs 30). Women are

---

<sup>47</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1040. Thiselton asserts, "The authentic is to be sifted from the inauthentic or spurious, in the light of the OT scriptures, the gospel of Christ, the traditions of all the churches, and critical reflections. Nowhere does Paul hint that preaching or "prophecy" achieves a privileged status which places them above critical reflection in the light of the gospel, the Spirit, and the scriptures. It is never infallible."

precluded from didactic proclamation during worship (vss 33-35; cf. 1 Tim 2:11). Each of these correctives served to infuse Corinthian worship with edification, courtesy and order.

Paul punctuates the pericope of 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 with this exhortation: “πάντα δὲ εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατὰ τάξιν γινέσθω—but all should be done correctly and according to proper procedure” (vs 40). His use of the adjectival πάντα here indicates *everything* that might take place in their congregational worship—regardless of whether or not Paul had mentioned it in the pericope—should be executed according to a prescribed manner. Thiselton maintains that εὐσχημόνως is best translated “correctly” or “fittingly.”<sup>48</sup> There exists a correct and fitting manner of worship over against the incorrect and unfitting manner of worship practiced by the Corinthians.

To further drive home the point, the apostle adds, “καὶ κατὰ τάξιν—and according to order (or proper procedure). Thiselton is again helpful, asserting, “The prepositional phrase κατὰ τάξιν is a metaphor drawn from a military universe of discourse. The cognate noun τάγμα means that which is, ordered, especially in literal terms of a body of troops drawn up in ordered ranks.” Hence we understand proper and orderly procedure is essential to the worship of the gathered church. Indeed, the surrounding context prescribes just such orderly worship.

Proper worship acknowledges the lordship of Jesus through the variety of gifts empowered by the Holy Spirit within the body of the church (1 Cor 12:1-6). Orderly worship occurs when the variegated parts of the church-body converge in unison to proclaim and advance the gospel of the risen Christ (1 Cor 12:12-30). Mutual love and its entailments are more excellent than both prophecy and tongues in moderating the orderly worship of the church (1 Cor 13:1-13). Proclamation is superior to and more fitting than tongue-speaking in worship for the edification of the church and the conversion of the

---

<sup>48</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1167.

unregenerate (1 Cor 14:1-25). The gospel of the crucified, resurrected Christ is of first-order importance in the corporate worship of the gathered church (1 Cor 15:1-4).

In summary, the significant body of didactic material concerning worship in 1 Corinthians speaks powerfully to the Pauline concern for the primacy of worship in the life of this schismatic, chaotic church. Proper corporate worship of the living God, according to Paul, would have contributed considerably to the revival and revitalization of the church at Corinth. We will consider practical application of this invaluable instruction on the worship of the church in chapter ten of this dissertation.

### **Worship in Colossae**

The circumstances surrounding Paul's epistle to the Colossians are somewhat unusual. The apostle was not the founder of the church at Colossae whereas, in all likelihood, he had never visited the churches in this region (cf. Col 2:1). The text of the epistle suggests the possibility that Epaphras, a native of the area, planted the Colossian congregation (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12-13). Richard R. Melick, Jr. plausibly suggests that the church began around A. D. 53-55 while Paul taught in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus, where Epaphras became a student and able minister under the tutelage of the apostle.<sup>49</sup>

Five centuries prior to the time of the New Testament Colossae was a prominent city both due to its strategic location on the primary road between Ephesus and Sardis and the Euphrates and its thriving wool industry. By the time of the writing of this epistle, the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis had eclipsed Colossae in significance as the

---

<sup>49</sup>Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1991), 164.

financial and tourist centers of the region, though the population of Colossae doubtlessly remained quite diverse.<sup>50</sup>

Douglas J. Moo maintains that Epaphras had likely traveled to Rome for the purpose of consulting with Paul concerning problems arising in the church at Colossae. During his visit Epaphras apparently joined the apostle in his imprisonment (Phlm 23), precluding his ability to hand-deliver Paul's letter to the church, a task which fell to Tychius and Onesimus (cf. Col 4:7-9). Moo asserts, "Epaphras's [sic] reason for making this trip to visit Paul was almost certainly that he wanted to enlist the apostle's help in dealing with a dangerous yet slippery variation on the Christian gospel that had arisen in the community."<sup>51</sup> Despite the church having existed only seven or eight years, the principle of entropy was operative in this congregation.

Although Paul offers no explicit purpose for the writing of the letter in the text, cautions abound in the short letter. The believers at Colossae are warned of those who would "delude (them) with plausible arguments" (2:4), take them "captive by philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8), pass judgment on them concerning traditions (2:16-17), and deem them unqualified on ascetic and traditional grounds (2:18). The lack of specificity within the letter as to the "philosophy" against which Paul warned has given rise to wide speculation as to the particular false teaching threatening the health of this church. A relative consensus of scholars agree that the particular invading heresy was likely a syncretistic amalgamation of religio-philosophical traditions.<sup>52</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln well-poses the difficulty of identifying the heresy when he states, "Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the

---

<sup>50</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 20.

<sup>51</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 27.

<sup>52</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 57. Moo helpfully reviews the wide-ranging speculations about the false teaching at Colossae (pp 46-60).

ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis on his part.”<sup>53</sup> The difficulty of identifying the particular error notwithstanding, it was organized enough to be identified as a philosophy and aggressive enough to warrant Paul taking up his pen out of concern for the health of the church.

Whatever the strain of false teaching extant in Colossae at the time, the apostle’s counter-prescription is at once both concise and profoundly didactic. His Christ-hymn in 1:15-20 establishes the preeminence of Christ and his gospel in sweeping, cosmological terms (cf. Col 1:27; 2:2-3, 6-7, 9-15, 17, 20-23)<sup>54</sup> The compendium of Pauline warnings and Christological counter-prescriptions of 2:4-23 sets the stage for the orthopraxy delineated in 3:1-4:6.

Upon the ground that the Colossian believers had died in Christ to the elemental spirits of the world<sup>55</sup> and had been raised to new life in Christ, Paul urges upon them a series of practical injunctions calculated to liberate them from in-creeping error (cf. 2:20; 3:1). First, they must “Set (their) minds on things above, not on things that are on earth” if they were counteract the impulse of asceticism (cf. 2:18, 23; 3:2). Secondly, they must “Put to death therefore what is earthly in (them)” —namely sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene language and lying—if they were to overcome the indulgence of the flesh and escape the wrath of God (cf. 2:23b; 3:5-9).

Thirdly, the Colossians must “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” rather than taking on the appurtenances of

---

<sup>53</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Letter to the Colossians*, New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 561.

<sup>54</sup>Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 505. Hurtado rightly (albeit understatedly) asserts, “The key religious theme throughout Colossians is the centrality and supremacy of Jesus.”

<sup>55</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 189. Dunn states, “These (elemental spirits) are the powers and authorities which were so decisively routed on the cross (2:15). They therefore have no more authority over those ‘in Christ.’”

asceticism and its resultant pseudo-piety (cf. 2:18, 23; 3:10). Contra the false piety of tradition, asceticism and self-constructed religion, the new self in Christ clothes itself with the Spirit-fruit of compassion, kindness, genuine humility, meekness, patience, longsuffering, forgiveness, and love (cf. 2:16-23; 3:12-14). Each of these imperatives stand in sharp contradistinction to the false teaching that was undermining the health of the Colossian church.

Beginning in 3:15, Paul makes a subtle but identifiable shift in his argument: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.” While the conjunction *καὶ* connects the following injunctions with the commands of 3:1-14, the introduction of *ἐνὶ σώματι* (one body) shifts the perspective from the individual believers to the collective congregation of believers at Colossae. Indeed, whereas the instruction preceding verse fifteen seems addressed to individual Christians, the injunctions of 3:15-17 appear better addressed to the corporate *worship* of the church.

This shift in injunctives from the individual believers to the gathered worship of the church is significant in that Paul’s prescriptions for corporate worship here are calculated to shield the Colossian congregation from the in-creeping false teaching evidenced in 2:4-23. In far too many churches today we see little concern for a structured liturgy of worship designed to ground believers in the doctrines of Scripture. Such churches (and pastors) are derelict, leaving their congregations exposed to free-flowing breezes of unsound doctrine—and even outright heresy—and the schemes of those who promote them (cf. Eph 4:14). When we recognize that Paul’s worship injunctions to the Colossians were designed to equip them to resist the advance of false teaching, we are well served to consider the particulars of his instruction.

Having castigated the worship and veneration of angels in 2:18-19, Paul, in 3:15-17, presents his injunctions for proper worship wherein Christ is the worthy object and center of the church’s adoration in 3:15-17. First, he urges upon the Colossians, “*καὶ ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Χριστοῦ βραβεύετω ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν*—and let the peace of Christ rule in

in your hearts” (3:15). In 1:20 the apostle employed εἰρήνη (peace) to signify *shalom*, the eschatological condition of cosmic restoration anticipated by the OT prophets, but he appears to have a specific facet of this universal peace in view here.

The imperative βραβεύετω (let rule) has for its plural direct object καρδίαις ὑμῶν (your hearts). βραβεύετω refers to the function of an “umpire’ who renders verdicts in contested situations.”<sup>56</sup> Such “rule” or “umpiring” takes place in the corporate life of the church, for “ἐκλήθητε ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι—you were called into one body” (3:15b). The peace wrought by Christ in his cross-work and resurrection must be the ultimate arbiter when conflict or differing opinions arise within the corporate life and worship of the church because their hearts are both individually and collectively ruled by the peace of Christ.<sup>57</sup> Rather than quarreling over opinions, they should “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” because “the kingdom of God is . . . a matter . . . of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17, 19). In the corporate life and worship of the church, the arbitrating peace of Christ must rule, and thereby the “plausible arguments” and “empty philosophy” and “self-made religion” and “asceticism” of false teachers are purged from among us (cf. Col 2:4-23)! Hence, we see the indispensability of the peace-rule of Christ in the worship-life of the church.

Secondly—and tightly connected to the first imperative—Paul commands the Colossians to “ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως—let the word (or message) of Christ dwell in you richly” (3:16a). A parallelism between this injunction and the previous (“let the peace of Christ rule in you”) is evident in that both use the same Greek word order.<sup>58</sup> Just as the peace of Christ “umpires” the function of the worshiping church,

---

<sup>56</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 283.

<sup>57</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 234. Dunn observes, “The corporate dimension implicit in the talk of peace and of a people called is strengthened by the reminder that the call has in view ‘one body,’ that the one body is also the arena within which the peace of Christ comes to effect.”

<sup>58</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 285.

so the word of Christ—the message about Christ proceeding from Christ<sup>59</sup>—orders how the church worships. Indeed, as Melick asserts:

The entire context points to the freedom of the word to determine the actions, motivations, and decisions of the group. It, like the peace of God, becomes a measure of church life. Before every activity, the church should answer two questions: Is the peace of Christ present in the congregation at this point? And is this consistent with, and will it promote knowledge of, the word of Christ?<sup>60</sup>

The indwelling word of Christ—consisting of the sixty-six books of the OT and NT—coupled with the peace of Christ, must fully inform the life of the church, including its worship. This guards the church from the entropy-inducing false teaching against which Paul is writing, not the least of which was the false teaching concerning angel worship.<sup>61</sup> When the gospel of peace and the inspired word of God are at the center of worship, the worship of the church becomes an integral means of renewal, revival and revitalization.

Thirdly, the manner in which Paul instructs Colossae concerning the rich indwelling of the word of Christ further informs the liturgy of the church. They were to be found “ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοουθετοῦντες ἑαυτούς—in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another” (3:16b). Wisdom instruction is a prominent theme in this letter, set over against the pseudo-wisdom of false teachers. Contra the pseudo-wisdom of “plausible arguments” and “empty philosophy,” Paul informs the Colossians that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are vested in Christ (2:3; see also 1:9, 28; 4:5).

---

<sup>59</sup>William Hendriksen, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 160. Hendriksen rightly asserts concerning the word of Christ that it is, “The objective, special revelation that proceeds from (and concerns) Christ—“the Christ-word”—should govern every thought, word, and deed.”

<sup>60</sup>Melick, *Colossians*, 304.

<sup>61</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 235-36. Dunn observes, “One feature of the Colossian ‘philosophy’ which seemingly was proving attractive, however, was its adherents’ experience of worship, of a worship shared, it would appear, with the angels (see 2:18, 23). Not surprisingly, therefore, this sequence of parenesis is rounded off by a description of the worship which the Colossian Christians should be enjoying and, by implication, should find sufficiently fulfilling—at least enough to reduce the attractiveness of the Jewish angel worship.”

Hence we see a third element—the wisdom of Christ—added to the peace of Christ and the word of Christ as regulative principles for the worship of the church.

Further, this Christ-vested wisdom informs the teaching (*διδάσκοντες*) and admonishing (*νουθετοῦντες*) elements of corporate worship. Paul earlier described his own ministry using these exact participles (*διδάσκοντες* and *νουθετοῦντες*) in 1:28. The former encapsulates the affirmative presentation of truth, while the latter envisions something of a confrontational warning against erring from the truth.<sup>62</sup> Whereas teaching and admonishing during corporate worship are often understood to be the responsibility of the leadership of the congregation, the reflexive pronoun (*διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτούς*) indicates that each member of the congregation bears this dual responsibility. We see, therefore, a reciprocal, encompassing element of worship wherein each member bears responsibility to, in wisdom, teach and admonish others. How might this occur within the corporate worship of the church?

Paul further instructs that such teaching and admonition has for its means “*ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς*—psalms, hymns (and) spiritual songs” (3:16). The singing or recitation of psalms has for its predicate the assembled book of Psalms in the OT. Psalms, whether sung or recited, were didactic for the nation of Israel, and the tradition was clearly continued in the NT churches with the added element of Christocentric emphasis (cf. 2 Sam. 23:1; Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33). Hymns (*ὕμνοις*) is used only here and in the corollary of Eph 5:19 in the NT. Though somewhat synonymous with psalms—and retaining the didactic element—hymns may contain a greater emphasis upon praise. Dunn, citing Lightfoot, allows that,

The ‘psalms’ refer to praise drawn directly from the Scriptures (particularly the psalms of David), whereas the ‘hymns’ are the more distinctively Christian compositions (the ‘new song’ of Isa. 42:10?) which have been widely recognized within the New Testament itself, particularly the Magnificat and the Benedictus in Luke 1, but also the more disputed items in the Pauline corpus (Eph. 5:14; Phil. 2:6–

---

<sup>62</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 289.

11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 3:16).<sup>63</sup>

Spiritual songs (ὠδαὶς πνευματικαῖς)—again, only here and Eph 5:19 in the NT—likely references the spontaneous singing of songs prompted by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the corollary of Eph 5:18-19 identifies such singing of songs as the result of being filled with the Spirit. If the element of spontaneity is intended, such songs likely arise as a Spirit-prompted response to the proclaimed glories of God in Christ, as Moo seems to indicate.<sup>64</sup> Regardless of whether psalms, hymns and spiritual songs may be parsed this precisely, their tight connection to teaching and admonishing one another in the Pauline structure of the verse is apparent.

Such singing or recitation of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in corporate worship are shaped by “χάριτι. . . ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ—grace (or gratitude) in your hearts toward God” (3:16). Whether singing psalms, hymn or spiritual songs, biblical, corporate singing worship must reverentially express gratitude for the grace of God wrought in the hearts and lives of the worshipers (cf. 1:6).

In summary, the Pauline instruction to Colossae pertaining to her worship is quite didactic. God-pleasing corporate worship is “umpired” by the peace that is ours in Christ and is ordered by the word of Christ. The wisdom of Christ is to govern our teaching and admonition of one another, and the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude-filled hearts is a means of mutual edification in our corporate worship. Worship thus “umpired,” ordered and governed is a revitalizing worship that will infuse the church with a salubrious vitality and potency.

### Conclusion

Worship of God is the purpose for which mankind was created, and the Christ-restored ability to rightly worship God is a necessary and indispensable privilege of the

---

<sup>63</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 238.

<sup>64</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 290.

church. Worship is the native occupation of the regenerate believer whereby, through the God-appointed means of grace he receives of God's grace by faith and then responds in adoration, praise, honor-giving, glorification, enjoyment and obedience toward God. Worship this side of heaven is both individual and corporate in nature, and will be our joy-inducing privilege throughout eternity. Stagnant and declining churches must strive to resuscitate an uncompromised, biblically-informed wonder-inducing worship of the living God if they are to experience revitalization.

Luke's record of the first church in Jerusalem reveals a congregation regularly and vitally engaged in the worship of God regulated by the terms of worship established in Scripture. Their worship was exemplary, including devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Table, prayer, praise and thanksgiving, and awe-filled wonder at the mighty works of God. Worship for the Jerusalem church was paradigmatic, and churches desiring revival and revitalization today would be well-served to emulate the worship-devotion and practice of this congregation.

Further, the Pauline corpus is pregnant with emphasis on the primacy of worship and instruction pertaining to the specifics of worship in the corporate gatherings of the church. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul predicates worship upon the doctrine of justification by faith alone, arguing that true worship of God is the only rational response of the believer in light of the manifold mercies of God in our salvation. The resultant manner of our worship, according to Paul, is a refusal to be conformed to the world accompanied by holy, sacrificial presentation of our bodies and minds to the renewing work of the Spirit and word of God.

To the divided, schismatic and rather rude church at Corinth, Paul wrote to guide them toward an orderly worship humbly submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ. To counter in-creeping doctrinal error at Colossae, the apostle instructed them in worship "umpired" by the peace of Christ, ordered by the word of Christ, and governed by the wisdom of Christ.

In a word, worship is a primary discipline commanded of the church in Scripture. The redeemed church was purchased by and recreated in Christ for the purpose of worshiping God rightly. The Jerusalem church recognized and practiced the Kingdom priority of worship. The Pauline corpus provides an embarrassment of riches in worship instruction, all of which were calculated to counter the tendency toward entropy and decline. Plateaued and declining churches desperately need to submit their worship practices to the criticism and control of the biblical revelation. Those who do so may reasonably expect God-sent revival and revitalization.

CHAPTER 6  
THE FELICITY OF FELLOWSHIP IN CHURCH  
REVITALIZATION

**Introduction**

Among the numerous causes of church plateau and decline, internal divisions and strife among church members stands as a particularly debilitating cause (cf. 1 Cor 11:18; 3:3; 1:10). A recent Lifeway survey indicates maintaining unity within the church was the greatest pressure-point cited by Protestant pastors.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, fractured fellowship in a congregation is a common problem in churches experiencing plateau and decline.<sup>2</sup> Whereas we have already identified the entropic principle operative in the church from the very beginning of her existence, the disorganization, decay and decline that accompany divisions within the church should come as no surprise.

A review of the life-cycle of churches is helpful for understanding how divisions often emerge with alacrity in declining churches. William David Henard plots this life-cycle on a nine-stage Bell Curve wherein a new church experiences birth, growth, plateau, decline, and eventual death.<sup>3</sup> A newly-formed church establishes a body of theological belief, identifies priorities, sets goals, and implements an organizational structure to facilitate the ministry and growth of the church. These stages occur in an upward trajectory, culminating in what is often a season of effective and salubrious

---

<sup>1</sup>Lifeway Research, *Pastors' Views On How Covid-19 Is Affecting Their Church July 2020*, 21, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Coronavirus-Pastors-Full-Report-July-2020.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 95.

<sup>3</sup>William David Henard, *Can These Bones Live?* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 164-166.

ministry and growth. Focus, momentum and commitment then plateau over time, and, if unaddressed, such plateau leads to the downward slope of gradual degeneration.

When decline sets in, the church often waxes nostalgic for the better days of her spiritual youth, effecting a kind of spiritual paralysis that avoids embracing the present and fears the future. The decline deepens, and factions begin to form in the church, often questioning the commitments of their perceived counterparts. Factious wedge-issues widen existing disagreements and polarizing divisions form. Unless divided factions are led to repent and intentionally seek to reestablish the community and fellowship of the church on biblical grounds, members begin to disconnect and drop out of the church. At this point the eventual death of the church becomes a virtual certainty. In a very real sense, divisions thus formed and entrenched within the membership incite decline and hasten the demise of the church.

In seeking to identifying underlying causes of divisions within the church, we may easily observe that a spirit of individual autonomy is now embraced with abandon in our culture. The 1973 Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* and the radical advancement of the LGBTQ+ agenda are but two abominable examples of the corrosiveness of the spirit of individual autonomy. Ultimately, the perceived “rights” of the individual are leveraged to overthrow good for the larger community (nation), leading to widespread moral depravity and decay. Lack of theological and ecclesiological rigor in the pulpits of our land inevitably allows such unbiblical, humanistic individual autonomy to invade and undermine our churches. Community lies at the very heart of what it means to be a functional, healthy church of the Lord Jesus Christ—and individual autonomy is a vociferous disease that gnaws inexorably at the very foundations of the church as a community.

An additional cause of church division may be traced to the anti-authoritarian<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Anti-authoritarianism is opposition to authoritarianism, which is defined as a form of social organization characterized by submission to authority. While the author is aware of the distinction between

spirit of the age. The anti-authoritarian rebellion of the 1960's is alive and well in our culture today as evidenced by unprecedented chaos, riots and anarchism in the streets of cities across the nation. This spirit is not new, for mankind has from the beginning sought to rid itself of the rightful yoke of the Creator and every authority he has ordained for the flourishing of civilization. Postmodern humanists may embrace anti-authoritarianism more broadly than their forbears, but in doing so they are only carrying on the age-old family tradition.

The church family, conversely, is called to submission to the authority of the word of God, to the authoritative Lordship of Jesus Christ, submission to pastors, and even to submission to one another. When an anti-authoritarian spirit infiltrates the fellowship of the saints, such submission is first challenged. If this challenge is not countered with biblical correction, submission to authority will be outright rejected. Divisions inevitably ensue, compromising and diluting the potency of the worship, witness and ministry of the church. Diminished effectiveness in worship, witness and ministry inevitably leads to decay and decline. The pathology is inexorable.

In stark contrast to divisive individual autonomism and anti-authoritarianism, Scripture calls the church to a felicity of fellowship that binds the community together with sweet and unbreakable bonds under the Lordship and Word of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christian fellowship rightly understood and biblically practiced is the inspired antidote to debilitating, health-destroying, worship-crippling, witness-diminishing divisions within the local church. It is critical that declining churches recognize the primacy of Christian fellowship if they are to experience revitalization.

A survey of contemporary church revitalization literature reveals a paucity of emphasis on Christian fellowship. Though sometimes mentioned in passing or even

---

that which is authoritarian and that which is authoritative, "anti-authoritarian" remains the best descriptor of the spirit infecting our culture and churches.

abstract terms, we find little in the literature that identifies this discipline as important to the revitalization of unhealthy, declining churches. This is startling given that division and its concomitant tensions contribute significantly to the degeneration of many churches. In light of this observable reality, we wish to offer a biblical apologetic for the prioritization of the discipline of Christian fellowship.

The objective of this chapter is four-fold. First, we will seek to establish a working, Scriptural definition of fellowship. Secondly, we will demonstrate that the whole of the Jerusalem church was devoted to the discipline of Christian fellowship. Thirdly, we will consider the emphasis placed upon Christian fellowship in select passages from the Pauline corpus. Finally, we will offer a brief synthesis of the biblical data concerning fellowship and its felicity and utility for the church in relation to church revitalization. Further details for practical integration of the Kingdom priority of fellowship will be offered in chapter ten of this dissertation.

### **Fellowship Defined**

The term *κοινωνία* and its cognate forms appear with some regularity in the Greek New Testament, beginning in Matt 23:30. In secular Greek, the *κοιν* word-group was commonly used of the marriage partnership wherein a husband and wife enjoyed an intimate partnership of shared life-goals, co-ownership and common objectives. Cultically, *κοινωνία* could signify communion with a god, especially in the context of a sacred meal.<sup>5</sup> The early Christian community adopted the terminology to describe their intimate commonality and unity as the *ecclesia*.<sup>6</sup>

Interpreters have chosen to variously translate NT usage of the term as

---

<sup>5</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 119.

<sup>6</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), vol. iii, 790-97.

“fellowship,”<sup>7</sup> “participation,”<sup>8</sup> “share,”<sup>9</sup> “contribution,”<sup>10</sup> “taking part”<sup>11</sup> and “partnership.”<sup>12</sup> Lexically, *κοινωνία* is diversely defined as “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, fellowship, close relationship,”<sup>13</sup> “a sharing with someone in something,”<sup>14</sup> and “community, joint participation.”<sup>15</sup>

Consideration of a few texts will broaden our understanding of Christian fellowship beyond lexical definitions. The first church “devoted” themselves to “the fellowship,” according to the Lukan record (Acts 2:42). Commenting on this verse, Eckhard J. Schnabel helpfully asserts, “*κοινωνία* . . . should be understood as the personal, fraternal coherence of the individual members of the congregation, the followers of Jesus who live in community brought into existence by the shared experience of the Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> Here we see the element of a community-wide, shared experience of the Holy Spirit—namely the Holy Spirit’s work of the new birth and infilling, empowering presence—as the entry-point of the individual into the fellowship of believers (cf. John 3:3-8; Acts 2:1-4; 2 Cor 13:14). The believers are bound together as a community by the commonly-shared experience of the regeneration and indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. The apostle

---

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 6:14, 13:14; Gal 2:9; 1 John 1:3, 6, 7.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. 1 Cor 10:16; Phil 2:1.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Phil 3:10; Heb 3:16; Phm 6.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 9:13.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 8:4.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Phil 1:5.

<sup>13</sup>Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 553.

<sup>14</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. iii, 803.

<sup>15</sup>*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), vol. 2, 303.

<sup>16</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 178-79.

John further calls our attention to the nature of Christian fellowship when he asserts “that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). John states that our fellowship is with one another, but this mutual fellowship issues from our fellowship with the Father and the Son. Colin G. Kruse states of this passage, “Christian fellowship is primarily a fellowship with God the Father through Jesus Christ his Son.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, John’s concern is that the recipients of his letter understand that belief in the apostolic witness of God’s declarations concerning his Son is the only means of participation in eternal life and the fellowship of believers. Taken together, these passages illuminate the Trinitarian contour of Christian fellowship—our fellowship with one another as Christians is *with* the Father, *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Spirit.

Further, Paul’s salutation to the Church at Philippi includes thanksgiving for their “partnership (κοινωνία) in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil 1:5). Although the apostle doubtless had in mind to some degree the Philippians’ monetary assistance (cf. 2:25; 4:14-18), he seems to also have a wider sense of their gospel κοινωνία (partnership) in view.<sup>18</sup> Given the context of the epistle, Paul likely also had in mind gratitude for their actual proclamation and advancement of the gospel to those outside the church (1:27-28), their mutual suffering for the sake of the gospel (cf. 1:30; Acts 16:19), and their intercession for him in his imprisonment for the sake of the gospel (1:19). Hence, we see that Christian κοινωνία (fellowship) also includes an active partnership in the Kingdom priority of the proclamation and advancement of the gospel.

---

<sup>17</sup>Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 58.

<sup>18</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 62. O’Brien maintains that Paul likely, “. . . denotes co-operation in the widest sense, their participation with the Apostle whether in sympathy or in suffering or in active labour or in any other way.”

Further nuances of meaning will be addressed when we treat the subject of fellowship in the Jerusalem church and in the Pauline corpus, but the above is sufficient to formulate something of a working definition. Fellowship is shared, intimate communion with the Father, wrought by the reconciling cross-work and resurrection of the Son, and effectuated by the regenerating, indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. Christians fellowship is predicated upon partaking together in the shared experiences and common goals of all that is entailed in living together as Kingdom citizens. All of these entailments are tributaries of gospel experience, proclamation and advancement.

Further, Christian fellowship consists of participation together in that which is greater than the constituent parts *and* the sum of the gathered church. Fellowship is, therefore, a shared participation with others in that which is greater than the relationship itself. This fellowship of shared experience, like-mindedness and common objectives binds individuals together within the church in a relationship of mutual care and unifies the congregation in partnership for the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We turn now to a consideration of the felicity of fellowship evidenced in the first Jerusalem church. This consideration will both broaden and deepen our understanding of Christian fellowship and will demonstrate its indispensability in relation to church revitalization.

### **The Felicity of Fellowship in the Jerusalem Church**

In chapter three we argued that Luke's description of the practices and priorities of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2:42-47 is normative for the church of all ages. As the extant literature on church revitalization lacks significant emphasis upon the priority of Christian fellowship, this normative argument is particularly relevant to this chapter. The revitalization of a declining church simply cannot take place without intentional concern to embrace the unity-building blessedness of Christian fellowship.

As argued above, encroaching secularism, debilitating autonomism and anarchical anti-authoritarianism erode the church's practice of fellowship as a discipline. The ever-increasing busyness of lives lived at the individual level has led to a diminution of occasions for fostering fellowship. A current trend in many Southern Baptist churches is toward elimination of Sunday afternoon Training Union<sup>19</sup> and dismissal of Sunday evening worship. Further, a recent Lifeway survey indicated only forty-five percent of U. S. Protestant pastors reported still holding prayer meetings on Wednesday night.<sup>20</sup> Though unintended, this reduction of time spent together has consequently crippled the enjoyment and practice of Christian fellowship in many churches. In short, Christian fellowship is diminished in direct correlation to the reduction of time spent together. Such was not the case in the Jerusalem church. These early believers enjoyed a rich and regular life of fellowship together, and their example is instructive for the church today.

Returning to the description of the priorities and practices of the Jerusalem believers, Luke asserts of the church, “ἦσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες . . . τῇ κοινωνίᾳ—and they devoted themselves to . . . the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). Two instructive issues arise directly from the text.

First, we recall that the conjunctive δὲ logically connects this verse to verse forty-one. Luke desires the reader understand that the three thousand added to the church on the Day of Pentecost—along with the already existing church of at least 120 disciples—were enjoying fellowship together. The entire church participated in the

---

<sup>19</sup>Though admittedly anecdotal, our experience indicates that many in our churches today have no idea what Baptist Training Union is. For those unaware, Baptist Training Union was once a common practice in Southern Baptist Churches wherein members met one hour before the evening worship for the purpose of discipleship training.

<sup>20</sup>Aaron Earls, “Wednesday Night Still a Church Night for Most Congregations,” Lifeway Research, 2019, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/09/10/vast-majority-of-churches-still-have-wednesday-night-activities/>. Despite the title of this article, the research cited indicates that very few of the “activities” reported were for the gathered church, but were rather demographically segregated activities that divide rather than unify the fellowship of the church. It is also notable that several of the “activities” reported have little to do with the biblical priorities of the church.

fellowship.

Secondly, they were *προσκατεροῦντες*—*devoted* to the fellowship. Indeed, Luke informs us that “all who believed were *together*” and were “day by day attending the temple *together* and breaking bread in their homes” (cf. 2:44, 46, emphasis added). Far from a casual by-product of their relationship, the fellowship of the first church was a priority in which they persisted with intentionality, regularity and gladness of heart. They fellowshiped with resolve and perseverance. They participated in fellowship together continuously and with diligence and joy.

Although used only here in all of Luke/Acts, the usage of *κοινωνία* elsewhere in the NT sheds much additional light upon Luke’s meaning. Used in the context of believers, the term refers to their mutual participation *in Christ* to which they are called by God (cf. 1 Cor 1:9). Anthony C. Thiselton rightly identifies Paul’s use of the term here as meaning “communal participation in the sonship of Jesus Christ,” or “participation in the life of Christ” (cf. Rom 8:14-17; 1 John 1:1-3).<sup>21</sup> The Jerusalem believers’ fellowship arose from their shared experience of having been made sons and heirs of God in Christ. They participated mutually as new creatures in the super-abounding, eternal life that was theirs in Christ (cf. Rom 8:14-17; 2 Cor 5:17-18; John 10:10). In a word, their fellowship centered upon all the rich blessings of redemption in Christ Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 13:14 Paul commends the church to “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος—the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” David E. Garland points to the unity-deepening urgency of Paul’s commendation, asserting, “Paul wishes for the Corinthians a deepening of their participation in the Holy Spirit; he also wishes for the unity which the Holy Spirit gives to the community.”<sup>22</sup> The Jerusalem church enjoyed fellowship around their shared

---

<sup>21</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 104.

<sup>22</sup>David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 556.

experience of the regenerating, infilling, gifting work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:1-8; Acts 2:1-4; 4:23-31; 1 Cor 12:4-11). The Apostle here urges upon the Corinthian church a like felicity of fellowship and single-minded unity that could only be produced by the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 4:3; Acts 2:46; 4:24; 5:12).

A further Pauline usage of *κοινωνία* sheds light on the blessed fellowship of this first congregation of believers. In Philippians 1:3-5 the apostle writes, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of τῆς κοινωνίας ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον—your *partnership* in the gospel—from the first day until now.” Paul’s affirmation of the Philippians’ *κοινωνία* with him in the advancement of the gospel clearly included their defense and proclamation of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:7, 27-28). The church at Philippi likewise suffered persecution for the sake of the gospel, further demonstrating their shared partnership with the apostle (cf. Phil 1:30; Acts 16:19ff). So too the Jerusalem church enjoyed a mutual partnership—a fellowship—rooted in the bold proclamation and advancement of the gospel of the crucified, resurrected Christ (cf. Acts 2:1-13; 4:23-31).

Further, when we consider the immediate context of Luke’s use of *κοινωνία* in Acts 2:42, we see that the fellowship of the Jerusalem church also coalesced around several notable disciplines. First, Luke’s summary description identifies a church-wide participation in “τῆς διδασχῆς τῶν ἀποστόλων—the teaching of the apostles” (Acts 2:41-42). That they προσκαρτεροῦντες—devoted themselves to, or continued steadfastly in—the Christ-inculcated teaching of the apostles indicates both a consistent hearing of and practice of said teaching. The entire Jerusalem church shared in a common, joint participation in the living, active word. Such fellowship resulted in an increase in the influence of the word of God in the life of the church *and* in the lives of those outside the church hearing the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Acts 6:7; 12:24. See also 19:20; Col 1:5-6). In a word, fellowship around the teachings of Christ produced a unifying, spiritually salubrious, growth-inducing atmosphere in which the church functioned daily.

Secondly, their fellowship included the practice of breaking bread together daily in their homes with accompanying thanksgiving and praise (cf. Acts 2:42, 46-47). As we argued in chapter three, this table fellowship likely included both the sharing of common meals and the concurrent observation of the Lord's Supper in emulation of Christ instituting the Supper during the Passover meal (cf. Acts 2:42, 46-47; Luke 22:7-22). Again, Luke wishes us to understand that this church was devoted to this practice to the extent it became central to their lives together. We understand, therefore, that their fellowship—wherein their hearts and lives were bound more intimately together—included both the ordinary yet intimate practice of eating meals together and in the remembering the sufferings of Christ and his institution of the New Covenant on their behalf. Such unbreakable cords of fellowship bound them together in a manner antithetical to factionalism and disunity.

Thirdly, their fellowship found expression as they “προσκατεροῦντες . . . ταῖς προσευχαῖς—devoted themselves to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). As we argued in chapter three, the unusual use of the plural with the definite article emphasizes the primacy of prayer in which the fledgling community persistently prostrated themselves in a posture of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. While their prayer-life likely followed the Jewish tradition of appointed times and forms of prayer, it is also evident that extemporaneous, circumstance-driven prayers also characterized their prayer-life together (e.g. Acts 4:23-30; 12:1-12). Additionally, their prayers were powerfully influenced by their shared understanding of the passion, resurrection and ascension of the Christ (cf. Acts 4:24-30).<sup>23</sup> Church-wide participation (fellowship) in prayer marked the Jerusalem church.

---

<sup>23</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary On the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 71. Bruce asserts, “As for the prayers in which they participated, the primary reference is no doubt to their own appointed seasons for united prayer, although we know that the apostles also attended the Jewish prayer services in the temple (cf. 3:1). The community's prayers would follow Jewish models, but their content would be enriched because of the Christ-event.”

We recall that Luke offers several examples of the prayer-fellowship of this early church. Upon Christ's ascension, the disciples joined together in unity, ". . . *with one accord*, . . . devoting themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (cf. Acts 1:14, emphasis added). They prayed *corporately* for guidance in seeking Judas' replacement among the twelve (cf. Acts 1:24-25). In obedience to Christ's command and in hope of Christ's promise of Holy Spirit-imbued power, the church was praying *together* on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit powerfully filled every believer among them (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1-4). When threatened, the church prayed *together* for gospel boldness (Acts 4:24-30). The occasion of Peter's imprisonment by Herod drove the church to earnest *corporate* prayer (Acts 12:5, 12). The fellowship of prayer united the hearts and lives of these first Christians in an extraordinary way, and God was pleased to hear and answer their prayers.

Fourthly, these believers "εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινὰ . . . καὶ διεμέριζον αὐτὰ πᾶσιν καθότι ἂν τις χρείαν εἶχεν—held all things in common, . . . and were distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). Such was their fellowship and unity that the believers gladly sold land and possessions as occasion arose to meet the needs of others within the church. Given the joyful and exuberant context, this was no communist impulse seeking material utopia, but was rather a function of their mutual care for—and fellowship with—one another in Christ. Their fellowship of mutual edification included ministering to one another's material needs so that none among them lacked the necessities of life. Bound together by the unifying cord of ministry-fellowship, the Jerusalem church was not easily divided.

Fifthly, the Jerusalem church participated together in a fellowship of joy-filled thanksgiving and praise (cf. Acts 2:46-47). Their gatherings were marked by "ἀγαλλιάσει . . . καρδίς—glad heart(s)"—that is, hearts filled with joy, exuberance and exultation. Doubtless, this joyfulness of heart arose from their mutual assurance of salvation and reconciliation to God through the crucified, resurrected, ascended Christ, the abiding

presence of the Holy Spirit, and newly-formed relationships with one another as a result of these redemptive realities.<sup>24</sup> Such joyful exuberance spilled over in them, and they were “αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν—praising God” daily in the Temple and in their homes (cf. Acts 2:47). Theirs was a fellowship of unified, joyful praise as they glorified God in prayer, practice, celebration, and proclamation of the good news of salvation.

In-creeping dissention soon tested the strength of their bonds of fellowship. As they enjoyed ever-increasing numbers of disciples, there arose a “γογγυσμὸς—a grumbling, complaint, or murmuring” among the minority of Greek-speaking Jews because their widows were somehow being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1).<sup>25</sup> The problem involved a likely minority of the church’s widows and was probably no more than an administrative oversight. The apostles quickly assembled the congregation, as the church could ill-afford factional divisions in light of their great task of gospel advancement. The prompt apostolic solution was that they choose from among themselves seven reputable men who could govern the daily distribution and thus ensure equitable treatment (Acts 6:2-4). This pleased the congregation, and they quickly chose and appointed seven godly men to the task. The unity and depth of their fellowship was demonstrated by the speed with which the complaint was remedied. As a result of such demonstrably binding fellowship, Luke informs us that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). The felicity of the Jerusalem church’s fellowship eliminated the division posthaste, and God was pleased to continue empowering their witness. Indeed, their unity on this matter likely enhanced their witness in the city.

---

<sup>24</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 183-84.

<sup>25</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 258. Bock asserts, “Estimates suggest that Hellenists (i.e., those whose primary language was Greek) made up from 10 to 20 percent of the population (Le Cornu and Shulam 2003: 316).”

In summary, the Jerusalem congregation's fellowship clearly stands as an exemplar to the church of all ages. They enjoyed fellowship around the table of God's word, the table of shared meals and the Lord's Supper and corporate, and unified prayer. Additionally, their fellowship included ministry to one another's needs and the fellowship of mutual, joyful and public thanksgiving and praise directed Godward. The Jerusalem church was devoted to fellowship, and they practiced fellowship as a matter of intentional discipline. Such devotion to fellowship served to guard the church against encroaching strife and division and enhanced their gospel witness. Indeed, we find in Acts a church functioning with a single-minded unity that only occurs when the redeemed community fellowships around her God-given priorities. Again, God was pleased to continually multiply their influence and numbers as the church practiced the Kingdom priority of Christian fellowship (cf. Acts 2:47; 6:7).

Given the specificity of Luke's account of the felicity of these believers' fellowship—and the attention he calls to God's blessing of their felicitous fellowship—leaders of churches in need of revitalization should take heed. The scant attention given to the fellowship-life of the church in the contemporary literature is alarming—and one can only surmise that the faithful practice of Christian fellowship is simply assumed by many. This is potentially a critical mistake in the work of church revitalization. Fellowship assumed is fellowship taken for granted, and fellowship taken for granted soon disintegrates, especially in a cultural environment of individual autonomism and anti-authoritarianism.

Church leaders should intentionally and regularly call the congregation's attention to their shared experience in Christ, their joint participation in the life of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and their partnership in the advancement of the gospel. Additionally, the church's prayer-life, Word proclamation-life, worship-life and ministry-life should be regarded by all members as essential to the salubrious fellowship and unity of the church. Reminders of these fellowship-inducing realities should be part of the warp

and woof of church gatherings. As the cords of fellowship in a declining church are thus strengthened, such church may reasonably expect the winds of revitalization to blow supernaturally in their midst.

### **The Utility of Fellowship in the Pauline Corpus**

The danger of divisions disrupting the unity within the churches was a matter of constant Pauline concern. As we argued in chapter two, the apostle clearly recognized an entropic principle of decay and decline at work in the churches, and he labored exhaustively to ensure their ongoing renewal and revitalization. Cultural, societal and philosophical pressures—as well as constantly in-creeping heterodoxy—constantly threatened the ecclesial concord vital to the advancement of the gospel. Except these fledgling churches maintain a strict discipline of adherence to the word of Christ, decay and decline was inevitable. His incessant concern for their health and wellbeing thus prompted Paul to spiritually evaluate and instruct the churches via letters and personal visits. Having observed the felicity and utility of devoted fellowship in the Jerusalem church, the apostle often employed arguments to remind the churches of their mutual fellowship in Christ to combat personal autonomy, division and disunity.

### **The Utility of Fellowship at Corinth**

The licentiousness of the first-century city of Corinth is well attested. Abounding sexual debauchery, moral degeneracy and a dizzying conglomeration of religious practices presented formidable challenges to the church Paul planted there during his second missionary excursion (Acts 18:1-18). Indeed, these moral, social and philosophical influences weighed heavily upon the church at Corinth, causing divisions within their fellowship. Knowing Corinth's fragmented fellowship would diminish their witness and impair the advancement of the gospel, Paul penned the letter of First Corinthians to address the discord.

The apostle's salutation to the Corinthians is notable when considered against

the backdrop of his bold confrontation of their disunity. He began by acknowledging their ἡγιασμένοις (positional holiness) in Christ (1 Cor 1:2).<sup>26</sup> Further, he gave thanks for the active grace of God operational within their midst, acknowledging the divine origin of their gifts of speech and knowledge (1:5). Notwithstanding his forthcoming rebuke, Paul gave thanks that the Corinthian church was “not lacking in any gift” (1:7). He then expressed his confidence that the grace-work begun in them by the Lord Jesus Christ would sustain them until the day of his return (1:8).

In a final point of thanksgiving, the apostle commended them to the faithfulness of God: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the κοινωνίαν (fellowship) of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:9). The Corinthian believers were sovereignly called by God into a special fellowship with the Son. Paul’s usage of κοινωνίαν here is distinctive, meaning significantly more than the “togetherness” produced by their common experience. Thiselton translates the passage, “you were called into the communal participation of the sonship of Christ our Lord.”<sup>27</sup> The standing of being in Christ signifies their being shareholders in a sonship derivative of the divine sonship of Christ. They were literally called by God into a participation in the unifying life of Christ, having been made sons (and daughters) of God through the obedient sonship of Christ. Paul hereby intentionally seeds the answer to Corinthian discord and factionalism in his thanksgiving introduction to the letter. Those who understand their sonship through Jesus Christ should immediately recognize the incongruity of discord in the church.

---

<sup>26</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 52-53. Schreiner notes, “It is quite striking that Paul describes the believers as sanctified and as God’s holy people, particularly when we consider the many problems with the church recorded in the letter. The participle word sanctified (*hēgiasmenois*) is in the perfect tense in Greek (and here the focus is on the resultant state) and designates what is often called ‘positional’ or ‘definitive’ sanctification. In other words, the Corinthians are sanctified by virtue of their union with Christ (in Christ Jesus), not because of their inherent holiness.”

<sup>27</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 104.

After punctuating the thanksgiving section with this reminder, the apostle directly confronts their divisions: “I appeal to you, brothers, διὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ—by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1:10 emphasis added). This is no less than the tenth use of the name of Christ since verse one. The genitive Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ renders the name of Jesus Christ the instrument of the apostle’s appeal. Stated concisely, Paul is saying, “By the name of him who made you sons and daughters of the living God, I command that there be no divisions among you.”<sup>28</sup> This ties his imperative directly to the foregoing assertion that they were called into a participation (κοινωνίαν) in the unifying life of Christ. Their fellowship in Christ is antithetical to their existing divisions. Rather than being divided, in Christ they should be united by the same mind and arrive at the same judgements.

Paul argues that the “quarreling” among them concerning who they should follow—Paul? Apollos? Cephas? Christ? (1:11-12)—would lead onlookers to mistakenly determine that Christ is divided (1:13). The question is rhetorical: “Is Christ divided?” Obviously not, but the Corinthian factionalism indicated by default that Christ was distributed or apportioned out as one among many with whom they might align themselves.<sup>29</sup> Contrarily, the apostle reminds them that Christ was crucified for them, whereas Paul most decidedly was not. They were baptized in the name of Christ, not in the name of Paul (1:13). On the grounds that the Corinthians were called to participation in the sonship of Christ—that Christ was crucified for them, and that they were baptized in the name of Christ—Paul commands that their divisions cease and they be united in Christ.

---

<sup>28</sup>For a defense of the imperative nature of Paul’s construction here, see Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 54n14.

<sup>29</sup>Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 58. Taylor maintains, “. . . the verb means not just to divide but to divide and to distribute. In this case Paul would be asking, ‘Do you suppose that there are fragments of Christ that can be distributed among different groups?. Or. . . ‘Has Christ been distributed/apportioned out as one among many.’”

After arguing for the supremacy of Christ and the wisdom of the Spirit who gives believers the mind of Christ (1:18-2:16), the apostle again confronts the Corinthian factionalism. “For while there is jealousy (ζήλος) and strife (ἔρις) among you, are you not of the flesh (σαρκικοί) and behaving only in a human way (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον)?” (3:3). Blatant zeal (ζήλος) in asserting their commitment to human leaders had produced envy and jealousy (ζήλος) within the ranks of the Corinthians.<sup>30</sup> Such jealousy and envy created ἔρις (strife, or quarreling—cf. 1:11) in the church, which in turn aggravated and widened their discord.

Such behavior, Paul contends, is σαρκικοί—resulting from or belonging to the flesh. Whereas the Corinthians viewed their partisanship as evidence of their spiritual discernment, Paul asserts that such is evidence of their spiritual poverty. Their behavior is fleshly—merely human (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον), infantile and void of the Spirit-produced mind of Christ (cf. 2:14-3:1).<sup>31</sup> In reality, the discord-producing hyper-partisanship in this church reflected the antithesis of the unity produced by fellowship in Christ.

Furthermore, the Corinthian divisions threaten to destroy the sanctity of their fellowship. Paul’s incredulous query calls attention to the danger: “Do you not know that (οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι)<sup>32</sup> you are (ἐστε—plural) the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16). It is axiomatic that the church is collectively the sanctuary of God, specially and gloriously indwelt by the Holy Spirit—and divisions are adversative to the fellowship thus sanctified by the third person of the Trinity. Lest the Corinthians continue in their divisiveness, the apostle issues an unambiguous warning: “If anyone

---

<sup>30</sup>Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 67. Morris indicates that ζήλος “means basically something like ‘zeal’, ‘ardour’. It is usually ranked as a virtue by classical writers, and sometimes also by New Testament writers (e.g. 2 Cor. 7:7; 11:2). But this temper all too easily leads to envy and the like, and characteristically the New Testament writers use the word for that evil thing that is one of ‘the works of the flesh’ (Gal. 5:20).”

<sup>31</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 89.

<sup>32</sup>This construction of rhetorical questioning appears ten times in 1 Corinthians and seems to express Paul’s incredulity, as if he is saying “surely you know *this!*”

φθείρει (corrupts) the temple of God, God will φθερεῖ (destroy) him” (1 Cor 3:17). This is without question indicative of the sacred primacy of fellowship in the functional life of the church. Those who corrupt the unity and fellowship of the church are in danger of suffering the very wrath of God.

Paul applies this sanctity of fellowship throughout his argumentation and admonitions to the Corinthian church. The man having sexual relations with his father’s wife poses a momentous threat to the purity of the Corinthians’ fellowship (5:1-13). Absent repentance, this incestuous member is to “be removed from among you.” Why? Because “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (5:2, 6). The church’s identity in Christ and her witness before a corrupt world are compromised when open sin is allowed, like leaven, to permeate and infect the entire fellowship. Indeed, the apostle locates the necessity of purging out the old leaven of sin in the *table fellowship* of the church: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven . . . of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (5:7-8). Just as the shed blood of Christ, our Passover Lamb, signified the eradication of sin, so the celebration of the Lord’s Table requires the purging of sin from the fellowship of the church.<sup>33</sup>

To those bringing lawsuits against fellow believers—and that before unbelieving judges—the apostle exhorts: “The world is to be judged by you; are you incompetent to try trivial cases?” (6:2). Such divisiveness represents unqualified defeat in that the testimony of the church becomes obscured. Indeed, it is better to suffer wrong

---

<sup>33</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 401. Citing C. L. Mitton, Thiselton asserts, “In ancient times, instead of yeast, a piece of dough was held over from one week’s baking to the next. By then it was fermenting, and so could cause fermentation in the new lot of dough, causing it to rise in the heat. This was a useful practice, but not hygienic, since dirt and disease could be passed on from week to week.’ In the light of this, once a year the Jews would break the chain and begin all over again with fresh, unleavened dough. Hence the influence of a small amount of material carried over from the past was eradicated, and a new beginning took place.”

and fraudulence than to breach the Holy Spirit-sanctified fellowship of the church (6:7). So antithetical to the fellowship of believers is the idea of intra-church lawsuits the apostle warns Corinth that such wrongdoers (i.e. thieves, greedy persons, and swindlers) “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9-10).

Continuing, Paul exhorts that the eating of food offered to idols—though not necessarily sinful—should be avoided for the sake of maintaining fellowship with those of a weaker conscience (8:1-12). He rebukes their factionalism evident when they gathered for the Lord’s Supper, commanding generosity for the sake of their fellowship (11:17-34).<sup>34</sup> Further, Paul enjoins that every member is sovereignly gifted by the Holy Spirit for the common good of the entire fellowship of believers, therefore no gift should be elevated to the exclusion of another, thereby causing divisions (12:1-31). The primacy of the fellowship of the saints undergirds Paul’s entire corrective letter to the Corinthian church. Fellowship together in Christ Jesus was Paul’s inspired antidote for Corinth’s discord and factionalism.

### **The Utility of Fellowship at Ephesus**

In Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, he executes a notable pivot beginning in chapter four. The first three chapters are concerned with doctrine, and are punctuated by an ecclesial prayer for his readers to be spiritually strengthened for the purpose of comprehending and experiencing the satiating satiety (*πληρωθῆτε πλήρωμα*—*lit.* the “filling fullness”) of God (3:18-19). In the doxology following his prayer, Paul links together the insuperable loci of the earthly and heavenly display of the glory of God “in

---

<sup>34</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 249. Schreiner argues, “Believers are encouraged to ‘welcome one another’ (CSB). Others understand Paul to say ‘wait for one another’ (ESV, NET, NRSV). As was argued at verse 21, however, the situation is not that some were eating before others. All were eating at the same time, as verse 21 makes clear. The verb used here (*ekdechomai*) does not necessarily mean ‘wait’ and can clearly mean ‘welcome’ or ‘accept’ without a temporal meaning (see 2 Macc. 5:26; Sir. 6:23, 33; 18:14; 32:14), and we see the meaning ‘show hospitality’ in the papyri. Paul’s complaint is not that the rich are eating before the poor have arrived. Instead, he is perturbed because they are not welcoming, accepting and receiving the poor as Christ does. When they gather together they gorge themselves on their own food and drink and neglect the poor, when those who are better off should share with the poor.”

the church” and “in Christ Jesus” (3:21). Both the prayer and the doxology prepare the readers for the vital paraclesis of the final half of the epistle.

**The foundation of fellowship.** The fourth chapter of Ephesians contains one of the most extended sections of parenesis found in the Pauline corpus. In the opening verses of chapter four, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else in Scripture, Paul demonstrates the vital connection between Christian fellowship and unity and the salubrious growth of the church. The apostle’s leading exhortation is both pressing and pointed: “I therefore . . . urge (Παρακαλῶ) you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling (κλήσεως) to which you have been called” (4:1). On the ground of the indicatives of chapters one through three, Paul beseeches the Ephesian church to conduct themselves in a fashion concomitant with their high calling by God—a calling that is pregnant with the implications of unified fellowship.

In 1 Corinthians 1:9, the apostle associates the believers’ “calling” with the sovereign act of God drawing us into *fellowship* with his Son. The first three chapters of Ephesians similarly emphasize the unifying, fellowship-inducing blessings of our calling. Believers are called *together* into the multifaceted blessings and hope of salvation (1:3-14, 18). We are united *together* in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, and now share in his rule of all things (1:20-22; 2:6). Jews and Gentiles *alike* are, by the cross-work and resurrection of Christ, reconciled *together* with God and called into one *unified* humanity (2:13-16). *Together*, believers are called into one *cohesive* household of God and *integrated* as a holy temple unto the Lord (2:19, 21).<sup>35</sup> Paul’s opening exhortations to the Ephesians are predicated upon their having been called sovereignly and salvifically by God into a unifying *fellowship*.

Verses two and three describe the character of this Christian fellowship. Living

---

<sup>35</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 275.

in a manner worthy of our calling necessitates that we exercise the relational graces of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance toward one another in love (4:2; cf. Col 3:12-15). Such hostility-killing conduct is the ecclesial outworking of the peace and reconciliation purchased for us by the cross of Christ, and should characterize the fellowship of the unified body of Christ (cf. 2:14-18). Further, the fellowship of the church is of such importance that believers should be “eager (σπουδάζοντες—to be zealous, devoted) to maintain (τηρεῖν—to guard, preserve) the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). Ecclesial fellowship and its resultant Spirit-imbued unity must be zealously guarded against corruption. Indeed, to undermine the fellowship of believers is to walk *unworthy* of the calling (κλήσεως) to which we are called (ἐκλήθητε) as the called-out ones (ἐκκλησίαν) of God.

Paul then underscores the unifying foundation upon which the house of Christian fellowship is erected: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (4:4-6). The unity of fellowship in the church is not a unity at the expense of orthodoxy, but a unity grounded in the indivisible nature of the triune God. This seven-fold confession is emphatic. The absence of any conjunction and the lack of a verb (“there is” is supplied in most translations) serves as a rhetorical device to lend greater formality to the statement.<sup>36</sup> The resonant and confessional nature of Paul’s acclamations here calls attention to the robust foundation of Christian fellowship and unity.

Although later confessional formulae typically begin with a statement regarding God the Father—proceeding to God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and then the church—Paul here inverts the order, beginning with the church (one body) and

---

<sup>36</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 232.

concluding with God the Father. This order likely arises from the significant emphasis placed upon the doctrine of the church throughout the epistle (e.g. 1:22–23; 4:15–16; 5:29–30).<sup>37</sup> The fellowship and unity of the church as one body is predicated upon her “oneness” under the headship of Christ. Each member, through union with Christ, contributes to the proper working of the whole body so that the peace of Christ reigns and the church experiences salubrious growth. The function of the individual member is never solely for the benefit of the member, but is rather for the advancement of the whole church—because the church is a “one body” fellowship.

Further, the church enjoys unifying fellowship because there is “one Spirit.” The work of the Holy Spirit in developing the church body is formative and comprehensive. Believers receive spiritual baptism by the Holy Spirit into the one body and enjoy the inexhaustible spiritual supply of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). Each member of the body is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and experiences a peace with God and a peace with one another wrought by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 8:9; Eph 4:3). Indeed, the one Holy Spirit permeates and animates the church with the indivisible unity and fellowship of the Godhead—which work of the Holy Spirit members should carefully avoid quenching (cf. 1 Thess 5:12-19).

By inserting the clause “just as you were called to the *one hope* that belongs to your call” (4:4), Paul reminds his readers of the functional foundation of the entire parenthesis established in verse one—their calling by God in Christ Jesus. The “one hope” belonging to the believers’ call is evocative and expansive in the Ephesian epistle. Once they were “without hope” and separated from God (2:12), but now they have “hope in Christ” because of God’s predestining call and the authenticating (sealing) work of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:4, 11-13). The hope of the believer’s redemption, however, is expansive beyond our individual reconciliation to God in Christ.

---

<sup>37</sup>See also Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-13, 20; Col 3:15.

The mystery of God's will and glorious good pleasure in Christ is revealed to believers, namely that God has irrevocably purposed to unite all things in heaven and earth together in Christ (1:9-10). As Andrew T. Lincoln rightly asserts, "The one hope of Ephesians is not something individual and private but corporate and public, hope for a cosmos that is unified and reconciled, a world in which everything is brought together in harmony through that which God has done in Christ."<sup>38</sup> The unifying "one hope" of the church is both ecclesial and eschatological, corporate and cosmic. The God who reconciles and unifies the church in Christ is reconciling and unifying the entire cosmos in Christ. The fellowship of reconciliation and unity enjoyed by the church in Christ will one day be realized in the entire cosmos. Against the entropy of division and degeneration, this "one hope" of cosmic, Christological harmony should animate in believers an eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the fellowship of the church (cf. 1:22-23; 3:8-11; 4:3).

Fellowship and unity is further buttressed by the apostolic assertion that the church serves "one Lord" (4:5). Elsewhere Paul asserts that Jesus is *Lord* of the church by virtue of his death, resurrection and exaltation (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Rom 10:19; 14:8-9; Phil 2:9-11). More than twenty times in Ephesians Paul attributes to Christ the appellation "Lord." In chapter one verse three, the *Lord* Jesus Christ is the fountainhead from whom all spiritual blessings issue to believers. The *Lord* Jesus is the object of the believers' faith (1:15), and the *Lord* who is the Cornerstone upon whom and in whom the new creation of the holy temple is joined together and increasing (2:21-22). Christ Jesus our *Lord* is the one by whom the eternal purposes of God are brought to pass (3:11). Christ is the *Lord* whose sovereign rule permeates and fills the cosmos, and he is the head of the church (1:23; 4:10, 15-16).<sup>39</sup> To the exclusion of all others, Jesus Christ is *Lord* of all,

---

<sup>38</sup>Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 42, (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 239.

<sup>39</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 282.

and Paul holds forth this grand reality as irrefutable and glorious ground for fellowship and unity in the church.<sup>40</sup>

Following “one Lord,” the apostle adds the acclamation “one faith” (4:5). When compared with the “unity of the faith” to which all in the church are to aspire, the “one faith” here seems objective in its scope (cf. 4:13; Jude 3). The unifying faith to which the church is called is the comprehensive body of beliefs issuing from attainable knowledge of the Son of God as revealed in the whole of Scripture. Just as there is one Lord—and not many lords—so also there is “one faith” issuing from our Lord, constituting the unifying beliefs of the fellowship of believers. O’Brien states this succinctly when he asserts, “There can be only one faith since there is only one Lord.”<sup>41</sup> Fellowship around these common and eternal truths is to hold the fellowship of believers together in the face of any threat to her unity, be it internal or external.

Those of the one body, indwelt by the one Spirit, possessed of one hope, confessing the one Lord, and assenting to the one faith find further unity in having received “one baptism” (4:5). A distinction here whether Paul is denoting spiritual baptism or baptism by water need not distract from the acclamation. Baptism in water upon confession of faith in Christ—as commonly practiced by the early church<sup>42</sup>—was the outward symbol of the inward experience of spiritual baptism into Christ by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).<sup>43</sup> The ritual of water baptism made public the newly-confessing

---

<sup>40</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 235. Arnold notes: “Gentiles in the churches confessing Jesus as the one Lord would recognize that Artemis of Ephesus was not Lord regardless of the fact that she was acclaimed as such. An abundance of literary, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence points to the fact that Artemis was widely worshiped as lord over the entire cosmos—heaven, earth, and the underworld. The title “Lord” (κυρία) is used often of her in the inscriptions. But there were many other deities who claimed this title also; over against all of them, Paul confesses that Jesus is the one and only Lord (see also Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; 1 Cor 12:3).”

<sup>41</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 284-85.

<sup>42</sup>See Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 36, 38; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5.

<sup>43</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 235. Arnold rightly maintains, “Paul’s confession of ‘one baptism’ here probably indicates the rite as well as all that it symbolizes.”

believer's union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection—and thereby joined the believer confessionally to the fellowship of the congregation (Rom 6:1–11; Col 2:12). This “one baptism,” in which all believers participate, signifies both our unity with Christ and our unity with one another (cf. Gal 3:27, 28; 1 Cor 12:13). Paul hereby further emphasizes the God-ordained unity and fellowship of the church.

Finally, Paul punctuates the unity confession by asserting there is “one God and Father of all (*πάντων*), who is over all (*πάντων*) and through all (*πάντων*) and in all (*πάντων*)” (4:6). This acclamation is pregnant with the weight of glory as Paul posits the Fatherhood of God, the transcendent, universal sovereignty of God (*over all*), and prescient omnipresence of God (*through all and in all*). Some scholars take the “all (*πάντων*)” adjectives as masculine, meaning “*all of us*” or “*all of you*.”<sup>44</sup> Such a reading posits God as Father, Sovereign, and ever-present One of all the redeemed—those in the church.<sup>45</sup> While the masculine rendering seems to fit the immediate context, a neuter rendering (*everyone, everything*) in a comprehensive, cosmic sense finds support within the Ephesian letter and the larger Pauline corpus.

We find a clearly cosmological sense of *πάντων* in that God has sovereignly purposed to “unite all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and on earth” (1:9-10). Likewise, God is said to have omnipotently exalted Christ for the purpose of placing “all things (*πάντων*)” under Christ's authority (1:22). In Christ, God is “filling all things (*πάντων*)” with the fullness of the Godhead (cf. 1:23; 4:10; cf. Col 1:19-20). Indeed, the cosmological sense of God being sovereign over all things permeates Pauline thought

---

<sup>44</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 285. O'Brien states: “. . . although some manuscripts read ‘in us all’ or ‘in you all’, the additional pronouns . . . are generally conceded as a gloss.” In footnote 50, he notes: “One variant reading (cf. D F G K L etc.) has *ἡμῶν* after *πάντων* (‘all of us’), and this agrees with *ἡμῶν* (‘us’) in v. 7, while another reading (preserved in the Textus Receptus) has *ὑμῶν* (‘to you’) instead after *πάντων* (‘all of you’). But the shorter reading which omits them both has the strongest textual support:  $\mathfrak{B}^{46}$   $\times$  A B C P 082 6, etc.”

<sup>45</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 240. Lincoln cites a number of scholars holding this understanding, including Thomas Kingsmill Abbot (ICC) and Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer (CECNT).

(e.g. 1 Cor. 8:6; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16).

Further, God being the Father of everyone in a comprehensive, cosmological sense poses no difficulty to this reading. In 3:14-15 Paul states, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named*” (emphasis added). O’Brien helpfully comments on this verse, stating, “(God) is the Creator of all living things, so that their existence and significance depend on him. On this interpretation Paul is affirming that God is supremely transcendent ‘over everything’ and that his immanence is all-pervasive.”<sup>46</sup> In that everyone exists by the will and creation of God, Paul may well have intended his readers to understand that God is the Primogenitor—the Father—of all the living.

If this cosmological interpretation of *πάντων* holds, Paul is here placing a weighty and emphatic punctuation upon what is already a weighty confession. The one God in whom believers are united by a profound fellowship is the Father of all creation, the transcendent Sovereign over all things, the omniscient and omnipresent God of all. In this context, the church is “the eschatological outpost, the pilot project of God’s purposes, and his people are the expression of this unity that displays to the universe his final goal.”<sup>47</sup> God himself—in the majesty and glory of his cosmological Fatherhood, sovereignty, omniscience and omnipresence—is the ultimate ground of the unity and fellowship of the church.

One would be hard pressed to find a more compelling reason for unity and fellowship in the church than Paul’s acclamation of God as universal Father and Sovereign. When this acclamation is coupled with the previous six—all of which flow from the fountainhead of God himself—the apostle has here posited an unshakable foundation upon which the unity and fellowship of the church rests. To what end has Paul

---

<sup>46</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 285.

<sup>47</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 286.

laid such a sweeping foundation?

The declarative statements of 4:7-10 are skillfully enveloped by an *inclusio* that ties the first sixteen verses of chapter four together in a compellingly instructive manner. Paul moves from appeals for the fellowship of unity (4:1-6), to instructions related to diversity (4:7-10), then back again to a stress upon the mature fruit produced by the fellowship of unity (4:11-16). In a word, Paul teaches that the church's unity and fellowship in God—intentionally coupled with a Christ-supplied diversity of gifts within the church—produces the salubrious fruit of unified, healthy ecclesial maturity.

**Maturity—the fruit of unified fellowship.** Paul transitions from the unity of the church's fellowship to the diversity of the church's fellowship with a riveting burst of high Christology. Christ graciously bestows an array of functional spiritual gifts to every member of the church (4:7; cf. Rom 12:5-6). This diversity is not predicated upon ethnic variety or individual abilities, but upon Christ's triumphant and sovereign distribution of gifts to individual members of the body. Paul buttresses this assertion of Christ's sovereign authority by citing the victory ode of Psalm 68:18: "Therefore it says 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave<sup>48</sup> gifts to men.'"

The language of Psalm 68 depicts God as the Divine Warrior who triumphantly ascends to Mount Zion upon defeating the enemies of Israel. Paul's application of this OT text to Christ was presaged in 1:20-22 when he asserted:

(God) raised (Christ) from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church...

By his sinless life, cross-work and resurrection, Christ the Divine Warrior absolutely routed the principalities and powers and rulers and authorities of this present darkness (cf.

---

<sup>48</sup>See Arnold, *Ephesians*, 251ff and O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 290-92 for two excellent considerations of why Paul altered the wording ". . . he received" in Psa 68:18 to ". . . he gave" in Ephesians 4:8.

1:20-22; 6:12; Col 2:15). Christ the Warrior-King ascended to the right hand of power, leading his ruined, chained captives in a triumphal procession to display their utter defeat (cf. 4:8; Col 2:15; Jude 6; 2 Cor 2:14-16).

To commemorate and forever display his mighty victory, Christ the triumphant Warrior-King “gave gifts to men.” This giving of gifts in celebration of Christ’s victory is altogether other than the ancient practice of conquering kings dividing the spoils of war among their subjects, though Paul may have the principle in mind (cf. Gen 14; Judg 5:30; 1 Sam 30:26-31).<sup>49</sup> Christ’s royal largesse consists not of gifts captured through conquest, but gloriously variegated gifts issuing from the inexhaustible riches of his grace and given to the church as a result of his cross-work, resurrection and exaltation. The purpose of these Victor-given gifts is enablement of the gospel proclamation of his resounding victory in heavenly places and to the ends of the earth (cf. 4:7-10; 3:7-11; Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:8). Indeed, Christ’s gifts to the church are given to the end that through Christ’s rule the knowledge and worship of God will one day fill the earth as the water covers the sea (cf. 4:10; Isa 2:2; 9:6-7; 11:9; 45:23).

Verses eleven through sixteen establish the effectual, health-inducing growth-promoting nature of Christ’s gifts given to each member within the church. The leading Christ-gifts are those of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (4:11). Apostles (*ἀπόστολος*) here likely infers those sent as missionary-church planters who start and establish local congregations in new gospel frontiers (cf. Acts 14:4; 1 Cor 9:6; Rom 16:7). Prophets (*προφήτας*) are those specially gifted with mediating the word of God to the people of God.<sup>50</sup> The gift of evangelists (*εὐαγγελιστάς*) consists of those specially skilled in the communication of the gospel. Finally, the pastors (*ποιμένας*) are those

---

<sup>49</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 291.

<sup>50</sup>Though not germane to our argument here, the cessationist hermeneutic holds that the gifts of apostles and prophets ceased with the deaths of the twelve and the completion of the canon of Scripture. Arnold (*Ephesians* 256-57) and O’Brien (*Ephesians*, 298-99) argue against the cessationist position, while Lincoln (*Ephesians*, 249) seems to lend credence to the cessationist view.

proficient as overseeing shepherds,<sup>51</sup> and teachers (διδασκάλους) are those who preserve and transmit the apostolic gospel and tradition (cf. 1 Cor 12:28, 29; 14:26; Rom 12:7).<sup>52</sup>

The purpose for which these diverse gifts are placed in the church is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (4:12). We notice that such leading gifts are not tasked specifically with the work of ministry, though such gifted individuals should reasonably participate in ministry. Rather, the aforementioned gifts are placed in the church to teach, disciple and model so that each member is thereby prepared for the work of ministry. Paul is not here making a distinction between clergy and laity, but is rather emphasizing the ministry of all believers.<sup>53</sup> Such discipleship and ministry couples the diversity of Christ’s gifting in the church with the unifying fellowship of the church to produce the healthy growth and maturation of the church.

The full-orbed objective of members being well equipped for ministry finds further explanation in the next clause: “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13). Here Paul reclaims his earlier assertion that the fellowship of the church enjoys the unity of “one faith” and “one Lord” (4:5). Teaching and discipling in the church aims to unify the fellowship in an ever-maturing understanding of the one faith once for all delivered to the saints. Such maturation in the faith necessarily involves

---

<sup>51</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 299-300. O’Brien states, “The term ‘pastor’ is used only here in the New Testament to refer to a ministry in the church, although the related verb ‘to shepherd’ appears several times in this sense (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2; cf. John 21:16), and the noun ‘flock’ is used of the church (Acts 20:28–29; 1 Pet. 5:2, 3). *Pastors*, whose functions are similar to those of overseers (cf. Phil. 1:1) and elders (cf. Acts 20:17, with 28; also 14:23; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17, 19, etc.), exercise leadership through nurture and care of the congregation.”

<sup>52</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 300. O’Brien maintains, “The pastors and teachers are linked here by a single definite article in the Greek, which suggests a close association of functions between two kinds of ministers who operate within the one congregation (cf. 2:20). Although it has often been held that the two groups are identical (i.e., ‘pastors who teach’), it is more likely that the terms describe overlapping functions (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28–29 and Gal. 6:6, where ‘teachers’ are a distinct group). All pastors teach (since teaching is an essential part of pastoral ministry), but not all teachers are also pastors. The latter exercise their leadership role by feeding God’s flock with his word.”

<sup>53</sup>See Arnold, *Ephesians*, 262-264 for a defense of this interpretation.

the church increasing in its knowledge of the Son of God in whom God has revealed the mystery of his redemptive purposes and in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge reside. This maturation in the faith and in Christ binds the hearts of believers together in an insuperable unity as the church grows in understanding of and likeness to Christ (cf. 4:13; Col 2:2-3).

Further, this maturing fellowship of unity in the church serves to guard the membership from the ravages of empty philosophy and doctrinal error. Maturation must occur “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (4:14). Satan’s long war against orthodoxy and the philosophy of Christ necessitates a unified—and unifying—maturation in the faith and in the knowledge of Christ if the church is to avoid being drawn away into debilitating error. Indeed, the victorious Christ has placed the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, preaching and teaching gifts in the church precisely to insure that immaturity and instability decrease and maturation increases. Maturation guards against believers being drawn away from the faith by deceitful schemes (cf. 4:14; 6:11). By this gift-induced maturation, therefore, the church not only experiences healthy growth, but she is enabled to resist all that would undermine and destroy her fellowship and kingdom progress.<sup>54</sup>

Contra being moved about by erroneous doctrine and diabolic schemes of thought, the maturing fellowship of believers is characterized by “speaking the truth in love” (4:15). Continuation in this love-driven confession of the truth of the gospel (cf. 1:13; 6:14) and the full-orbed truth of the faith causes the fellowship of believers to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (4:15). This upward growth stands in juxtaposition to the immature childishness of verse thirteen where immature believers are easily moved away from the faith by every breeze of unorthodox teaching.

---

<sup>54</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 308.

Further, this ascending growth is comprehensive, touching every aspect of the lives of believers such that our growth trajectory is Christ-ward (cf. 4:13). The unity of love for one another, love of the truth, and love of Christ converge in the fellowship of the church, producing the dynamic of healthy spiritual growth.

Upward growth into Christ the Head of the church points to a further ecclesial health dynamic, namely that the whole body of believers is “joined (*συναρμολογούμενον*) and held together (*συμβιβαζόμενον*) by every joint of supply (*ἐπιχορηγίας*)” (4:16).<sup>55</sup> The verbs *συναρμολογούμενον* and *συμβιβαζόμενον* are nearly synonymous and are in the passive voice. Paul intendeds that his readers understand it is Christ, the glorious resurrected Head whose grace and gifting joins and holds the body of believers together (cf. Col 2:19). The prepositional phrase “when each part is working properly” rejoins the language of 4:7. Each member (part) is given grace and gifting by Christ through which—as they come in contact with the rest of the body—their properly functioning, Christ-given contribution imparts nourishment from the Head, promoting the healthy maturation of the whole body.<sup>56</sup> Here again we see the salubrious nature of the fellowship of believers joined and held together by Christ the Head.

The final clause of this expansive pericope mixes physiological and architectural metaphors. Grace-gifted and held together by Christ her Head, the fellowship of believers is enabled by him to “make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (4:16) This fellowship-induced growth is multifaceted. First, numerical growth in the fellowship of believers is in view whereas multiplied members are necessary for both the completion of a well-proportioned body and a well-constructed

---

<sup>55</sup>Though often translated as a verb (e.g. “is equipped”), *ἐπιχορηγίας* (supply, support, provision) is a genitive noun identifying a characteristic of the substantive (joint).

<sup>56</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 314. O’Brien asserts, “While the empowering for growth comes from above, members of the body themselves are fully involved in the process. Paul continues the physiological language, using it metaphorically to speak of the divine energy being channelled [sic] by every supporting ligament [joint]. The ligaments make contact with other parts of the body and are the channels which extend nourishment from the head.”

temple (cf. 4:16; 2:20-22). Secondly, growth in knowledge of the faith and the Son of God must characterize the fellowship of the church (4:13) Thirdly, growth in mutual love is indispensable to the health and unity of the fellowship of believers (cf. 4:2, 15, 16). A properly fellowshiping, unified body of believers may reasonably expect—through Christ’s empowerment—to grow and build itself up into a healthy, effective and vital instrument of Kingdom advancement.

In summary, maturity in size, maturity in knowledge, and maturity in love are the fruits of a fellowship wherein believers are unified as one body by one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God as universal Father. Though diverse by the multifaceted grace-gifting of Christ, the fellowship of believers comprises a unified body experiencing equipping for the work of ministry whereby the Kingdom of God is spread to the ends of the earth. Given these fruits of maturation flowing from a unified fellowship of believers, declining churches should embrace and foster the discipline of fellowship as a powerful and effective means for revitalization.

### **Conclusion**

As noted in the opening of this chapter, contemporary church revitalization literature largely overlooks the primacy of fellowship in the work of church revitalization. We have sought in this chapter to call attention to the felicity of this vital spiritual discipline to counter the debilitating influences of factionalism and division that so often accompany church decline. The utility of the fellowship of the saints stands as an indispensable part of the restoration of the church to united, Kingdom effectiveness. As such, a thorough understanding of this spiritual discipline is essential for churches suffering the ravages of division and decline.

Christian fellowship is a shared, intimate communion with the Father, wrought by the redemptive work of the Son and effectuated by the indwelling Holy Spirit. As such, the fellowship of the church is predicated upon members partaking together in the

full-orbed entailments of a shared gospel regeneration and the variegated functions of the advancement of that gospel to the ends of the earth. The fellowship of the church, therefore, is a joint participation with others in a Kingdom that is greater than the individual members and greater even than the sum of the gathered church. In a word, fellowship is a spiritual discipline and Kingdom priority that unites the church around the mission to which she is called.

We have observed the primacy of fellowship in the exemplary Jerusalem church in Acts. The Jerusalem church was devoted to fellowship as a matter of purposeful discipline, and their fellowship fortified them against the encroachment of strife and division. Their fellowship coalesced around the table of God's word, shared meals and Communion, and unified corporate prayer. The Jerusalem church's fellowship united them in ministry to one another and united them in joyful and public worship of the living God. Their fellowship of unity rendered the church and her gospel message attractive to the community in which she resided. God was pleased, therefore, to multiply their influence and numbers as they practiced this Kingdom priority of fellowship.

Further, we have observed Paul's emphasis upon the felicity of fellowship in his corrective letter to the church at Corinth. In the face of their factionalism and division, Paul repeatedly urged them to embrace the unity of fellowship inherent in their common salvation in Jesus Christ. Indeed, we observed that the primacy of the fellowship of the saints undergirds the entire letter of First Corinthians. Additionally, Paul's letter to the Ephesians called them to a unified fellowship as one body, indwelled by one Spirit, possessed of one hope, grace-gifted by one Lord, coalescing around one faith, one baptism and one sovereign, universal Father. The fruit of such fellowship, according to Paul, would be their maturation in numbers, maturation in knowledge and maturation in love.

The encroaching busyness of life lived in the twenty-first century has led to a reduction of time and opportunity for genuine Christian fellowship in many churches.

Indeed, declining churches often take Christian fellowship for granted and give scant attention to fostering this indispensable discipline. Again, fellowship assumed is fellowship taken for granted, and fellowship taken for granted soon disintegrates into factionalism and discordance. The spirit of autonomism so prevalent in our culture multiplies this danger exponentially.

Church leaders and churches would be well served to prioritize and call constant attention to the felicity of fellowship in the body of Christ. Without this primary privilege and discipline, church decline becomes certain. Conversely, those leaders and churches who intentionally strengthen the cords of fellowship among the saints may reasonably expect the divine blessing of church revitalization. To this end, we will present some practical means in chapter ten of this dissertation whereby churches may foster and strengthen their fellowship together in Christ Jesus.

CHAPTER 7  
THE EFFICACY OF EVANGELISM IN CHURCH  
REVITALIZATION

Evangelical Protestantism is in precipitous decline in North America.

According to a recent Pew Research survey, the number of Americans who self-identify as Protestants declined by 26,356,000 between 2009 and 2019.<sup>1</sup> During this same ten-year period, the population of the United States increased by 22,650,000. In a decade where the U. S. population increased by nearly seven percent, those identifying as Evangelical Protestants decreased by a full eight percent, pointing to a continuing inverted trend between population growth and Evangelical decline.

In the Southern Baptist Convention, the 2018 Annual Church Profiles reported 246,442 baptisms, representing a 3.02 percent decline from 2017. This is the lowest number of baptisms recorded by the SBC in seventy-four years. As R. Albert Mohler rightly stated in response to this report, “The number of baptisms per year is the best indicator of evangelistic activity within SBC churches.”<sup>2</sup> In the same reporting period, SBC churches tallied a total of 14,813,234 members. Taken together, these statistics represent a 60:1 member-to-baptism ratio.<sup>3</sup> For sake of perspective, this reveals that the current climate of evangelism in the SBC requires, on statistical average, sixty church

---

<sup>1</sup>Pew Research Center, “In U. S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>2</sup>R. Albert Mohler, “The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention: The Numbers Don't Add Up,” May 31, 2019, <https://albertmohler.com/2019/05/31/the-future-of-the-southern-baptist-convention-the-numbers-dont-add-up>.

<sup>3</sup>Carol Pipes, “Giving Increases for SBC in 2018, Baptisms, Attendance Continue Decline,” Lifeway Newsroom, May 23, 2019, <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2019/05/23/giving-increases-for-sbc-in-2018-baptisms-attendance-continue-decline/>.

members to realize one baptism *per year*.

A 2019 Lifeway survey discovered that fifty-five percent of those who attend church at least once a month say they have not shared with someone how to become a Christian in the past six months. This survey further confirms an evident paucity of evangelism among Southern Baptist church members.<sup>4</sup> According to Barna Research, in 1993, “nine out of 10 Christians who had shared their faith (89%) agreed that every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith. Today, just two-thirds (64%) say so—a 25-point drop.”<sup>5</sup> Evangelistic stagnancy among Protestant Evangelicals in North America has clearly reached crisis levels.

The findings of a 2018 Barna Research survey uncovered yet another startling reality. Asked if they had ever heard of the Great Commission, fifty-one percent of U. S. churchgoers said they could not recall having heard the term. Further, twenty-five percent of the respondents had heard the term, but were unfamiliar with what it meant. When taken together, the data indicate that as many as seventy-five percent of U. S. churchgoers have little to no understanding of the Great Commission given to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:18-20.

This paucity of evangelism is not limited to church members. According to a 2014 survey of SBC pastors, only twenty-five percent of respondents claimed to average two or more complete gospel conversations per week. More than sixty percent of pastors surveyed reported they do not present the gospel as often as once per week. Chuck Lawless, Dean of Doctoral Studies and Vice-President of Spiritual Formation and Ministry Centers at Southeastern Seminary, writes in the introduction to this survey,

---

<sup>4</sup>Aaron Earls, “Evangelism More Prayed for Than Practiced by Churchgoers,” Lifeway Research, April 23, 2019, <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2019/05/23/giving-increases-for-sbc-in-2018-baptisms-attendance-continue-decline/>.

<sup>5</sup>Barna Group, “Sharing Faith Is Increasingly Optional to Christians,” May 15, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>.

“Over fifteen years of church consulting, our research has led to this finding: seldom have we seen a congregation more evangelistic than the church who is led from the pulpit each Sunday.”<sup>6</sup>

Therein lies the root of the problem of insipid evangelism in so many of our churches—most pastors are not leading by example in the practice of personal evangelism. Evangelistically anemic leaders produce evangelistically anemic churches. Evangelistically anemic churches fail to add new converts and the church plateaus. The members of the plateaued church begin to age and die. The plateaued church then begins to decline. This process is virtually inexorable—and the only means of reversing the trend is a renewal of evangelistic fervor—first in the pastor, and afterwards in the church.

Anemic evangelism is a virtual hallmark in both the leadership and membership of plateaued and declining churches. The above-enumerated statistics on evangelism are correlative to the data indicating that as many as nine out of ten churches in the Southern Baptist Convention are either plateaued or in decline. Indeed, one may easily argue that a causal relationship exists between the former and the latter sets of data. While a paucity of both pastoral and congregational evangelism is not the sole contributing factor in plateaued and declining churches, anemic evangelism is one of the significant contributing factors. Failure to evangelize will, over time, lead inexorably to the plateau, decline and eventual death of a church.

The objective of this chapter is three-fold. First, we will establish that the right understanding and practice of evangelism is axiomatic in relation to the health of the local church. Secondly, we will demonstrate from the narratives of the book of Acts and from the Pauline corpus that evangelism is an indispensable responsibility of the pastor. Finally, we will establish from the Lukan narratives and the Pauline literature that

---

<sup>6</sup>Charles E. Lawless Jr, “Personal Evangelism and Pastors,” Thom S. Rainer, January 21, 2014, <https://thomrainer.com/2014/01/personal-evangelism-and-pastors-14-findings-part-one/>.

evangelism is both the privilege and duty of every professing believer in every church. Taken together, these realities are indicative of the necessity of evangelism in the revitalization of plateaued, declining and dying churches.

### **Evangelism: The What and the Why**

Evangelism has become a significantly diluted term in the twenty-first century, even in Protestant Evangelical circles. What passes for evangelism in the minds of many professing Christians is far removed from the evangelism evidenced in sacred writ. Mark Dever demonstrates the impotency of much postmodern evangelism when he identifies what evangelism is not. Evangelism is not imposing one's belief system upon an unbeliever whose worldview is equally valid to that of Scripture. Nor is evangelism a mere sharing one's personal testimony of God's saving grace. Evangelism is not one's public involvement in social justice issues. One's deft defense of the truth through the employment of Christian apologetics is not evangelism. The conversion of unbelievers—the fruit of evangelism—is not evangelism.<sup>7</sup> Such common misconceptions of evangelism are evidence of the entropic principle of decay and decline that is certainly operative in twenty-first century North American churches.

### **What Is Evangelism?**

Postmodern confusion about evangelism compels us to return to Scripture for understanding. The first mention of the gospel in the NT is found in Matthew's declaration, “Καὶ περιῆγεν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Γαλιλαίᾳ . . . κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας—And he (Jesus) went about in the whole of Galilee . . . proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (cf. Matt 4:23; 9:35). This description of the beginning of Jesus's public ministry calls attention to the content of his message: Jesus was proclaiming the

---

<sup>7</sup>Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 69-82.

εὐαγγέλιον of the kingdom, literally the *good news*, or the gospel, of the kingdom of God. The incarnate Christ, however, was not the first to preach the gospel. In Galatians 3:8 Paul asserts, “προϊδοῦσα δὲ ἡ γραφή ὅτι ἐκ πίστεως δικαιοῖ τὰ ἔθνη ὁ θεός, προεσηγγερίσατο τῷ Ἀβραάμ—And the Scripture, seeing beforehand that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel* to Abraham.”<sup>8</sup> Το προεσηγγερίσατο<sup>9</sup> is to proclaim the good news, the gospel, and in this case it was God who preached the gospel to Abraham. Abraham was justified by faith when he believed God’s proclamation of the gospel (cf. Gen 15:1-6). We understand, therefore, that evangelism is the proclamation of the good news, the gospel of justification by faith.

To understand and rightly proclaim the “good news” declared in evangelism, we must first understand the bad news that renders the gospel such good news. In Galatians 3:8, Paul pushes us in the direction of looking back to the OT to understand the εὐαγγέλιον. Indeed, though the gospel preached to Abraham was the focus of the apostle’s attention (cf. Gen 15:1-6; 18:18; 22:18), the first proclamation of the gospel occurs even earlier, and that in the midst of the bad news which makes the gospel such good news.

In the Genesis record we receive the inspired account of God creating all that exists *ex nihilo* by the power of his spoken word. On the sixth day God generated Adam and Eve as the very pinnacle of creation, bestowing on them the *Imago Dei* (cf. Gen 1:26-27). God then commanded our first parents to multiply exceedingly, assigning to them the cultural mandate to subdue the entire earth and subjugate all to obedience and

---

<sup>8</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 155. Bruce helps clarify the source of the gospel preached to Abraham when he comments: “Paul might well have said προϊδὼν δὲ ὁ θεός κτλ and omitted ὁ θεός from the ὅτι clause, but he uses ‘the scripture’ here more or less as an extension of the divine personality.” The first record of God proclaiming the gospel to Abraham is found in Genesis 15:1-6.

<sup>9</sup>Aorist middle indicative third person singular of προεσαγγερίζομαι.

worship of the Creator (cf. Gen 1:28; Psa 8:4-9).<sup>10</sup> God placed our first parents in the Garden of Eden as his vice-regents who would love, worship, serve, obey and enjoy him (cf. Gen 2:8, 15-17; 3:8). *Elohim* gave Adam one negative command: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17).

Sometime thereafter, the serpent, Satan, tempted Eve to doubt God’s commandment, and she quickly then distorted God’s commandment (cf. Gen 3:1-3). Satan then denied God’s judgment and disparaged God’s intentions (cf. Gen 3:4-5). Sin entered the world in rapid succession on the heels of Satan’s temptation: Eve looked upon the tree, desired that which God forbade, took fruit from the tree, ate the fruit, gave to Adam—who was with her—and he ate (Gen 3:6).<sup>11</sup> Eve’s was the sin of deluded deceit, while Adam’s was the sin of rank rebellion (cf. 1 Tim 2:14). Immediately, Moses writes, their eyes were opened to their nakedness, their exposure to the righteous wrath of holy God against whom they had sinned. They pointlessly attempted to cover up, then hide, and then, when confronted, shift the blame—all to no avail. (cf. Gen 3:7-13).

The Genesis record informs us of God’s devastating judgment, first of the serpent, then of Eve, then of Adam. The serpent will be cursed above all beasts, crawl on its belly, eat dust, and be crushed. Eve and all women descending from her will sin and

---

<sup>10</sup>Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 98. Significantly, Allison ties the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 to the Kingdom of God inaugurated at the first advent of Christ: “Additionally, the church lives the reality of the inaugurated kingdom by seeking to advance that kingdom wherever the church’s members—the citizens of the kingdom—live, work, and play: in neighborhoods, workplaces, governmental agencies, financial establishments, sports programs, and other institutions and structures. Specifically, the church takes seriously the ‘cultural mandate’ (Gen 1:28).” In a footnote Allison is careful to deny that he is suggesting here any aspect of the social justice/social gospel movement as developed in Rauschenbuschism.

<sup>11</sup>R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 71. Hughes vividly and succinctly describes the horror of the scene: “Adam sinned willfully, eyes wide-open, without hesitation. His sin was freighted with sinful self-interest. He had watched Eve take the fruit, and nothing happened to her. He sinned willfully, assuming there would be no consequences. Everything was upside-down. Eve followed the snake, Adam followed Eve, and no one followed God. The result was seismic.”

rebel, experience pain in childbirth, resist husbandly authority, and suffer unrighteous husbandly dominion. Adam and all men descending from him possess a sin-nature, will experience toilsome labor in the confines of a cursed and resistant creation, and sinfully domineer their wives. Both Adam and Eve and their progeny will die and return to the dust from whence they were formed. God then clothed our first parents in animal skins and drove them from his presence and from the tree of life (Gen 3:14-24). The bad news is overwhelming: for all mankind, the *Imago Dei* is razed, the cultural mandate is hopeless, paradise is lost, we are severed from our Creator and we are destined to die eternally (cf. Rev 2:11; 20:14-15; 21:8).

Yet, located in the midst of the raining blows of God’s righteous judgment against sin, there is imbedded the *protoevangelium*—the first gospel, the good news. “I will put enmity between you (Satan) and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head,<sup>12</sup> and you shall desire his heel” (Gen 3:15).<sup>13</sup> Through the chosen

---

<sup>12</sup>U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Vol. 1 From Adam to Noah, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 162. Cassuto sheds light on the difficult but significant translation: “שׁוֹפֵן יִשְׁפֹּן *šūph<sup>e</sup>khā* [usually rendered: (he) will bruise you]. תִּשְׁפֹּן לְשׁוֹפֵנִי *šūphennū* [usually rendered: (you) shall bruise him] / It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the two verbs, which form a word-play here; much discussion has been devoted to the problem by the commentators. The most likely explanation is that the first verb שׁוֹפֵן יִשְׁפֹּן *šūph<sup>e</sup>khā* is derived from a root שׁוֹפֵן *šūph* that is akin to שָׁאֵף *šā’aph* in Amos 2:7: *they that trample הַשְׂאֵפִים haššō’āphīm*] *the HEAD OF THE POOR INTO THE DUST OF THE EARTH*, and *ibid.*, 8:4: *You who trample [הַשְׂאֵפִים haššō’āphīm] upon the needy*, where it has the meaning of *tread upon or crush*; and that the second verb, תִּשְׁפֹּן לְשׁוֹפֵנִי *šūphennū*, comes from a stem שׁוֹפֵן *šūph* that is cognate with שָׁאֵף *šā’aph* in the normal sense of that root, namely, *to crave, desire* (compare the expression *its desire* in the aforementioned verse of the next chapter [4:7]).”

<sup>13</sup>Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 1:248. After briefly reviewing the various positions on Genesis 3:15 from the LXX to John Calvin, Mathews offers this intertextually cohesive observation: “Our passage provides for this mature reflection that points to Christ as the vindicator of the woman (cp. Rom 16:20). There may be an allusion to our passage in Gal 4:4, which speaks of God’s Son as ‘born of a woman.’ Specifically, Paul identified Christ as the ‘seed’ ultimately intended in the promissory blessing to Abraham (Gal 3:16), and Abraham’s believing offspring includes the church (Rom 4:13, 16–18; Gal 3:8). This is further developed in John’s Gospel, where the spiritual dimension is at the forefront. Jesus alluded to our verse when he indicted the Pharisees as children of the ‘devil’ because of their spiritual apostasy (John 8:44), contrary to their claims to be the offspring of righteous Abraham (8:39). John used similar imagery when he contrasted God’s ‘seed’ and those who are ‘of the devil’ (1 John 3:7–10). This is heightened by his appeal to Cain’s murder of righteous Abel as paradigmatic of one ‘who belonged to the evil one’ (3:11–15). Finally, the Apocalypse describes the ‘red dragon,’ who is identified as ‘that ancient serpent’ (Rev 12:9), opposing the believing community

descendants of the woman would come a sinless Seed—and by his perfect obedience to the Father and his mighty, substitutionary cross-work and triumphant resurrection he would crush the power of sin and Satan and justify by faith all who repent and believe (cf. Gen 3:15; 22:18; Gal 4:4-5; 3:7-14, 29).

This is the good news, the *εὐαγγέλιον* Jesus proclaimed—the gospel message of our evangelism. When we repent of our sin and place our faith in the finished work of Christ, the last Adam, the wrath of God is satisfied. The curse is reversed, the *Imago Dei* is restored, the cultural mandate is reinstated,<sup>14</sup> we are reunited with our Creator, the hell of eternal death is defeated and paradise is regained (cf. John 3:16; Rev 2:10-11; 14:13; 21:1-4). This is the greatest news this broken world has or ever will receive. Augustine, upon considering the utter vanity of life apart from God, summarized this *εὐαγγέλιον* beautifully when he said of God, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”<sup>15</sup> We are commanded to propagate this glorious message to the ends of the earth (cf. Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). This is evangelism—and it is a primary responsibility of every pastor and every member of every congregation to advance this gospel.

### **Why Should We Evangelize?**

The self-evident goodness of the gospel—that through repentance and faith in the atoning work of Christ we are reconciled to God and delivered from the wrath to

---

(i.e., the woman) and plotting the destruction of her child (i.e., the Messiah). Ultimately, ‘that ancient serpent’ is destroyed by God for its deception of the nations (Rev 20:2, 7–10).”

<sup>14</sup>Matt 28:18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

<sup>15</sup>Augustine of Hippo, “Letters,” trans. J. G. Cunningham, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, First Series, vol. 1, *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine, with a Sketch of His Life and Work* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886), 146.

come—seems a sufficient motive for evangelism. The reality of living in a fallen world, however, dictates that those who need the gospel are innately resistant to the gospel. Satan, the god of this world, blinds the minds of unbelievers to the goodness of the gospel, veiling their minds to the glories of the gospel (cf. 2 Cor 4:3-4, Matt 13:15). Those thus blinded are occasionally not only resistant to the gospel, but outright hostile to the gospel (cf. Acts 7:1-60; 14:19-22). In the face of inherent resistance and occasional hostility, proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers can be a daunting task.

John Stott summarized the challenge of faithful evangelism when he asserted, “In evangelism too we need incentive, for evangelism is difficult and dangerous work. It brings us face to face with the enemy in hand to hand combat. . . . Some never begin to evangelize for want of adequate incentives. Others begin, but grow discouraged and give up; they need fresh incentives.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, faithful evangelism springs from right spiritual motives, and the apostle Paul gives us no less than nine such motives in 2 Corinthians 4:16—5:21.<sup>17</sup>

The eternal perspective of the Christian is the first motivation to evangelism set forth by the apostle in this passage (2 Cor 4:16-5:5). The entire pericope appears in the context of advancing the gospel through evangelism. We recognize that the eternal God of creation possesses the power to cause the light of the gospel to shine into sin-darkened hearts (cf. 2 Cor 4:3-4, 6). The treasure of the gospel resides in us, mere temporal, clay jars, so as to demonstrate the salvific power of God (cf. 2 Cor 4:7; Rom 1:16). Resistance to the gospel does not overcome us, for the eternal life of Christ abides in us (cf. 2 Cor 4:9-10; 2:14-16). Momentary afflictions for the sake of the gospel are inconsequential in comparison to the eternal glories of the new heavens and new earth

---

<sup>16</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Our Guilty Silence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), 13-14.

<sup>17</sup>Timothy Beougher, “32100 Personal Evangelism” (lecture, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, September 8, 2015).

(cf. 2 Cor 4:17; Rom 8:18; 2 Thess 1:5). Our eyes are not fixed on transient things that fade away, but on things eternal that are unfading (cf. 2 Cor 4:18; 5:7).<sup>18</sup> The Christian's entire perspective is eternal and he understands that the souls who are the object of his evangelism are eternal—and eternal heaven or hell hangs in the balance as a compelling motive for evangelism.

Secondly, we evangelize from the motive of a deep desire to please God (2 Cor 5:9). We please God by proclaiming the gospel with boldness and by being courageous even when affliction follows (cf. 2 Cor 3:12; 4:1, 13; 5:6). Christians please God when we live in confidence of the resurrection and advance the good news of Christ's reconciling cross-work and justifying resurrection (cf. 2 Cor 4:10-11; 5:19-21). We labor to please God by making Christ known because Christ has made us his own (2 Cor 5:9; Phil 3:12). Desire to please the God of our salvation compels us to evangelize.

Thirdly, Paul contends that Christians evangelize because we know we will be judged for our stewardship of the gospel (cf. 2 Cor 5:10; 1 Cor 4:1-2; 9:17). As stewards entrusted with the advancement of the gospel, we desire to be found faithful when we stand before the *bema* seat of Christ. Every Christian should be motivated to hear his Lord say at that final day, "Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master" (cf. Matt 25:14-30). The coming judgment motivates us to be good stewards of the gospel.

The fourth argument of our passage is that Christians are motivated to evangelize by our understanding of the holiness of God (cf. 2 Cor 5:11). The holiness of God requires that he judge all men according to his standard of perfect righteousness. We fear God's wrath, therefore, and out of love and concern for others we persuade them to

---

<sup>18</sup>Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 365. Harris' summary of 2 Cor 4:18 is quite didactic: "Christians should be characterized by a fixation on invisible, eternal realities. Paradoxically, their eyes are riveted on what cannot be seen. The world of sense does not determine their outlook and action."

flee from the wrath to come by repenting and entrusting themselves to the perfect righteousness of Christ (cf. Acts 17:30-31; 2 Cor 5:19-21). The fear of holy God is the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of evangelistic motivation.

Fifthly, Paul sets forth Christ's compelling love for us as a motivation for evangelism (2 Cor 5:14).<sup>19</sup> Right understanding of Christ's redeeming love restrains us from living for ourselves and compels our testimony of his love to others (cf. 2 Cor 5:15; Acts 4:19-20; 1 John 3:1). God's love for us in Christ elicits our love for Christ in God, which love manifests itself in our evangelism (cf. 1 Cor 5:14; 1 John 4:10-11, 14, 19-21). The self-sacrificial love of Christ for us is a significant motivator of passionate evangelism.

The sixth inducement to evangelism the apostle sets forth is the Lordship of the resurrected Christ (2 Cor 5:15). The redemption accomplished by Christ's death and resurrection works in its recipients a radical restructuring of our orientation. We no longer live for sin and self—we live for him who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Gal 5:24; Rom 6:6-10). The One who possesses all authority in heaven and earth is now the Lord of our life; and he commands as our Lord that we evangelize the nations (cf. Acts 2:36; 2 Cor 4:5; Rom 14:9; Matt 28:18-20). Submission to the rightful Lordship of Jesus stimulates zealous evangelism.

Seventhly, our passage offers as motivation for evangelism the assurance that lives are radically changed by Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Those who heed the gospel message of repentance and faith become new creatures in Christ, born anew of the Spirit of God (cf.

---

<sup>19</sup>Harris, *2 Corinthians*, 419. Harris argues in favor of the subjective genitive: "Very few commentators take τοῦ Χριστοῦ as an objective genitive ('love of Christ,' 'our love for Christ'), the vast majority regarding it as a subjective genitive ('Christ's love,' 'the love Christ showed;' cf. Gal. 2:20). Support for this latter view may be found in: (a) Pauline usage, in which a personal genitive after ἀγάπη always denotes the person having or showing love, not the one receiving it, and in which Christ is never the object of believers' ἀγάπη; and (b) the immediate context, where the focus is on Christ's death (ἀπέθανεν ... ἀπέθανεν ... τῷ ... ἀποθανόντι, vv. 14–15) as an evidence of his self-sacrificial love."

John 3:3-8; Rom 6:4-8). In Christ, blinded eyes see, broken lives are healed, shattered relationships are mended and sinful lifestyles are transformed. In a fallen world of sin and brokenness, the transformative nature of the gospel is an extraordinary impetus to fervent evangelism.

The eighth incentive to evangelism set forth by the apostle is the amazing reality that God has made us a part of his glorious and sweeping redemptive purpose (2 Cor 5:18-20). Having reconciled us to himself through the atoning death and justifying resurrection of the Lord Jesus, God has made us his ambassadors of reconciliation to the world. The divine enterprise of redemption—planned in the council-chambers of eternity past, secured in time by the Word made flesh, and culminating in a numberless throng gathered around the throne of the Lamb in eternal worship—enlists us as ambassadors to call others to reconciliation with our great God. One is hard-pressed to imagine a more grand motive for evangelism than is held forth in these three verses.

Finally, our passage induces the doctrine of imputation as a motive for evangelism (2 Cor 5:21). For those who believe, God imputes our sins to Christ, and, in turn, imputes Christ's perfect righteousness to us, thereby justifying us forever (cf. Gal 3:3; Rom 3:21-26; 8:1-4). This is the message of our evangelism: The Son of God's eternal love became the object of God's holy wrath so that the objects of God's holy wrath might become the sons and daughters of God's eternal love. Such is possible only because the wrath of God is now satisfied and the sinner is now justified via this dual imputation of sin and righteousness. The propitious act of God's redemptive double-imputation serves as a rousing motive for vigorous evangelism.

These nine scriptural motives for evangelism sufficiently answer the question of why we should evangelize. Failure to advance the gospel is never for want of revealed incentives, for Scripture is pregnant with imperatives, inducements and promises concerning the Great Commission work of evangelism.

In summary of the what and why of evangelism, a right understanding of the

gospel and the faithful, scripturally-motivated practice of evangelism are indispensable to the revitalization and renewal of the local church. Evangelism is the prescribed means by which God redeems for himself an inestimably large *ecclesia* from every nation, kindred, tribe and tongue (Rev 5:9). Churches that fail to embrace God's grand, redemptive purpose by witnessing to the world of the gospel of God's grace will forfeit Christ's presence, plateau, decline and eventually die (cf. Rev 2:1-5).<sup>20</sup> Conversely, churches who embrace a right understanding and practice of evangelism may reasonably expect to experience God's blessing and revitalization.

We will now consider the primacy of pastoral evangelism in the revitalization of plateaued and declining churches.

### **The Primacy of Pastoral Evangelism**

As leaders and shepherds of the church, pastors are to set an example for the church to follow (1 Tim 4:12). Exemplary pastoral leadership is nowhere more urgently pressing than in a church revitalization context. The anemic evangelism evidenced by the statistics presented at the beginning of this chapter points to a desperate need for pastors to be *evangelistic* exemplars before their churches. Indeed, studies of churches experiencing revitalization evidence the effectiveness of pastoral evangelism in that their

---

<sup>20</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 231. Beale contends, "Although they were ever on guard to maintain the purity of the apostolic teaching, the Ephesian Christians were not diligent in witnessing to the same faith in the outside world . . . This is what is meant when Christ chastises them for having left their 'first love.' . . . The idea is that they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus *by witnessing to him in the world*. This is why Christ chooses to introduce himself as he does in v 1. His statement that he 'walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands' is intended to remind the introverted readers that their primary role in relation to their Lord should be that of a light of witness to the outside world . . . That losing their 'first love' was tantamount to becoming unzealous witnesses is suggested further as we see a link with Matt. 24:12-14, which shows such an end-time expectation: 'Most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world for a *witness* to all the nations, and then the end will come.' This explains the loss of love as unfaithfulness to the covenantal task of enduring in preaching the gospel 'for a witness.' Indeed, this is to occur together with an increase in 'false prophets' who will 'mislead' (Matt. 24:10-11, 23-26), just as was occurring in Ephesus."

pastors consistently display strong leadership in this spiritual discipline.

In an extensive analytic study of some 50,000 American churches, Thom Rainer discovered that “Breakout Churches” invariably have pastors who are outwardly focused and make evangelism a top priority.<sup>21</sup> In a similar study identifying some 300 “Comeback Churches,” Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson discovered a crucial commonality—comeback churches have pastors whose lives evidence faithful personal evangelism.<sup>22</sup> These findings should come as no surprise given the abundant testimony in the book of Acts to the personal evangelism of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Leaders practicing evangelism was the standard both in the first church and in the Pauline corpus.

### **Pastoral Evangelism in Acts**

On the Day of Pentecost, the gathered disciples experienced the promised effusion of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit propelled them into the streets of Jerusalem to proclaim the gospel of the risen Christ. As the marveling crowd gathered, the apostle Peter seized the opportunity and addressed them with a piercing proclamation of the *εὐαγγέλιον*. Peter’s address was evangelistic, including testimony of the redeeming life, sin-atonement, justifying resurrection and Lordship-affirming exaltation of Christ (cf. Acts 2:22-36). Peter’s exposure of their sin of rejecting and crucifying Christ produced conviction, for, “κατενύγησαν τὴν καρδίαν—they were cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37).<sup>23</sup> Peter responded to their cry of desperation with an exhortation to repentance and

---

<sup>21</sup>Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 42.

<sup>22</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 103.

<sup>23</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary On the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 69. Bruce comments, “If Jesus of Nazareth was indeed their appointed Messiah, then no guilt could be greater than the guilt of treating him as he had been treated. *If they had refused him in whom all their hope of salvation rested, what hope of salvation was left to them now?* Well might they cry out in anguish of heart, ‘What are we to do, brothers?’” (emphasis added). This is the kind of conviction of conscience at which all evangelism should aim

faith. Three thousand repented, believed and were baptized (cf. Acts 2:37b-41). Here we see a model of pastoral leadership in evangelism. Peter's witness was exemplary in that it was Christocentric, concise, confrontational, convicting and clear in calling for repentance and faith.

Again, upon the healing of the lame beggar, Peter recognized and seized an opportunity for evangelism when a marveling crowd gathered in Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:1-12). Peter's *προεσαγγελίζομαι* was again Christ-centered and confrontational as he accused them of killing the Author of life. He addressed their wickedness and called them to repentance (cf. Acts 3:15, 19, 26). In a word, the apostle proclaimed to the gathered crowd the same gospel that God preached to Abraham (see above, cf. Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8; Gen 22:18). Peter's evangelistic example in this narrative is distinctly opportunistic, assertively bold and thoroughly intertextual.<sup>24</sup>

The Lukan narrative is pregnant with the primacy of pastoral evangelism. Peter practiced evangelism even when confronted by the temple authorities, boldly stating that there is salvation in none other than Christ (cf. Acts 4:8-12). As a group, the apostles, with boldness and power, bore witness to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 4:33). When the apostles were arrested and placed in the public prison for their evangelism in the Temple, an angel of the Lord miraculously freed them and they returned to the Temple and resumed their evangelism at sunrise the next morning (Acts 5:17-21). Brought again to the authorities who had imprisoned them, the apostles proclaimed the *εὐαγγέλιον* to their antagonists (Acts 5:29-32). These Temple authorities, enraged to the point of desiring to kill the apostles, beat them, warned them to cease their evangelism, and released them. Undeterred, the leaders of the first church continued their *daily*

---

<sup>24</sup>Intertextual treatment of the gospel is evident in verses 13, 18, and 21-25 of this relatively brief account of the Petrine proclamation.

evangelism in the Temple and from house to house (Acts 5:33-42).<sup>25</sup>

From the Lukan record we discover that the leaders of the Jerusalem church were irrepressible evangelists. These apostles were opportunistic, observantly seizing upon various circumstances as a platform for proclaiming the gospel. Their evangelism consistently bore testimony to the redeeming life, sin-atonement death, justifying resurrection and Lordship-affirming exaltation of Christ. The apostles' *εὐαγγέλιον* was also markedly intertextual, employing the whole of Scripture to proclaim a full-orbed gospel.

Further, the evangelism of the shepherds of the first church was unapologetically nouthetic, confronting and admonishing the sin of their hearers. Their gospel proclamation produced conviction in the hearts of their hearers. Apostolic evangelism called for repentance and faith. They were courageous evangelists even in the face of threats to their lives, beatings and imprisonment. The apostles' evangelism took place in public venues and privately, from house to house—and they evangelized daily without ceasing.

In summary, Luke was didactically concerned to record the faithfulness of the apostles' evangelism. Of the 1,006 verses comprising the twenty-eight chapters of Acts, Luke dedicated approximately 500 of those verses to describing the evangelism of church leaders. The historian, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, intended to set forth a pattern for emulation. The church throughout the book of Acts was graced with shepherds who led by example in personal evangelism. God was pleased to bless their evangelism, and the church grew exponentially.

---

<sup>25</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, International Critical Commentary 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 301. Noting that the apostles were undeterredly “preaching and teaching Jesus as the Christ” in Acts 5:42, Barrett reminds us, “. . . Luke makes no distinction between *διδάσκειν* and *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι*.”

## **Pastoral Evangelism in the Pauline Corpus**

The Pauline literature bears significant testimony to the primacy of pastoral evangelism. The apostle Paul, both prior to and shortly after his conversion, intentionally observed the practices and priorities of the Jerusalem church.<sup>26</sup> Being thus familiar with the primacy of evangelism among the original apostles, Paul himself began to effectively evangelize immediately upon his conversion (Acts 9:20-22), and he maintained the discipline throughout his life.

Paul's practice of personal evangelism as a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer<sup>27</sup> is first and copiously evident in the book of Acts.<sup>28</sup> Unsurprisingly, Pauline evangelism mirrored that of the apostles leading the Jerusalem church in that he was consistent, opportunistic, Christocentric, intertextual, nouthetic, convicting and courageous in his evangelistic approach. Paul evangelized in synagogues, in jails, at riversides, and before prelates and kings. In a word, Paul's entire career as a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer modeled consistent personal evangelism.

---

<sup>26</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, 164. Bruce maintains that the evangelistic message of the Jerusalem church was the source of Saul's bitter angst against the church: "A zealot for the ancestral traditions of his nation, he saw that the new faith menaced those traditions. Drastic action was called for: these people, he thought, were not merely misguided enthusiasts whose sincere embracing of error called for patient enlightenment; they were deliberate impostors, proclaiming that God had raised from the tomb to be Lord and Messiah a man whose manner of death was sufficient to show that the divine curse rested on him." Additionally, the witnesses against Stephen in his trial before the Sanhedrin for the charge of blasphemy laid their garments at the feet of Saul, indicating he was likely an eyewitness to the trial, and, therefore, to the nature of the dispute between the Jewish authorities and the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 7:58; 2:20). After his conversion, for a period of fifteen days Saul met with Peter and James in what was likely an intensive period of discussion, prayer and worship together. Although this visit was brief, the conversations with Peter and James and the consequent meetings with the gathered church would have been more than adequate to acquaint him with the church's paradigmatic emphasis on evangelism (cf. Acts 9:24-26; Gal 1:15-18).

<sup>27</sup>As argued in chapter two of this dissertation, the three missionary journeys recorded in Acts demonstrate that Paul was committed to the work of church revitalization. He consistently returned to already-established churches for the purpose of strengthening and revitalizing (cf. Acts 14:21-23; 15:36-41; 16:1-5; 18:22-23; 20:1-2). The Pauline epistles likewise bear significant testimony to Paul's concern for church revitalization.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Acts 9:20-22; 13:5, 7, 12, 15-41, 44-48; 14:1, 21, 25; 16:13-15, 25-33; 17:1-4, 10-12, 22-34; 18:1-4, 7-8, 19; 19:1-5, 8; 22:3-21; 23:6; 24:22-26; 26:1-23; 28:23-31.

Paul revealed the underlying compulsion that drove his evangelism when writing to the Corinthian church. He reminded them that he did not rely on their patronage to preach the gospel. Rather, he asserts, “ἀνάγκη . . . μοι ἐπίκειται—necessity is pressed upon me” (1 Cor 9:16). The apostle hereby harkens back to his calling and commission, and echoes the words of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, “For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20; cf. Acts 9:6, 15, 20; Rom 1:14). Paul was compelled to proclaim the gospel because he was a recipient of God’s saving grace. Indeed, Paul writes, “οὐαὶ γὰρ μοί ἐστιν ἐὰν μὴ εὐαγγελίσωμαι—for woe is to me if I do not proclaim the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). In the words of Anthony C. Thiselton, “It is agony if Paul tries to escape from the constraints and commission which the love and grace of ‘the hound of heaven’ presses upon him.”<sup>29</sup> As a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer, Paul was obligated by grace to evangelize. Like the prophet Jeremiah, he discovered himself divinely compelled to proclaim the εὐαγγέλιον to others (cf. Jer 20:9).

Paul further asserted that in relation to evangelism he was “οἰκονομίαν πεπίστευμαι—entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor 9:17; cf. 1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:1-3). He viewed himself a glad bond-servant entrusted with proclaiming the now-revealed mysteries of God’s salvific revelation to others (cf. 1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:4-11, 6:18-20). Here we see not only Paul’s compulsion to evangelize because he was a debtor to grace, but also something of his obligation as a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer. An οἰκονόμος was a slave entrusted with the managership (οἰκονομίαν—cf. 1 Cor 9:17) of a large estate. This deputy-slave was tasked by his master with ensuring that subordinate servants accomplished the work necessary for the advancement of the estate.<sup>30</sup> This

---

<sup>29</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 695.

<sup>30</sup>Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 74.

understanding of stewardship accords well with the apostle's commitment to training and overseeing both pastors and churches in the work of evangelism (cf. Eph 4:11-16; 2 Tim 4:5).

Paul directly addressed the issue of evangelism in relation to pastoral ministry in a revitalization context in 2 Timothy 4:5. Having left Timothy at Ephesus to confront rising heterodoxy, Paul penned the pastoral epistles of First and Second Timothy to encourage his young protégé and to instruct Timothy in his personal conduct and his oversight of this declining church. In a pericope of the second epistle wherein he was exhorting Timothy to faithfully preach the word of God, Paul punctuates his exhortations with this imperative: “ἔργον ποιήσον εὐαγγελιστοῦ—do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). Notably, εὐαγγελιστής (evangelist) appears only three times in the NT, here and in Acts 21:8 and Ephesians 4:11. Both the Acts and Ephesians occurrences are helpful to understanding Paul's exhortation to Timothy.

Acts 21:8 designates Philip, one of the original seven deacons, as an evangelist. We recall the record of Philip's evangelism from Acts chapter eight wherein he fruitfully proclaimed the gospel of the risen Christ in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8). Philip also joined the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza and proclaimed to him the gospel from the prophecy of Isaiah (cf. Acts 8:26-39; Isa 53:7-8). Philip then proceeded from Azotus to Caesarea, evangelizing in every town along the way (Acts 8:40). His was a ministry of itinerant evangelism in heretofore unevangelized regions. We also note, however, a direct oversight of Philip's itinerant ministry by the apostles (cf. Acts 8:14-17).

Ephesians 4:11 identifies evangelists as gifts placed in the church by the resurrected Christ for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry (cf. Eph 4:7-12). Paul's commendation of Timothy in Philippians 2:22 and 1 Thessalonians 3:2 may

indicate that Timothy possessed the gift of evangelism, much like Philip.<sup>31</sup> While it is possible that Paul uses the term “evangelists” here to include itinerates such as Philip, it is unlikely the term is limited to itinerates alone. Context clearly indicates some evangelists do serve in the framework of an established local church (cf. Eph 4:12-16).<sup>32</sup>

Four lines of argumentation support the discipline of evangelism as integral to pastoral leadership. First, Paul, himself a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer, was clearly a skilled and practicing evangelist. Secondly, Philip’s itinerant evangelism was overseen by the apostles, indicating that even itinerant evangelism was a function and ministry of the local church and her leadership.<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, Paul lists evangelists as those who equip the saints for the work of ministry. Fourthly, Paul exhorts Timothy—who is leading pastorally in a revitalization context at Ephesus—to do the work of an evangelist. Taken together, these texts present a strong case for the primacy of pastoral evangelism in the context of church leadership.

Paul’s exhortation to Timothy was given to a man laboring in the trenches of revitalization pastoral ministry. In addition to preaching the word in the local church, Timothy was to be sober-minded, endure suffering—and *do the work of an evangelist*. Paul was not exhorting Timothy to do the work of an itinerant evangelist, but to be pastorally evangelistic in his preaching, teaching and personal witness in an established-

---

<sup>31</sup>George W., Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 457.

<sup>32</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 300. O’Brien comments, “While the term probably included itinerant individuals who engaged in primary evangelism, it was not limited to them. The admonition to Timothy to ‘do the work of an evangelist’ is set within the context of a settled congregation, which presumably meant a ministry to believers and unbelievers alike, while the cognate verb, rendered ‘preach the gospel,’ covers a range of activities from primary evangelism and the planting of churches to the ongoing building of Christians and the establishment of settled congregations (cf. Rom. 1:11–15). Here in Ephesians 4 evangelists are given by the ascended Christ for the purpose of building his body, and this included both intensive and extensive growth.”

<sup>33</sup>Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 42, (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 250. It is helpful to here remember that the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John, two of the leading evangelists in the Jerusalem church, to oversee the revival in Samaria.

church context. Evangelism was an indispensable function of Timothy's work as a revitalizing pastor at Ephesus.<sup>34</sup> Timothy was to set an example of personal evangelism before this struggling church (cf. 1 Tim 4:12; 2 Tim 4:5). In preaching the word, keeping a sober mind, enduring suffering, *and doing the work of an evangelist*, Timothy would “διακονίαν σου πληροφόρησον—fill (his) ministry to the brim” (2 Tim 4:5). Διακονίαν σου πληροφόρησον exhorts Timothy to faithfulness and abundant fruitfulness in the whole work of ministry, including the work of evangelism.<sup>35</sup>

In summary, as a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer, Paul practiced personal evangelism that reflected all the dimensions of the evangelism practiced by the original apostles. Paul viewed evangelism as a grace-entrusted stewardship to be transferred to those whom he discipled. The apostle deemed pastoral evangelism integral to the equipping and revitalization of the church.

Given the afore-mentioned analytic studies of revitalizing churches and their evangelistic pastors, the apostolic emphasis upon personal pastoral evangelism in the book of Acts, and the unqualified exhortations of the apostle Paul, we conclude that pastoral evangelism is requisite to the revitalization of the local church. Evangelism must begin in the pulpit and with the pastor.

### **The Efficacy of Congregational Evangelism**

The didactic objective of pastoral evangelism is the equipping of the congregation for the work of personal evangelism—and congregational evangelism is

---

<sup>34</sup>Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 246.

<sup>35</sup>Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 458. Knight maintains, “τὴν διακονίαν σου πληροφόρησον, functions as a summary exhortation embracing the preceding imperatives and any other aspect of Timothy's ministry. πληροφορέω (Lk. 1:1; Rom. 4:21; 14:5; Col. 4:12; 2 Tim. 4:5) is used here with the meaning ‘fulfill,’ i.e., fully and completely accomplish and carry out the duties of his ministry (cf. Col. 4:17, where Paul [with Timothy] uses the synonym πληρόω to give a similar exhortation to Archippus concerning τὴν διακονίαν).”

essential to the work of church revitalization. As we will demonstrate in this section, the Great Commission was delivered to the entire church and is operative for every member of every church of all ages.

Despite scriptural clarity pertaining to the imperative of evangelism, the studies cited at the beginning of this chapter indicate a woeful paucity of evangelism in most of our congregations. We recall that in 2018 Southern Baptists recorded the lowest number of baptisms in seventy-four years. Worse still, Annual Church Profile (ACP) data for 2018 indicated a ratio of sixty church members for every one baptism in Southern Baptist churches. We contend that a self-evident, direct correlation exists between the statistical plateau and decline of our churches and the observable deficiency of congregation-wide evangelism. It is not coincidental that as many as nine out of every ten churches in the SBC are plateaued or declining while our members-to-baptisms ratio is 60:1.

Perhaps more so than any other single discipline, the recovery of evangelism in our churches holds the greatest potential for renewal and revitalization. Christ himself attributed the decline of the Ephesian church to her abandonment of evangelism (cf. Rev 2:1-5).<sup>36</sup> The Jerusalem church, conversely, suffered no such lack of congregational evangelism—and the church grew exponentially. Further, the letters of the apostle Paul, very often concerned with the revitalization of declining churches, contain copious exhortations to faithful congregational evangelism. In the following, we will first consider the evidence and efficacy of congregation-wide evangelism in the Jerusalem church. Secondly, we will consider several passages from the Pauline corpus that communicate the urgency of congregational evangelism in the context of church revitalization.

---

<sup>36</sup>See also footnote 20 above.

## Congregational Evangelism in Acts

The command to evangelize the nations stands as the final, commissioning exhortation of our victorious Lord prior to his ascension. The stunning events of his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection galvanized the believing community of his followers and prepared them for this profoundly eschatological recapitulation of the creation mandate (cf. Gen 1:28). The expansive grandeur of our Lord's words doubtlessly caused the disciples' minds to reel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:18-20)

Jesus's allusion to Daniel 7:13-14 in proclaiming his expansive authority (vs. 18) would not have been lost on this group of disciples, all of whom were likely aware of Daniel's prophetic vision:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14)

These disciples' Lord was the foreseen Son of Man. The everlasting dominion was his. The nations of the earth would serve Jesus. The indestructible Kingdom was his, and the King was giving the disciples their Kingdom marching orders: Make disciples of all nations. These Jesus-followers would now be witnesses to the risen Christ from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8). Notice the promise of Matt 28:20b: “ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος—I am with you all the days to the completion of the age.” We see here one directive given to one church by the one ever-present King of the one indestructible Kingdom—and the one commission remains in place to the end of the age. In a word, Jesus commanded the whole church of

all time to make disciples of all nations.<sup>37</sup>

When the day of Pentecost had fully come, the Christ-promised baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred, filling and empowering the newly-commissioned disciples (cf. Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-3). The 120 gathered disciples discovered themselves in possession of the gift of *γλώσσαις*, and they promptly filled Jerusalem with proclamations of the *εὐαγγέλιον* of the risen Christ (cf. Acts 1:15; 2:4-13).<sup>38</sup> Luke informs us that the evangelism of the disciples was heard by the nationalistically diverse crowd, each in *ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ*—his own language (cf. Acts 2:5-6). The nations were gathered in Jerusalem, and the *entire congregation* of believers began evangelizing the nations, just as Christ had commanded them (cf. Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8).<sup>39</sup> While tendency exists to think the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost responded exclusively to Peter’s gospel proclamation, Luke was careful to point out the evangelism of the entire congregation of the 120. The text of Acts 2:41 indicates that those who believed did so in response to Peter’s exhortations, but evangelism of the congregation doubtlessly influenced many of these confessors. We see, therefore, that the first evangelism of the first church was a congregation-wide witness to the mighty, redemptive works of God (cf. Acts 2:11).

Further evidence of congregational evangelism appears in Luke’s reference to

---

<sup>37</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 432. Blomberg asserts, “Matthew closes his Gospel with Jesus’s promise to be spiritually present with his followers until the end of this age, that is, until his return, when he will once again be present bodily . . . Acts 2 will describe the decisive moment of the fulfillment of this promise at Pentecost. Matthew chooses to leave his readers here. The disciples represent *everyone in the church* to which he writes and, derivatively, *everyone who professes to follow Christ in any age*.” (emphasis added)

<sup>38</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 97. Bock asserts, “These tongues allow the disciples to speak about God’s activity in the foreign languages of their audience (vv. 4–11). Thus these tongues function as an evangelistic enablement, so that each person can hear about God’s work in his or her own language.”

<sup>39</sup>Barrett, *Acts*, 119. Citing the difficulty of the phrase *ἀπὸ παντὸς ἔθνους τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν*, Barrett comments: “If taken with *Jews* the phrase must mean, *from* (their residence among) *every nation under heaven*; if taken with *pious men* it could mean, *belonging to every nation under heaven*.” Either way, Luke apparently intended a symbolic representation of the nations in the construction of the phrase.

the believers “ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν—having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:47 cf. 5:13). The stunning events of Pentecost—coupled with apostolic signs and wonders and their generous, worshipful disposition—elicited a favorable response to the fledgling church among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This favor doubtlessly afforded the congregation ample opportunity for evangelism, for Luke immediately asserts, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Here we have further evidence of the efficacy of congregational evangelism. The weight of the evidence increases when we recognize that the pericope of Acts 2:42-47 is descriptive of the entire church, including the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost.

Luke locates yet another oblique reference to congregation-wide evangelism in Acts 2:46 when he reports, “καθ’ ἡμέραν τε προσκαρτεροῦντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ—daily they were attending the Temple together.” While Luke does not provide for us the location where the Pentecostal, church-wide proclamation of the gospel took place, he does reveal that a pattern of evangelism in the Temple precincts developed shortly thereafter. Unified Temple attendance supplied the first church with an already-gathered audience to whom they proclaimed the redemptive works of God (cf. Acts 2:11, 45; 3:1, 11; 5:12-14, 20-21, 42).<sup>40</sup> Luke consistently reminds us that evangelism in the Temple was the norm for this body of believers, thereby evidencing the constant intentionality of congregational evangelism.

When Temple authorities first threatened the apostles, the Jerusalem congregation responded with unified prayer that God would grant them all boldness to continue their evangelism (Acts 4:23-30). God answered their prayer with edifice-shaking power, and Luke records that “ἐπλήσθησαν ἅπαντες τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος—they

---

<sup>40</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 122. Polhill observes, “The Christian presence in the temple testifies not only to their remaining faithful to their Jewish heritage but also evidences their zeal for witness. In Jerusalem the temple was the primary place where crowds would be found, and there the Christians went to bear their witness (3:11–12; 5:21, 42).”

all were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:31). The divine response to their prayer was reminiscent of the Pentecost-outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the congregation’s evangelistic response likewise mirrored the Day of Pentecost.<sup>41</sup> They “ἐλάλουν τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ παρρησίας—continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” We must note carefully that the *entire congregation* was both filled with the Holy Spirit *and* continued to evangelize with boldness. Here again, Luke informs us of congregation-wide participation in the work of evangelism.

Further, the practice of evangelism by individuals in the Jerusalem congregation is evidenced in Stephen’s speech, Philip’s evangelistic outreach in Samaria, and his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (cf. Acts 7; 8:1-8, 26-38). The care of Luke, as a historian, to record the evangelistic fervor of the Jerusalem congregation is indicative of the primacy this spiritual discipline held in their fellowship.

In summary, the leadership of the first church led by evangelistic example, and the church emulated their fidelity. Faithful to the command of our Lord, the Jerusalem church—indeed, the entire Jerusalem church—was evangelistically engaged.

### **Congregational Evangelism in the Pauline Corpus**

Reflecting on the Great Commission given to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ, John Stott presses home the primacy of personal evangelism when he asserts,

[This] commission . . . is binding on every member of the whole church. . . . Every Christian is called to be a witness to Christ in the particular environment in which God has placed him. Further, though the public ministry of the Word is a high office, private witness or personal evangelism has a value which in some respects surpasses even that of preaching, since the message can be adapted more personally.<sup>42</sup>

Paul likewise recognized and promoted the primacy of personal evangelism. The case

---

<sup>41</sup>Bruce, *Acts*, 99.

<sup>42</sup>John Stott, *Personal Evangelism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1949), 3-4.

may be reasonably made that every letter of the NT written by Paul addresses evangelism and the responsibility of the local congregations to advance the gospel. Congregational evangelism is abundantly evident in the book of Acts—and congregational evangelism is urgently pressed upon the churches addressed in the Pauline epistles.

**Evangelism in Romans.** Paul’s epistle to the church in Rome is a soteriological textbook on orthodox evangelism. Dedicating the first eleven chapters to a thorough explication of the doctrine of justification by faith, the apostle graced the recipients of this letter with the most detailed exegesis of the gospel found anywhere in Scripture. Paul articulated his longing to visit the church in order that he might “τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικὸν εἰς τὸ στηριχθῆναι ὑμᾶς—impart some spiritual gift to you to strengthen you” (Rom 1:11). Here again we note Paul’s impulse to strengthen and revitalize the churches in his use of στηρίζω. In lieu of a personal visit, he sent them his soteriological *magnum opus* as a spiritual gift to strengthen their evangelism.

The apostle’s intention to spur the evangelism of the Roman church is further evidenced in his assertion, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for (Israel) is that they might be saved” (Rom 10:1). This exclamation rests at the mid-point of Paul’s argument for urgent proclamation of the gospel to the Jews (cf. Rom 1:16; 9:1-11:10). Further, in the portion of the letter dedicated to orthopraxy, he urges the evangelism of Gentiles by employing a catena of OT texts as his apologetic (Rom 15:8-12).<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the exhortations of chapters thirteen and fourteen—including submission to authorities, loving one’s neighbor as one’s self, resisting the impulse to judge one another, and

---

<sup>43</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 505. Morris comments, “(Paul) quotes from the law, the prophets, and twice from the Psalms, so that he calls all the recognized divisions of Scripture to witness to the point he is making, that the Gentiles have their place in God’s salvation. There is something of a progression. The first quotation has the note of confession, as the Psalmist praises God among the Gentiles. The second calls on the Gentiles to rejoice with Israel. In the third the Gentiles praise God independently of Israel. And in the fourth we find that the cause of it all is the ‘root’ of Jesse, the only one on whom sinners can hope.”

avoiding being a stumbling-block—were calculated to increase the Roman congregation’s advancement of the gospel. They must adorn the gospel with right living, for this gospel must be “made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God” (cf. Rom 13:1-14:23; 16:25-26). To that end, the apostle assured the church that God will “στηρίξαι κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου—strengthen you according to my gospel” (Rom 16:25).<sup>44</sup> One of the apostle’s objectives in writing this epistle was to heighten understanding of the gospel among the Romans and thereby strengthen and mobilize their evangelism.<sup>45</sup>

The pericope of Romans 3:21-26 is the heart of the epistle,<sup>46</sup> and it is instructive for the Roman congregation’s understanding and communication of the gospel. To this point in the letter Paul had demonstrated the universality of God’s wrath against sinners and established the failure of Jews and Gentiles alike to meet God’s perfect standard of righteousness. Righteousness on the basis of the law is not possible because of human disobedience (cf. Rom 3:9-18; 3:23). None are righteous, and the law-

---

<sup>44</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 26. Schreiner asserts, “. . . the manifold purposes of the letter are subsumed under Paul’s desire to unite the church under his gospel.”

<sup>45</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 28. While commentators’ views on the purpose(s) of this epistle are myriad and variegated, Mounce constructs a question pertinent to Paul’s purpose: “Immediately after Paul presented his plans to go to Spain following his mission of taking the collection for the poor to Jerusalem, he requested prayer for his safety, specifically that he might ‘be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea’ (Rom 15:30–31). At Miletus he shared with the Ephesian elders his concern about going to Jerusalem. He told them, ‘In every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me’ (Acts 20:23). Perhaps he would not come through the Jerusalem trip alive. Then would it not have been appropriate for him to write down a relatively comprehensive statement of the gospel he proclaimed so that those in Rome might carry out his plan to evangelize Spain?” Given the gospel-centricity and scope of the letter, it seems clear Paul wished to unify and energize the Roman church for evangelical mission through his elucidation of the gospel.

<sup>46</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 391. Longenecker comments, “A note that appears in the margin of Luther’s Bible alongside 3:21–26 reads: ‘The chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.’ Many commentators today have expressed a similar understanding in lauding this section of Paul’s letter, stating it almost as enthusiastically.”

requirements of God universally repudiate any attempt to justify oneself by works of the law. The entire world, consequently, stands guilty before holy God, deserving his just wrath (cf. Rom 1:18-32; 3:19-20). This is the bad news to which the exceeding good news of the εὐαγγέλιον answers.

The Pauline answer to the bad news is profound: “Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται—but now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested” (Rom 3:21). The law is unable to produce righteousness because of inexorable human sinfulness, *but God has provided a righteousness that the law could never provide* (cf. Rom 1:17; 8:3-4).<sup>47</sup> The Law and the Prophets foretold the appearing of this righteousness, and this righteousness may only be received as a gift “διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ—through faith in/of<sup>48</sup> Jesus Christ,” the promised Messiah (Rom 3:21-22). Faith in the faithfulness of Christ to obey the law perfectly on our behalf appropriates a righteousness—not our own righteousness, but Christ’s righteousness—which is fully acceptable and pleasing to God (cf. Rom 1:17; 5:1; 8:1-4; 1 Cor 5:21).

Jews and Gentiles alike stand in desperate need of this foreign righteousness, for “πάντες . . . ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑπεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23; cf. 3:9-20). Inherent and inexorable sin utterly

---

<sup>47</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 189. Schreiner contends, “The term (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) reaches back to 1:17, where the accent is on the saving righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel. This saving righteousness, as I argued in 1:17, is forensic . . . δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ should be understood in a similar way here. Paul speaks of a righteousness from God—righteousness that is a gift of God.”

<sup>48</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 175-76. After reviewing the subjective vs. objective genitive arguments, Morris helpfully asserts, “. . . perhaps in all our discussions we are making too sharp a distinction between the subjective and the objective genitives. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Paul saw that the expression might be taken in either of two ways and still used it. It is even possible that the distinction that seems so obvious to us with our quite different constructions did not loom so large to a Greek speaker. We should bear in mind that Paul is here not describing Christ, but outlining what Christ has done in bringing about salvation, so that we must understand, at least as part of the meaning, the objective genitive. *Faith in Jesus Christ* is certainly in mind. But there would be no place for the exercise of this faith were it not for ‘the faithfulness of Jesus Christ’ and for ‘God’s faithfulness shown in Jesus Christ’. The right standing God gives is connected with his faithfulness and that of Christ, and it certainly is linked with the faith of believers in Christ.”

precludes the possibility of anyone standing justified in the sight of holy God on the basis of works-righteousness (cf. Rom 3:20).

If we are to be considered righteous in the sight of holy God, we must be “δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῆ ἀυτοῦ χάριτι—justified (declared righteous) as a gift of his grace” (Rom 3:24a; cf. Tit 3:5-7; Rom 4:4-5; Eph 2:8-10). Declarative righteousness as a gift of God’s unmerited favor is antithetical to the impotent human impulse to try and earn God’s favor.<sup>49</sup> It is precisely this justifying righteousness, however, that was secured “διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ—through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24b). The ransom-price for sin-slaves was paid in full by Christ in his sin-atoning work on the cross.<sup>50</sup>

The divinely predestined, public crucifixion of Christ served as a ἱλαστήριον—a wrath-appeasing, sin-removing, mercy-inducing blood sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> God’s mercy toward undeserving sinners is received “διὰ πίστεως—through faith” in Christ’s propitiatory, expiatory death on the cross. Christ’s sacrifice was the “ἐνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ--demonstration of (God’s) righteousness,” vindicating both the judging righteousness and the saving righteousness of holy God (Rom 3:25).

Indeed, the propitiatory, expiatory cross-work of Christ was a demonstration of “τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ . . . εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως

---

<sup>49</sup>Mounce, *Romans*, 116. Mounce insightfully comments, “The righteousness God provides comes as a free gift. It cannot be purchased or earned. In either case it would no longer be a gift. *One of fallen humanity’s most difficult tasks is to accept righteousness as a gift.* With every fiber of their moral being, people want to earn God’s favor. From a human perspective this sounds both reasonable and noble” (emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 196-99. Schreiner effectively defends the ransom motif inherent in ἀπολυτρώσεως and concludes, “Since sacrifices involved the payment of a price (i.e., the blood of an animal) and since Paul elsewhere specifies that Christ’s blood was the price of redemption (Eph. 1:7; cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23), we should conclude that the payment of a price is intended here as well.”

<sup>51</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 199-203. Schreiner maintains that Paul’s use of ἱλαστήριον here includes the concepts of propitiation, expiation, and the cultus of Leviticus 16, concluding, “What Jesus accomplished on the cross transcended previous categories and constituted their fulfillment.”

Ἰησοῦ—the righteousness of (God) . . . so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Because the wrath of God against the believer’s sin was justly satisfied by Christ’s suffering, the mercy of God in justifying the believer does not compromise his righteousness in judging sin.<sup>52</sup> Justice and mercy are met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed each other (cf. Psa 85:1-10).

This is the gospel of justification by faith. This is the gospel that answers the bad news of universal human sinfulness. This is the gospel that redeems Jew and Gentile alike. This is the gospel that reveals the righteousness of God. This is the gospel that begins and ends in faith. This is the gospel by which the one who has faith is made righteous and by which he will live (cf. Rom 1:17). This is the gospel that breathes life into plateaued, declining and dying churches. This is the gospel Paul desired to set before the Romans to inform and invigorate their evangelism.

**Evangelism in Corinthians.** Paul penned the letters we identify as First and Second Corinthians<sup>53</sup> to a church internally fractured and in danger of serious decline, if not outright apostasy. The notoriously corrupt and cultic port-city of Corinth needed evangelizing, and unless the Corinthians’ internal strife, fissures and aberrant beliefs were remedied, their ability to advance the gospel would be compromised. Though he addressed a broad range of issues, these letters bear ample testimony that Paul was

---

<sup>52</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 207. Schreiner summarizes the Pauline gospel well: “Verses 25–26 also solve the problem that has been building since 1:17. How do the saving righteousness and the judging righteousness of God relate to each other? How can God mercifully save people without compromising his justice? Paul’s answer is that in the death of Jesus, the saving righteousness and judging righteousness of God meet. God’s justice (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον) is satisfied in that the death of his Son pays fully for human sin. He can also extend mercy (καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ) by virtue of Jesus’s death to those who put their faith in Jesus.”

<sup>53</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 9-10. Schreiner outlines the probability that Paul wrote at least four letters to Corinth, two of which are now lost.

concerned to strengthen the Corinthian understanding of the gospel *and* their advancement of the gospel.

The array of purposes for which Paul wrote First and Second Corinthians may be subsumed under his stated objective: “Your restoration—κατάρτισιν—is what we pray for” (2 Cor 13:9). Indeed, he exhorted them to “καταρτίξεσθε—aim for restoration” (2 Cor 13:11). As stated above, the verb form of κατάρτισιν is καταρτίζω, which conveys the idea of refurbishing or restoring that which is lacking, disordered and in a state of disrepair. The object of Paul’s concern for this dysfunctional church was that they experience restoration and revitalization—and he clearly viewed the εὐαγγέλιόν as the means of their revitalization. He was concerned that the Corinthians embrace the gospel to heal divisions, correct heterodoxy and invigorate evangelism.<sup>54</sup>

The apostle began the letter of 1 Corinthians by asserting that the gospel is the power of God and the wisdom of God by which those who believe are saved (1 Cor 1:18-31). He reminded them of his singular devotion to the proclamation of the gospel while he labored among them (1 Cor 2:1-5). He reiterated the heart of the gospel, that Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us, and recalled to the Corinthians’ minds the reality that they were bought with the price of the precious blood of the spotless Lamb of God (cf. 1 Cor 5:7; 6:19-20). Driving home the primacy of the gospel message, Paul concluded this first epistle with a towering explication of the gospel in terms of the resurrection of Christ, declaring that this gospel is “ἐν πρώτοις—of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3).<sup>55</sup> This of-first-importance gospel—presented in chapter one as the power and wisdom of God and in chapter fifteen as the potent hope of resurrection to eternal life—was calculated by Paul to invigorate Corinthian evangelism.

---

<sup>54</sup>For matters of gospel expediency related to divisions and heterodoxy, cf. 1 Cor 1:10-31; 2:1-5; 5:1-8; 6:12-20; 10:23-33; 14:13-25; 15:1-29; 2 Cor 6:14-18; 11:1-6; 13:5-10.

<sup>55</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1186-87.

Further, the apostle clearly desired that the Corinthians emulate his apostolic example of intentional evangelism. After a blitzkrieg of scathing reprimands against their self-congratulatory pride (1 Cor 4:1-13), the apostle assured Corinth that he was not attempting to shame them, but rather to “τέκνα μου ἀγαπητὰ νουθετῶν—confront you as my beloved children” (1 Cor 4:14).<sup>56</sup> As their father in Christ through the gospel he had preached to them, Paul urged the Corinthian believers, “μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε—be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:16). As their father in the faith, Paul was not hesitant to confront and call upon these believers to emulate his conduct and practice as he followed the imperatives of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6). Such an exhortation was doubtless intended by Paul, at least in-part, to encourage their emulation of his own faithful evangelism. Indeed, if Timothy was a gifted evangelist as argued above, Paul’s sending of his young protégé may well have been partially premeditated to strengthen the evangelism of this faltering congregation (1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:22; 1 Thess 3:2).<sup>57</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul again urges the Corinthians to be imitators of him as he imitates Christ. This exhortation punctuates a lengthy section of the letter wherein the apostle urges them to live in such a manner conducive to the good of others and to do all for the glory of God (cf. 1 Cor 8:1-10:33). The summary imperatives of 10:31-32 are clear: Do all things to the glory of God, and “ἀπόσκοποι . . . Ἰουδαίοις γίνεσθε καὶ Ἑλλησιν καὶ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ—cause no damage to Jews and Greeks and the church of God” (1 Cor 10:31-32). What is the objective of this God-glorifying, blameless manner of living? The Corinthians should live thus so that, like Paul, they might be found

---

<sup>56</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 369. Thiselton navigates the tension between Paul’s scorching rhetoric and his declaration of his love thus: “Paul means . . . that his irony is to achieve *realism*, *not low self-esteem* . . . Paul characteristically performs *illocutionary* speech-acts of **warning** (νουθετῶν; cf. 1 Thess 5:12, 14; Rom 15:14; Col 1:28–3:16) in contrast to *perlocutionary* speech-acts of **bringing shame to his addressees**. He does not intend *causally* to demolish their self-respect by mere epideictic rhetoric alone, but to convey acts of warning on the basis of a personal and institutional relationship to the believers as their spiritual father and apostle” (emphasis original).

<sup>57</sup>See p. 94 (esp. n. 31) of this dissertation.

seeking not their own advantage but the advantage of many, “ἵνα σωθῶσιν—in order that (the many) might be saved” (1 Cor 10:33). The glory of God would be advanced if the Corinthians lived in such a manner that their evangelistic witness was undamaged by the testimony of their lives.<sup>58</sup> To that end, Paul exhorted the church at Corinth to emulate his approach to evangelism (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

The second epistle to the Corinthians is likewise pregnant with gospel instruction aimed at encouraging evangelism. Paul reminds the Corinthians that though often discomfited, Christ is leading them in an inexorably triumphal procession as he “τὴν ὁσμὴν τῆς γνώσεως αὐτοῦ φανεροῦντι δι’ ἡμῶν ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ—through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of (Christ) in every place” (2 Cor 2:14). They should not be disheartened when Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers to the gospel, for God, who spoke light out of darkness, is able to open their eyes (2 Cor 4:1-6). Proclamation of the gospel and accompanying afflictions redound to the glory of God as his saving, sanctifying grace extends to more and more people (2 Cor 4:15).

Further, as new creatures in Christ, God has entrusted the Corinthians with the gospel message of reconciliation. As God’s ambassadors, therefore, they must implore others to be reconciled to God through Christ (2 Cor 5:17-21). Corinthian evangelism must be urgent, for “now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:1-2). The Corinthian church must guard against “ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων—super-apostles”<sup>59</sup> who seek to subvert the gospel Paul delivered to them, lest they be led astray from a pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor 11:1-4 cf. Gal 1:8).

---

<sup>58</sup>Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary 28 (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 249-51.

<sup>59</sup>David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 469. After debunking the theory that Paul was referring to Peter, James and John, Garland asserts, “We conclude that the term ‘superapostles’ refers to the rivals in Corinth, and the context suggests that it is ‘a highly ironic way to refer to his opponents, who are making pretentious claims in order to win the allegiance of the Corinthian Christians’ (Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 503–5).”

In summary, we see that Paul consistently urged upon the Corinthian congregation an evangelism informed by a thoroughly Christocentric gospel. Paul's solution for this dysfunctional church in need of revitalization was *application* of the gospel to their divisions and heterodoxy—and evangelistic *proclamation* of the gospel in their context.

**Evangelism in Ephesians.** The epistle to the Ephesians lacks an explicitly stated rhetorical occasion, a feature that sets this correspondence apart from much of the Pauline corpus.<sup>60</sup> As a result, significant differences exist between commentators concerning the purpose(s) of the letter.<sup>61</sup> We maintain that attempts to isolate a single purpose or a tightly limited grouping of purposes in the Pauline epistles seems overwrought. Paul was certainly not one-dimensional in his concerns, as this dissertation seeks to demonstrate.

In accord with our thesis of a Pauline paradigm of evangelism, we maintain that Paul was at the very least concerned with the propagation of the gospel in his Ephesian epistle. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Beale argues that the Ephesian abandonment of their “first love” constituted a significantly decreased zeal for the ministry of evangelism (Rev 2:1-5).<sup>62</sup> While most conservative scholars date the Ephesian letter to AD 61-62 and the book of Revelation to the latter part of the first century AD, it is not inconceivable that the evangelistic decline evident in Revelation may have already begun when Paul penned Ephesians. Further, having later sent Timothy to revitalize the Ephesian congregations, Paul exhorts Timothy to set an example before the churches by doing the work of an evangelist (cf. 1 Tim 4:12; 2 Tim 5:5). Considering

---

<sup>60</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lxxv.

<sup>61</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 51.

<sup>62</sup>See page 87-88 and footnote 20.

evidence that Timothy was a gifted evangelist (cf. Phil 2:22; 1 Thess 3:2) and Paul’s exhortation to exemplary pastoral evangelism, it is plausible that the evangelistic decline rebuked by Christ in Revelation had already begun at Ephesus during Paul’s lifetime. If this were the case, we would reasonably expect Paul to address evangelism in the Ephesian letter—and he does.

The Greek text of Ephesians 1:3-14 constitutes one unbroken sentence of sweeping soteriological indicatives. Upon pronouncing Christ the fountainhead of the Father’s spiritual blessings upon believers, Paul informed the Ephesians that the Father “ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου—chose (them) in (Christ, for salvation) before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4; cf. 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 2:9). Because of their position in Christ, they are holy and blameless before God (cf. Eph 5:25-27; Rom 8:1; Col 1:22). In electing love the Father was “προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν—predestining (them) for adoption”<sup>63</sup> as his sons and daughters through Christ, and this according to the good pleasure of the Father’s will (Eph 1:5; cf. 1:7, 9, 11; Luke 12:32). The Father chose the Ephesian believers in Christ, made them holy and blameless in his sight, predestined them to adoption as sons and daughters, and took great pleasure in all of this that it might redound “εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ—to the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph 1:6; cf. 1:12; 1:14).<sup>64</sup>

Paul then expanded upon the εὐαγγελίον of the electing, predestining grace of God. The Ephesian believers enjoyed “ἀπολύτρωσιν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ—redemption

---

<sup>63</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 82. Arnold notes, “Under Roman law, an adopted child acquired all of the legal rights of a natural-born child and was released from the control of his natural father. The child also received the adopting parent’s family name and a share in the status of the new family.”

<sup>64</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 26. Lincoln summarizes, “The goal of believers’ predestination as sons and daughters has already been said to be εἰς αὐτόν but now it is also εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ. The redemption, which originated with God, has his own glorification as its end. The predestination, which is the product of God’s grace, resounds to the praise of the glory of that grace.”

through the blood of (Christ),”<sup>65</sup> and “τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων—the forgiveness of (their) trespasses” because of the richness of God’s grace (Eph 1:7). This super-abounding grace, Paul reminded the Ephesian believers, was poured out liberally upon them to give them God’s wisdom that they might comprehend the far-reaching mystery of the εὐαγγέλιόν (Eph 1:8-9; cf. 1:16-23).<sup>66</sup> The εὐαγγέλιόν is God’s “οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν—plan for the fullness of time,” now revealed in Christ’s redemptive cross-work and resurrection (Eph 1:10a; cf. Gal 4:4-5; 1 Tim 2:6).<sup>67</sup> What is God’s objective in this plan for the fullness of time? It is to “ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα—unite all things” in the entire cosmos in Christ, the *telos* of all creation (Eph 1:10b; cf. Eph 1:23; 4:10; Col 1:15-20). Paul used sweeping, cosmos-encompassing explications to invigorate the Ephesian believers’ understanding of the gospel.

Paul continued to heap superlative indicatives upon superlative indicatives. The Ephesian believers were “ἐκκληρώθημεν—chosen by lot” to be God’s personal possession and inheritance (Eph 1:11a; cf. Deut 32:9; 1 Pet 2:9).<sup>68</sup> Their standing with

---

<sup>65</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 106. O’Brien rightly observes, “In Ephesians 1:7 the redemption which we have in the Beloved has been procured *through his blood*. This abbreviated expression is pregnant with meaning, and signifies that Christ’s violent death on the cross as a sacrifice is the *means* by which our deliverance has been won (cf. Rom. 3:25). It was obtained at very great cost.”

<sup>66</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 86. Arnold tightly connects the wisdom of God to the revelation of the mystery of the gospel, asserting, “It is also important to observe that words dealing with wisdom are naturally associated with revelation. Thus, it is God’s wisdom that is in view here, informing how he unfolds his plan of salvation. Similarly, it is God’s wisdom that is stressed in 3:10, when Paul later speaks of the revelation of the mystery.”

<sup>67</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 32. “In the Greek world οἰκονομία was regularly used for God’s ordering and administration of the universe. Here in 1:10 it also appears to have that active force (cf. also 3:9) . . . God has ordered history in such a way that it culminates in the achievement of his purpose, as the various eras of history are crowned and completed by a climactic point at which the disclosure of the mystery of his will takes place.”

<sup>68</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 115-16. O’Brien is helpful here, commenting, “The unusual verb (ἐκκληρώθημεν) . . . means to ‘appoint or choose by lot’; in the passive voice (used here) it can signify to ‘be appointed by lot’. It has been taken more generally to mean ‘we were destined or chosen’ (a nuance it has in the papyri; cf. RSV) . . . the rendering ‘we were claimed by God as his portion’ brings out the passive voice more accurately and is at the same time more in keeping with Old Testament precedent.”

God is fixed and cannot be threatened, for the God who chose them is the sovereign God who unthwartably “τὰ πάντα ἐνεργοῦντος κατὰ τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ—works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11b; cf. Dan 4:34-35).<sup>69</sup> The purpose of God’s electing grace is that those whose hope is in Christ might extol the glory of their redeeming God (Eph 1:12; 1 Pet 2:9).

Paul further informed the Ephesians that when they heard and believed the truth of the εὐαγγέλιόν of their salvation, they were “ἐσφραγίσθητε τῷ πνεύματι τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τῷ ἁγίῳ—sealed with the Holy Spirit of the promise” (Eph 1:13). This seal ineradicably marked the Ephesian believers as the personal possession of the sovereign God.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, Paul asserted that the seal of the Holy Spirit serves as an ἀρραβῶν—a first-payment, or guarantee that those who are thus God’s possession will themselves one day acquire the full inheritance God has in store for them (cf. Eph 1:14; 2 Cor 5:1-5).<sup>71</sup> This again, as with all heretofore enumerated, is “to the praise of (God’s) glory” (cf. Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).

Woven throughout this indicative-laden soteriological pericope we find an “ἐν Χριστῷ—in Christ” motif (cf. Eph 1:3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). Every spiritual blessing

---

<sup>69</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 90. Arnold highlights the Pauline stress on the sovereignty of God, stating, “He here uses three different words to express the fact that he has a plan (πρόθεσις, βουλή, and θέλημα). It is difficult to find shades of differences between the three words, especially as they appear in this context. It is better to recognize a rhetorical stress on God’s sovereignty. It offers great assurance to the Gentile readers of this letter who may still have doubts or concerns about God’s sovereignty over all of the other gods, especially those who once laid claim on their lives.” We would further add that Paul doubtless intended by this stress on the sovereignty of God to embolden the Ephesians’ evangelism.

<sup>70</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 120. O’Brien illustrates the power of this sealing when he asserts, “In speaking of the Holy Spirit as a *seal* the notions of ownership and protection are in view. Cattle, and even slaves, were branded with a seal by their masters to indicate to whom they belonged. Owners thus guarded their property against theft; in this sense the seal was a protecting sign or a guarantee. In the Old Testament God set a sign on his chosen ones to distinguish them as his own possession and to keep them from destruction (Ezek. 9:4–6).”

<sup>71</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 42. Lincoln captures the Pauline nuance well when he asserts, “The Spirit functions as the guarantee of believers’ inheritance, looking toward or vouching for God’s full redemption of that for which he has made this down payment. Final deliverance by God means his taking full and complete possession of those who have already become his.”

was theirs in Christ. The Father chose the Ephesian believers in Christ. They were predestined to adoption through Christ. They were blessed with unmerited favor in Christ. They had redemption in Christ. They had forgiveness of sins in Christ. The mystery of the gospel was made known to them in Christ. God is uniting all things in Christ. They had obtained an inheritance in Christ. Their hope was in Christ. In Christ they were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. Paul here firmly locates the Ephesian believers' entire identity in the person and work of Christ.<sup>72</sup> All the blessings of union with God issued from the gospel of their redemption in Christ. Every indicative of this opening passage was calculated by Paul to fan the flame of the Ephesians' appreciation of the gospel of their salvation to a white-hot intensity.

After penning a prayer laden with further gospel indicatives (Eph 1:15-23), Paul continued pressing the glories of the gospel into the minds of the Ephesians. He reminded them of their desperate plight prior to their hearing and believing the gospel, stating that they were “dead in . . . trespasses and sins” and were “following the prince of the power of the world” (Eph 2:1-2). Fulfilling the desires of their flesh, they were by nature the objects of God's wrath, along with the rest of humankind (Eph 2:3).

Because of the rich mercy and love of God, however, though they were dead in sin, they had been “συνεζωοποίησεν τῷ Χριστῷ—raised to life together with Christ” (Eph 2:5; cf. 1:19-20; Col 2:13).<sup>73</sup> With a confessionally impassioned emphasis, Paul parenthetically inserted “—χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι—by grace you have been saved,”

---

<sup>72</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 79. Arnold captures the Pauline intention well when he states, “‘In Christ’ is the most important phrase of this passage and for the letter as a whole. Some form of it (‘in him,’ ‘in the beloved,’ or ‘in the Christ’) punctuates this passage eleven times. The key for understanding this letter is recognizing that believers have a new identity in Christ. A new self-understanding based on a new reality permeates every aspect of life and transforms individuals.”

<sup>73</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 167. O'Brien identifies the profound import of Paul's use of *συνεζωοποίησεν* when he rightly asserts, “Speaking of the mighty salvation that has already been won, Paul maintains that believers have been made alive together with Christ, raised up with him, and made to sit with him in the heavenly places. What God has accomplished in Christ he has also accomplished for believers . . . the relationship with Christ that is in view affects believers' destinies, for it involves their sharing in his destiny.”

reminding the Ephesians that their salvation was entirely the result of the divine gospel initiative set forth in Christ (Eph 2:5; cf. 2:7).<sup>74</sup> Lest they miss that their salvation was all of God’s grace, the apostle further developed the assertion: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9; cf. Rom 3:21-26). Indeed, the Ephesian believers should view themselves as God’s salvific *ποίημα*, or workmanship, passively created through God’s sovereign activity in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10; 2 Cor 5:17-18). Such humbling gospel indicatives were calculated by Paul to enhance the Ephesians appreciation of the *εὐαγγέλιόν*.

Paul further desired his readers to understand that though Gentiles were once hopelessly distanced from God’s salvific covenant of promise, by Christ’s atoning sacrifice they were now brought into the covenant (Eph 2:12-13; cf. Acts 2:39).<sup>75</sup> The peace with God effected by Christ’s sacrifice demolished the hostility between Jews and Gentiles, making them “*συμπολίται*—fellow-citizens” and members together of the household of God (Eph 2:14-19; cf. 3:6). Paul emphasized for the Ephesian congregation that the gospel of their evangelism powerfully transgressed ethnic boundaries.<sup>76</sup>

In 3:1 Paul began a prayer for the Ephesians, then deviated into a defense of his apostolic stewardship of the gospel for the Gentiles, not resuming his prayer until 3:14. This diversion is likewise laden with gospel indicatives. The gospel is the “mystery

---

<sup>74</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 103. Lincoln summarizes the Pauline emphasis well when he states, “. . . *χάρις* is the term especially characteristic of the Pauline corpus, where it occurs about one hundred times (most frequently in Romans—twenty-four times), and where more often than not it points to the special nature of God’s saving action as one of gratuitous generosity to an undeserving sinful humanity.

<sup>75</sup>Notice that Paul’s conception of the gospel and evangelism here mirrors the declaration of the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost.

<sup>76</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 183. O’Brien elevates this pericope when he claims, “. . . the fundamental theological undergirding of the whole letter . . . is to be found in vv. 14–18, where believers come near to God and to one another (Gentiles and Jews) through the saving death of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

of Christ” long-hidden, but now revealed to the apostles and to Paul by the Holy Spirit (Eph 3:3-5). Paul framed his preaching of the gospel as the proclamation of “τὸ ἀνεξίχνιαστον πλοῦτος τοῦ Χριστοῦ—the unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8).<sup>77</sup>

He further declared that God—through the church’s proclamation and advancement of the gospel—was making known to hostile spiritual powers the multifaceted wisdom of his eternal redemptive purpose in Christ (Eph 3:10-11; cf. 1 Cor 2:6-8).<sup>78</sup> The Ephesians needed to know that the gospel of their evangelism was resounding throughout the cosmos. In light of this sweeping, cosmic outworking of the gospel, Paul prayed that the Ephesians might “have the strength to comprehend . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth” of the surpassing wisdom and love of God in Christ (Eph 3:18-19; cf. Rom 11:33-36). The super-abounding reach of the gospel of their evangelism required super-abounding comprehension if the Ephesians were to grasp its grandeur.

In chapter four of Ephesians Paul pivoted from the indicatives of the gospel to the imperatives of the gospel. The risen, ascended Christ placed gifts in the church to “πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας—to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (cf. Eph 4:7-12). Among these Christ-purchased gifts are the apostles, the prophets, the pastor-teachers and “τοὺς . . . εὐαγγελιστάς—the evangelists” (Eph 4:11). The purpose of these equipping gifts (including evangelists) is the ongoing edification or

---

<sup>77</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 184. Lincoln comments, “ἀνεξίχνιαστος suggests the picture of a reservoir so deep that soundings cannot reach the bottom of it. No limit can, therefore, be put to its resources.”

<sup>78</sup>E. F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 189. Scott powerfully describes the significance of this verse, “The hostile powers had sought to frustrate the work of God, and believed they had succeeded when they conspired against Christ and brought about his Crucifixion. But unwittingly they had been mere instruments in God’s hands. The death of Christ had been the very means He had devised for the accomplishment of His plan. So it is here declared that the hostile powers, after their brief apparent triumph, had now become aware of a divine wisdom they had never dreamed of. They saw the Church arising as the result of Christ’s death and giving effect to what they could now perceive to have been the hidden purpose of God.”

up-building of the church toward maturity in Christ (Eph 4:12). Church members and churches thus built up are not immature in their faith, but rather learn to proclaim the truth in love and become increasingly mature in Christ their head (Eph 4:14-15). Such equipping and maturation causes the church to grow organically as it is built up by love for Christ and love for one another (Eph 4:16).

Notice that Paul here envisioned a healthy, increasingly strong church experiencing ongoing renewal and revitalization. We notice as well his assertion that the Christ-placed gift of evangelists is essential to church health and vitality. Further, we notice that these gifted leaders are not placed in the church explicitly to *do* the work of ministry, but to *equip* the members of the church to accomplish the work of ministry.<sup>79</sup> When we couple the nature of the gifts placed in the church with the purpose of the gifts, we conclude that gifted evangelists are sovereignly distributed by Christ in the churches to equip the congregations for the work of the ministry of evangelism.<sup>80</sup> As we argued above, the commission of evangelism is given to every Christian in every age. It therefore stands to reason that Christ would also gift the church with leaders to equip the individual members for the ministry of evangelism—and so he does, according to Paul.

Finally, Paul closed the letter to the Ephesians with an extensive exhortation that they be strong in the Lord by putting on the whole armor of God (Eph 6:10-11). Spiritual armor was necessary because the believers were engaged in spiritual conflict with Satan and his cosmic powers, and Paul desired that they be found standing firm in the conflict (Eph 6:12-13). This allegorical, six-piece panoply of armor included a particular type of footwear—gospel shoes.

---

<sup>79</sup>We hold that it is not possible for a leader to equip the saints for the work of ministry without themselves engaging in the work of ministry. As we have argued throughout this chapter, the leaders of the early churches, including Paul, led by example in the ministry of evangelism.

<sup>80</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 299-300. Commenting on Ephesians 4:11, O'Brien asserts, "While the term probably included itinerant individuals who engaged in primary evangelism, it was not limited to them. The admonition to Timothy to 'do the work of an evangelist' is set within the context of a settled congregation, which presumably meant a ministry to believers and unbelievers alike."

Perhaps Paul was using the armor of the Roman soldier to which he was chained to construct his spiritual metaphor for the Ephesians. The soldier was likely wearing leather boots with studded soles, readying him for marching over rough terrain. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to stand, “ὑποδησάμενοι τοὺς πόδας ἐν ἐτοιμασίᾳ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τῆς εἰρήνης—having put on your feet the readiness of the gospel of peace” (Eph 6:15).

Paul was not, however, overly-enamored with his adopted metaphor. His mind was first and foremost saturated with Scripture. He was alluding to Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” Paul simply adapted the wording of the OT text to fit the syntax of his imperative to “στῆτε—stand firm” (cf. Isa 52:7; Eph 6:14, 15).<sup>81</sup> The Isaiah passage envisions a running messenger, nimbly and swiftly traversing the mountains to bring good tidings to Jerusalem—“Peace to be unto you! . . . Salvation is come! . . . Your God reigns!” Paul similarly used a shortened form of this passage in the context of the proclamation of the gospel when he declared, “How beautiful are the feet of them who preach the good news” (Rom 10:15).

Scholars are somewhat divided on Paul’s use of ἐτοιμασία (readiness) in his exhortation.<sup>82</sup> Are the Ephesians to appropriate the gospel in a merely defensive sense, so as to “stand firm” in the face of encroaching spiritual powers of darkness? Or must they, in an offensive sense, advance the gospel in the face of cosmic evil powers? The allusion to Isaiah 52:7 seems to indicate Paul intended a readiness for offensive proclamation of the gospel of peace.

Further, Paul employed the language of warfare in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 where

---

<sup>81</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 476.

<sup>82</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 476-78. O’Brien offers an insightful discussion of the various views.

he framed spiritual weapons as aggressively offensive: “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (cf. 2 Cor 6:7; Eph 6:17). We recall as well Peter’s assertion that Christians must “always (be) ready (ἔτοιμοι) to make a defense (ἀπολογία)<sup>83</sup> for the reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Faithful spiritual warfare includes aggressive, stronghold-destroying, hope-advancing intentional evangelism.

We conclude Paul intended the Ephesians to stand firm through a constant readiness and preparedness to proclaim and advance the gospel of peace into the territory of the enemy. If, as we argued above, the sad decline of Ephesian evangelism recorded in Revelation 2:1-5 had already begun in Paul’s lifetime, the need for appropriating gospel shoes was pressing. Unless the church experienced a renewed passion for evangelism, they risked Christ removing his presence from among them (cf. Rev 2:5). Conversely, if the Ephesians embraced faithful evangelism, they would flourish as a church of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 4:11-16).

In summary of evangelism in the Pauline corpus, the above represents but a portion of the considerable emphasis Paul placed on the advancement of the gospel in his epistles. The letter to the Galatians is a classical defense of the gospel from the OT text. Paul’s letter to the Philippians was one of gratitude for their partnership with him in the advancement of the gospel. The Colossian letter is a brilliant philosophical defense of the gospel in light of the preeminence of Christ. First and Second Thessalonians stand as profound encouragement for those suffering for the sake of advancing the gospel. Paul’s letter to Philemon pleads for the acceptance of Onesimus for the sake of the testimony of the gospel. Paul clearly viewed evangelism as an indispensable responsibility and privilege for every church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>83</sup>The term ἀπολογία refers to a positive argument or declaration.

## Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the precipitous numerical decline of Evangelical Protestants in North America is correlational to the decline of evangelism in our churches. This stands in contradistinction to the early church wherein both the leaders and laity of the church practiced intentional evangelism in obedience to the command of our Lord. Evangelism in the early church was paradigmatic, and the church enjoyed the blessing of God upon their efforts as they experienced exponential growth.

Further, we discovered that the apostle Paul was a skilled and practiced evangelist who trained and exhorted leadership of the churches to practice exemplary evangelism. In every epistle he wrote, Paul was concerned to urge upon the churches and their leadership an unswerving commitment to the advancement of the gospel through evangelism. Taken together, the evangelistic example of the early church and the Pauline exhortations confirm that evangelism is both the privilege and responsibility of every professing Christian in every age. The biblical data clearly indicates that evangelism is essential for the revitalization of plateaued and declining churches.

When we consider the contemporary literature on church revitalization, the testimony is virtually unanimous—personal evangelism is requisite for the renewal of the church in the twenty-first century. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson identify a renewed passion for evangelism among the ten most important factors for “Comeback Churches.”<sup>84</sup> Andrew M. Davis contends that every revitalization effort must embrace “the responsibility to be witnesses to lost neighbors, co-workers, family members, and even total strangers.”<sup>85</sup> In their study of churches experiencing transformation, Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer discovered that “evangelism is a natural part of life for (the churches’)

---

<sup>84</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 195.

<sup>85</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 204.

members.”<sup>86</sup> Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest maintain that anemic evangelism is a barrier churches absolutely must overcome to experience renewal.<sup>87</sup> Harry L. Reeder holds that God revitalizes those churches who “stay amazed by the gospel and intentionally seek relationships with the lost so that (they) can share the gospel with them.”<sup>88</sup>

Evangelism is an indispensable discipline in the work of church revitalization. Evangelism is a vital discipline for combating the entropic principle of decay and decline evident in our churches. More importantly, evangelism as a discipline is a most effective means of church revitalization. God is pleased to bless intentional efforts to advance the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>86</sup>Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 201.

<sup>87</sup>Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 39-49.

<sup>88</sup>Harry L. Reeder and David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2004), 175.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE DISCIPLINE OF DISCIPLESHIP IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION

The discipline of making disciples stands among the most clearly Scripture-revealed priorities of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospels consistently and emphatically communicate our Lord so discipling a small band of individuals as to transform their lives in a mere three-year period. After his redeeming death and glorious resurrection—which rendered his command supremely compelling—Jesus assembled his disciples and delivered to them the sweeping mandate that is to shape and guide the mission of the church until his consummating return:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20, emphasis added).

Consequently, in obedience to our Lord’s command, this handful of his followers made disciples so effectively that they were rumored to have turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). Indeed, their faithfulness, fruitfulness and influence now echo down through two millennia of time.

Despite the Christ-mandate and church-health-inducing nature of this Great Commission, another common deficiency among churches experiencing decay and decline is a lack of discipline in being, making and maturing disciples. A survey conducted by Barna Research in 2015 revealed the depths of discipleship deficiency in the thinking and practice of many churches.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Barna Group, “New Research on the State of Discipleship,” December 1, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.

According to the survey, only one in five Christian adults polled were engaged in some form of discipleship activity. This number is especially startling given the wide range of activities offered to the respondents as being forms of discipleship. These included Sunday School/Bible Fellowship Group, engagement with a spiritual mentor, studying Scripture in a group setting, and the reading and discussion of a Christian book with a group of fellow believers. Only twenty percent of Christians surveyed reported participating in any of these forms of discipleship engagement. This is convincingly indicative of poor leadership and anemic Christianity in many churches.

Additionally, when asked to rank a list of descriptors for *the process of growing spiritually*, the respondents' preference of those descriptors reveal something of a disconnect between discipleship and spiritual growth. The descriptor "becoming more Christ-like" rated highest, while "spiritual growth" ranked as the second most-preferred. Ranked third was the moniker "spiritual journey." The term "discipleship"—preferred by only eighteen percent of those surveyed—appeared as only the fourth most-preferred descriptor of the process of growing spiritually. "Spiritual maturation" held fifth place, while "sanctification" and "spiritual formation" ranked at the very bottom of the preferred descriptors.

Several issues stand out in this ranking. The second most preferred descriptor was "spiritual growth." While spiritual growth is the result of discipleship, the phrase itself is ambiguous and contributes nothing to describing the *process* of growing spiritually. Even more telling was the third-place preference of "spiritual journey." Virtually everyone, whether Christian or not, consider themselves as being on a "spiritual journey." The problem lies in the reality that many of these "spiritual journeys" have very little to do with the biblical discipline of spiritual growth in grace and knowledge, even when offered up by professing Christians. The picture becomes even clearer when we find "sanctification" ranked near the bottom of the offered descriptors. Several of the most preferred descriptors in this survey of supposed Christians miss entirely the process

of discipleship whereby we are sanctified through conformity to the image of Christ.

This startling disconnect was further evidenced when respondents who did not select the term “discipleship” were asked if the term had any relevance to their Christian experience. *Only twenty-five percent responded that discipleship was very relevant to their experience.* Adding to this disappointing response, thirty-seven percent of those surveyed revealed a preference to pursue spiritual growth on their own, and forty-one percent considered their spiritual life to be entirely private. Here again we observe evidence that the spirit of autonomism—considered in chapter six of this dissertation—is having a significant impact in the church. Considered as a whole, this survey points to substantial diminution of discipleship in the life of many professing Christians.

As is usually the case, this decline in emphasis on discipleship did not begin in the pews of our churches. A mere one-third of the Christians surveyed indicated that their church leadership recommends meeting with a spiritual mentor, while a mere half of their churches publicly promote studying the bible with a group of fellow Christians. Further, the majority of pastors included in this survey indicated that having a discipleship curriculum was the *least* important element of effective discipleship. Considering the results of this survey, it is little wonder that discipleship in the pews is in decline when the priority of intentional discipleship is largely unpromoted by church leadership.

Given the reproducing and health-inducing nature of Great Commission discipleship, churches in plateau or decline have, as a general rule, allowed various programs to displace the primacy of discipleship in the functional life of the church. As new generations of believers arise in such churches, failure to disciple these generations results in their drifting away. Indeed, the process of new believers coming in the front doors of churches, proceeding through the baptistry, and eventually disappearing via that back doors is an incongruity commonly acknowledged in declining churches. As a result, swollen membership rolls that do not in any way reflect the so-called “active” membership of the church are common. Further, failure to disciple each successive

generation produces an increasingly evident lack of generational diversity within the church, and the church experiences the downward spiral of an aging congregation. At a certain point the process becomes irreversible, and the inevitable decline leads to the death of the church.

As we should expect, the primacy of discipleship is front-and-center in much of the current literature on church revitalization. After surveying and interviewing thousands of churches, Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer concluded that healthy churches—transformational churches, in their parlance—“are serious about fulfilling Christ’s command to ‘make disciples of all nations.’”<sup>2</sup> Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest cite ineffective discipleship as a barrier that must be overcome for churches to experience renewal. They assert:

(Crossing) . . . the Rubicon of . . . discipleship (is) not only important, but essential for every church. When thinking revitalization, (discipleship) become(s) the lifeblood for the kingdom work that needs to be accomplished. A strategy that permits the church to move forward in . . . discipling the new converts and maturing disciples requires intentionality.”<sup>3</sup>

Mark Dever maintains, “A healthy church is characterized by a serious concern for spiritual growth on the part of its members. In a healthy church, people want to get better at following Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> In identifying churches once in decline who experienced revitalization, Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson assert:

Comeback churches do not just lead people to make decisions to accept Christ; they engage them in discipleship. When we connect people to Christ, involve them in a small group, and help them commit to membership, they make real, significant, and lasting relationship connections. Discipleship occurs organically. Churches should ensure that each of their members receives biblical teaching on the key habits of discipleship.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 34.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 59.

<sup>4</sup>Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, exp. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 198.

<sup>5</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 126-27.

Mark Clifton observes, “Nearly every evangelical church you go into will recognize the Great Commission’s call to make disciples as a core part of the church’s mission. Yet most of our churches struggle to do it. For the (revitalizing) church, discipleship is theologically and pragmatically essential.”<sup>6</sup> Mark Hallock maintains, “This is the first step toward Great Commission Revitalization in our lives and in our churches: becoming a sold-out disciple of Jesus ourselves . . . that we might then be used by him to GO make more disciples for the glory of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the anemic state of discipleship in most declining churches, the imperative of discipleship is indisputable, the priority is pressing, and the need is urgent. Churches exist to carry out the mission given us by our Lord to be disciples who make and mature disciples. Those churches who give due primacy to the spiritual discipline of discipleship become, by the enabling of the Holy Spirit, self-replicating across generations. Such churches stand in a long and venerable stream of Kingdom advancement and expansion to the ends of the earth. While none of the priorities of the church stand alone, the priority of disciple making stands very near the center of all the church is to be and do. Lack of commitment to disciple making virtually insures unhealth and decline in any church. Conversely, dedication to the priority of discipleship will, over time, produce a vibrancy and vitality in any church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The objective of this chapter is four-fold. First, we will seek to establish a biblical, functional definition of discipleship. Secondly, we will consider the primacy given to making disciples in the first church at Jerusalem. Thirdly, we will examine the emphasis upon discipleship evident in select passages of the Pauline corpus. Finally, we will triangulate the biblical definition of discipleship, the primacy of the discipline in the first church, and Paul’s concern for the practice of discipleship to demonstrate the

---

<sup>6</sup>Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 73.

<sup>7</sup>Mark Hallock, *Great Commission Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 53.

indispensableness of disciple making in church revitalization.

### Defining Discipleship

Any attempt to define discipleship should include a consideration of Matthew 28:16-20, and this is where we will begin. After his stunning and victorious resurrection from the dead, and just prior to his ascension to the right hand of the Father, our Lord gathered those whom he had discipled to deliver to them the marching orders for the church until his return:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go *therefore* and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20, emphasis added).

Too often we begin our consideration of the Great Commission with verse nineteen, “Go therefore and make disciples.” The “therefore” in this verse, however, casts us back upon Jesus’s prior assertion, and it is pregnant with the weight of glory: “All ἐξουσία (authority, power) in heaven and on earth ἐδόθη (has been given) to me” (Matt 28:18). Jesus’s absolute, universal authority and power in the entire created cosmos informs both *why* and *how* we are to go and make disciples—and the implications of Jesus’s authority are enormous for the church. This declaration by our Lord warrants careful consideration.

Jesus’s earthly authority has been a recurring theme in Matthew’s gospel to this point (cf. 7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1; 21:23, 24, 27). The sweeping comprehensiveness<sup>8</sup> of Jesus’s statement that he has now been given all authority “in heaven and on earth,” however, indicates an expansive authority now received by the risen Lord. Indeed, this declaration positively rings with the grandeur of Daniel’s Messianic vision:<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Gen 1:1 “In the beginning, God created the *heavens and the earth*.” Heaven(s) and earth form a *merism*, a figure of speech common in the Hebrew Old Testament, in which two contrasting parts of a whole are coupled to signify a comprehensive totality.

<sup>9</sup>John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan 7:13-14).

While the Old Testament is replete with human individuals referred to as sons of man, Daniel's usage here is distinctive. Notably, the Aramaic particle translated "like" distinguishes the subject as resembling a man, but possessing the quality of being more than a mere mortal (cf. Rev 1:13; 14:14).<sup>10</sup> Further, that this figure is depicted as coming in the clouds of heaven is indicative of deity. Indeed, the language Daniel uses is that of coronation in a divine royal court. The son-of-man-like figure is presented before the Ancient of Days, an unmistakable depiction of the sovereign, enthroned God (cf. Dan 7:9; Psa 90:2). Christ himself furnished us with the Messianic explanation of the figure in Daniel's vision when, during his trial, he responded to the query of the high priest as to whether he was the Christ. "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62-63; cf. Psa 110:1).<sup>11</sup> Christ is the Son-of-Man-like figure coronated by the Ancient of Days.

Daniel's description in verse fourteen of the power and authority given to the Son of Man is astonishingly expansive. He is granted dominion, an absolute, unquestionable, sovereign authority, and that dominion is everlasting. He is bestowed glory, a weighty position of honor and esteem superseding that of any earthly or heavenly power (cf. Phil 2:9-11). He is bequeathed a Kingdom, a comprehensive realm in which he will everlastingly rule and govern and reign with absolute power and authority (cf. Isa 9:6-7; Luke 1:31-32). So absolute is his power and authority that *all* the nations of the

---

Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1264. See also Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 431.

<sup>10</sup>Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary, vol. 18, (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 207.

<sup>11</sup>Miller, *Daniel*, 209. Miller rightly asserts, "There is no other passage [than Dan 7:13-14] in the Old Testament to which Christ could have been referring." See also James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 447.

earth—without exception—will worship and serve him (cf. Psa 2:8; 22:27; Isa 25:6-7; Acts 15:16-18). This dominion and glory and Kingdom endowed to the Son of Man is not like the great earthly kingdoms of Daniel’s vision which all pass into oblivion. The powerful and authoritative Kingdom given to Christ is without end, enduring and unshakable (cf. Heb 12:28).

Why would the Ancient of Days bestow such incomparable authority and power and glory upon Christ, the Son of Man? Paul sheds much light upon the reason Christ is clothed in such majesty and power in his letter to the Ephesians. He cites the victory ode of Psalm 68:18: “Therefore it says ‘When he ascended on high he lead a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men’” (Eph 4:8). Psalm 68 portrays God as the Divine Warrior who ascends in triumph to Mount Zion after defeating the enemies of Israel. As we argued in chapter six, Paul’s application of this OT text to Christ was presaged in 1:20-22 when he asserted:

(God) raised (Christ) from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church...

By his incarnation as the last Adam and his sinless life, passion and resurrection, Christ the Divine Warrior entirely routed the principalities and powers and rulers and authorities of this present darkness (cf. 1:20-22; 6:12; Col 2:15). He conquered sin, he crushed Satan, he defeated hell and he vanquished death (cf. 1 Pet 2:14; Heb 2:14; Rev 1:8; 2 Tim 1:10). Christ utterly defeated every enemy of God’s redemptive purpose. Christ the Divine Warrior then ascended to the right hand of power, leading his ruined, chained captives in a triumphal procession to display their utter defeat (cf. 4:8; Col 2:15; Jude 6; 2 Cor 2:14-16). This triumphal procession terminated with the coronation of Christ—wherein the Ancient of Days endowed him with absolute and unassailable Kingdom power and authority—and this honor is entirely predicated upon Christ’s resounding victory. Christ the Divine Warrior is now Christ the Victor whom the Father

crowned as Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords. So absolute is Christ's victory that God has given him a name that is above every name—and God has declared that every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth is going to bow to Jesus and acknowledge he is Lord (cf. Phil 2:9-11; Rom 14:11; Isa 45:23).

Understanding of Jesus's absolute power, authority and dominion should radically effect how we seek to fulfill the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations. Making disciples begins with the evangelistic proclamation that Christ the Victor is King and Lord. Our glad task is to announce and preach to the nations that their responsibility is to submit to the already-established authority of Jesus. He has conquered sin and death and hell for all who repent and believe on his exalted name (Acts 2:22-41). As the coronated and sceptered Son of Man, Christ alone has the authority to forgive sins (cf. Gen 49:10; Mark 2:10). His Kingdom and rule is everlasting, and of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end (Isa 9:7). All the nations of the earth are his rightful inheritance, and all the ends of the earth are his blood-bought possession (Psa 22:27).

Christ is King, he is enthroned, crowned and sceptered, and all his enemies are being subjected as his footstool (Psa 110:1; cf. Psa 2:12). Peter's evangelistic sermon on the Day of Pentecost proclaimed to his hearers precisely this message of Christ's authority, power and dominion. After asserting in verse thirty-three that the resurrected Christ was exalted to the right hand of God, the place of universal supremacy, Peter cites Psalm 110:1, declaring of Christ, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool" (Acts 2:34-35). Peter's apologetic in applying this passage to Christ is clearly calculated to assert the enthronement, power and authority of Christ. He then emphatically declares, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). This first proclamation of the gospel after his ascension vigorously sets forth Christ as the exalted, powerful, authoritative Lord of all, upon whose name men must call

to be saved (cf. Acts 2:36, 21; Joel 2:32). Indeed, the message that Jesus is *now* King and Lord, vested with absolute power, authority and dominion, remains constant throughout the remainder of New Testament.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20, we may now draw some conclusions as to *how* we are to make disciples. First, we are not attempting to convince people to choose Jesus as Lord, he is already seated at the right hand of power. We are not trying to establish the authority, glory, dominion and Lordship of Christ; we are announcing to everyone what the Ancient of Days has already done. All must bow to his name, all must seek forgiveness of sins through him, and all are subject to his righteous government. This is the glad message we proclaim, and in doing so we are calling the nations to come and humbly repent and submit to the redeeming Lordship of Jesus and be his disciples. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. (But) blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Psa 2:12). The evangelical message is both a sober warning and a glad summons to forgiveness and salvation in Christ alone.<sup>13</sup>

A disciple, therefore, is first one who has heard, learned and believed the message that Christ is both Lord and Savior (cf. Matt 28:18; Acts 2:22-41). The imperative of Matthew 28:19 is to “μαθητεύσατε—make disciples,” that is, those who both learn who Jesus is and then follow after him (cf. John 1:43-51).<sup>14</sup> Disciple making begins with the proclamation that Jesus is *Lord* and *Savior*, which proclamation is learned and believed by those being made disciples. The sphere in which disciples are made is comprehensive, including “πάντα τὰ ἔθνη—all the nations” over which Christ already

---

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20, 22; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Matt 3:7; Rom 1:18; 5:9; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 19:15.

<sup>14</sup>Notably, when Nathanael believed and acknowledged that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel, Jesus informed Nathanael that he would “. . . see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the *Son of Man*” (John 1:51, emphasis added).

holds absolute power, authority and dominion (cf. Matt 28:19; Dan 7:14). Hence, a disciple is one who acknowledges and embraces that which God has already established.

Secondly, the subordinate participles of *μαθητεύσατε*—make disciples—reinforce the Lordship, Kingship, authority, power and dominion of Jesus. Making disciples involves “*βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα*—baptizing them into the name...” of Jesus (Matt 28:19; cf. Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).<sup>15</sup> Upon believing the message that Jesus is Lord, the new disciple publicly declares his allegiance to the authority and power of Jesus.<sup>16</sup> The disciple baptized is the disciple publicly declaring that the man he was has died and been buried with Christ, and he has been raised from the watery grave to walk in a new life of obedience to the Lordship of King Jesus (cf. Matt 28:18-19; Rom 6:3-11).

Finally, making disciples of those who believe the message that Jesus is Savior and Lord involves “*διδάσκοντες* (teaching) them to *τηρεῖν* (observe) all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20). Instructive teaching of our Lord’s authoritative commands forms the heart of discipleship. The words of Christ here are imperative and expansive, a command that comprehends the teaching of the whole of Scripture<sup>17</sup> to those who are now committed followers of him who is endowed with all authority in heaven and in earth. This didactic function of discipleship has for its objective that such disciples *τηρεῖν*—obey, keep, and guard—the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ as their new way of life and conduct.<sup>18</sup> The believing, baptized convert is now a glad, obedient, life-long servant of him who is Savior, King and Lord.

---

<sup>15</sup>For thorough considerations of the Trinitarian baptismal formula here used by Matthew, see John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1268-70, and Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 747-49.

<sup>16</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 432.

<sup>17</sup>We contend that the whole of Scripture is in view in Christ’s command on the grounds of John 5:39, Luke 24:27 and John 1:1, 14.

<sup>18</sup>Nolland, *Matthew*, 1270. Nolland observes, “Matthew shares the general Jewish impulse to view true religion as involving a way of life and not simply a pattern of beliefs. So what is to be taught is to keep—that is, to implement in obedience—what has been commanded.”

Finally, in light of Jesus’s initial declaration that he now possesses all power and authority in heaven and earth, the terminating clause of the Great Commission is likewise pregnant with the weight of glory: “And behold, I am (ἐγὼ . . . εἰμι) with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). The conclusion here couples with Jesus’s opening assertion in verse eighteen, encapsulating the commanded task of Great Commission discipleship in a magnificent inclusio. The ἐγὼ εἰμι (I am) declaration points the reader back to the Matthean incarnation assertion that Jesus is none other than Immanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23). Indeed the emphatic I AM here echoes the glorious instruction of God to Moses to tell the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you” (Exod 3:14). Those who go and make disciples of the nations do so with the assuring, empowering accompaniment of the eternal, self-existent God. We make disciples in the power and authority of Christ the Warrior who is Christ the Victor now crowned Christ the King—and he is with us always and forever.

We see, therefore, that defining what is a disciple is integral to understanding and defining discipleship. Mark Dever is helpful here, asserting, “To be a Christian is to be a disciple. . . . Christians are people who have real faith in Christ, and who show it by resting their hopes, fears, and lives entirely upon him. They follow him wherever he leads. . . . Jesus is not just our Savior—he is our Lord.”<sup>19</sup> Notice the congruity of Dever’s definition with the assertions of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20. One who believes the message that Jesus is Savior and Lord is now a Christian, and all true Christians are disciples. Christians are disciples first because they have believed and placed their faith in the finished work and resurrection-affirmed Saviorship and Lordship of Christ. Christians are disciples secondly in that they follow Jesus in their manner of living by learning and obeying his commandments because he is Lord (John 13:12-17; cf. Luke

---

<sup>19</sup>Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 15.

11:28; James 1:22). Christians are disciples finally because they love God and their neighbor, and they desire to be like Christ (cf. Mark 12:30-31; Luke 6:40; John 14:15).

Discipleship, therefore, is the entire, intentional process of proclaiming the authoritative gospel of Jesus Christ to others, baptizing those who repent, believe and embrace the Lordship of Jesus Christ—and then teaching them to obey the whole of Scripture. The Great Commission is, consequently, a monumental Kingdom task. To that end, Christ commanded his followers to be disciples who make disciples by intentionally proclaiming that Christ is risen and he is Lord, and by teaching his commandments to all who believe—and to do so as a matter of lifestyle.<sup>20</sup> The mission of Great Commission discipleship is as universal and comprehensive as the authority and dominion of Christ our Lord and King, extending from our local communities to the ends of the earth. Indeed, Christ is given everlasting dominion, glory and Kingdom precisely to this end—that all peoples, nations and languages should worship and serve him (cf. Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8; Dan 7:13-14).

Given the principle of spiritual entropy at work against the church as we function in a fallen world, the discipline of discipleship holds a place of decided primacy in the life of the church. Indeed, any paradigm of church revitalization must necessarily emphasize and prescribe significant effort in the area of discipleship. The duplicative and multiplicative nature of Kingdom discipleship has sustained the church for two millennia, evidencing the divine wisdom of the imperative that we must be disciples who make disciples. As we turn now to the first church at Jerusalem and the church revitalization-focused Pauline corpus, we will discover an inexorable emphasis upon the essential discipline of discipleship.

---

<sup>20</sup>The aorist, passive participle *πορευθέντες* in Matt 28:19 is best translated “As you are going” or “as you are conducting your life,” indicating that the making of disciples is requisite and normative in the life of the Christian.

## Discipleship in the Jerusalem Church

The apostle Peter's Great Commission-informed and Holy Spirit-empowered proclamation of the good news of Jesus's exaltation and Kingdom authority on the Day of Pentecost yielded the conversion of three thousand souls in Jerusalem. Luke informs us immediately that these new disciples became “προσκαρτεροῦντες τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων—devoted to the apostles' teaching” (Acts 2:41-42). As we noted in chapter three of this dissertation, the leaders of the early church were the apostles who had followed Christ from the time of his baptism until the day of his ascension (cf. Acts 1:21-22), and were, therefore, intimately familiar with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. These first Christ-followers, converted on the Day of Pentecost, all demonstrated a steadfast fidelity to the teachings of Christ as transmitted through the apostles.

The daily teaching of the apostles would have included anthologies of the words of Jesus (cf. 20:35), didactic accounts of his earthly ministry, passion, and resurrection (cf. 2:22-24), and declarations of the redemptive import of Christ's cross-work and resurrection (cf. Acts 3:12-26). Luke's record is replete with demonstrations of the Christocentric nature of the of the apostolic teaching.<sup>21</sup> When we couple this Christocentricity with the Christotelic treatments of the OT throughout the book of Acts (cf. 2:14-36; 7:2-53; 8:30-35; 13:15-41; 15:13-21), we can reasonably surmise that early church discipleship centered upon the apostolic, Christocentric teaching of the completed OT canon and the emerging NT canon.

The imperfect periphrastic construction of Acts 2:42 informs us that these new disciples assiduously devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching as a constant

---

<sup>21</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 178. Schnabel identifies the following Christocentric themes in the preaching in the book of Acts: “Jesus is Israel's Messiah and Lord; the Son of David and God's Servant; the holy and righteous Savior; the prophet like Moses and the judge of humankind; the necessity of repentance in view of God's revelation in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus and in the bestowal of the Spirit of prophecy; God's offer of salvation through Jesus, who is Israel's Messiah and Lord, available only in personal allegiance to Jesus.”

discipline.<sup>22</sup> Inherent in the Lukan use of *προσκατεροῦντες* (devoted) is both a commitment to an ever-increasing understanding of *and* the conscientious practice of the apostolic teaching. Instruction was integral to the formation of this new community of Christ-followers, and Luke indicates that all members were thus instructed for this new life and witness as the living church of Jesus Christ. One cannot but recall the Great Commission Jesus delivered to his disciples as he instructed them to make disciples, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:18-20). The apostles served as living, instructive conduits, transmitting the teachings of Christ to the now-burgeoning congregation of believers. Considering that for the span of approximately three years the Lord Jesus consistently taught his disciples, we may easily infer that the apostles were bursting with instructions for these new believers—and their witness of his glorious resurrection doubtlessly added a potent intensity to their teaching.

Furthermore, as the Jerusalem church practiced the Kingdom priorities delineated in Acts 2:42-47, the practice of these priorities was itself didactic in nature. Devotion to prayer disciplined new believers to commune with and supplicate the almighty, sovereign God (cf. Acts 1:14, 24-25; 4:24-30; 12:12). Attentiveness to the fellowship of believers disciplined new believers in the joys of Christian unity and participation together in the blessings of the New Covenant. Participating in the Lord’s Table together in remembrance of Christ’s sufferings disciplined new believers concerning the glories of Christ’s salvific suffering and victorious resurrection. The continual practice of evangelism disciplined new believers to become powerful witnesses to the gospel of the risen, enthroned Christ. The Jerusalem church, consequently, was a school of Christ wherein every function of the church trained new believers to become disciples of Christ.

This pattern of discipling new believers continues throughout the book of Acts. As converts were added daily, they were integrated into the discipleship life of the church

---

<sup>22</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 177.

(4:32). Despite being arrested and beaten, the apostles continued steadfastly in teaching the burgeoning band of disciples (cf. 5:17-21, 40-42). When division threatened the enterprise of the church, the apostles wisely defused the tension, “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (6:1-7). Not only so, a significant number of the Jewish priests were converted and disciplined, becoming obedient followers of Christ (6:17). The execution of Stephen occasioned an intensified persecution of the church, implemented largely through Saul of Tarsus, resulting in a scattering of the believers—yet the persecuted preached and made disciples wherever they were driven (8:1-4).

Philip proceeded to Samaria and preached the gospel, resulting in widespread conversions. Upon hearing of the Samaritan Pentecost, the church at Jerusalem dispatched Peter and John to teach and disciple the new believers (8:4-25). As Peter and John traveled back to Jerusalem, they preached the gospel and made disciples in many of the villages of Samaria (8:25).

When the inveterate persecutor Saul was stunningly converted, God specially sent the disciple Ananias to disciple him concerning his appointment by God as a chosen instrument (9:1-18). The Damascan disciples then received Saul into their fellowship and were instrumental in discipling the former persecutor of the church (9:19-22). Not only so, but as Saul increased in the faith, he began discipling others, which disciples, in a twist of irony, then aided him in escaping persecution in the city (9:22-25). Sometime later, Saul journeyed to Jerusalem where for a season he was directly disciplined by the apostles themselves (9:26-30).<sup>23</sup> From Jerusalem to Samaria to Damascus and back to Jerusalem, the pattern of faithful discipleship came full-circle in the person of the apostle

---

<sup>23</sup>The phrase “went in and out” in Acts 9:28, “So (Saul) went in and out among (the apostles) at Jerusalem,” is strikingly similar to Luke’s use of the phrase in 1:21, a clear reference to Jesus’s discipling of the twelve. For a discussion on reconciling Luke’s account of Saul’s Jerusalem visit with Paul’s account in Gal 1:18-23, see F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary On the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) and I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

Paul.

Further, at the directive of an angel, Cornelius the centurion sent men to Joppa for the purpose of bringing the apostle Peter to Caesarea. Prompted by a vision from God, Peter journeyed to meet with the “unclean” Gentile Cornelius and a group of his relatives and close friends. To these Gentiles Peter proclaimed the gospel of the risen, exalted Christ, declaring him to be Lord and Judge of all (cf. 10:36, 42). The Holy Spirit fell upon these hearers, and they experienced a Gentile Pentecost. Recognizing the duplication of the Jerusalem Pentecost, Peter ordered their baptism and remained with these new believers for a number of days, participating in table fellowship with them and doubtlessly discipling them in the same manner the Jerusalem church was discipled (10:44-48). We see, therefore, that the command of our Lord to disciple the nations is now reaching the Gentiles (11:18).

As the Jewish believers scattered from Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria soon became the focus of intensive Gentile discipleship. Natives of Cyprus and Cyrene, converted at Jerusalem, began proclaiming the gospel of the Lordship of Christ at Antioch, and a significant number of Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord (11:21). Upon hearing this news, the Church in Jerusalem dispatched Barnabas to Antioch, and he began discipling these new believers (11:22-23). As increasing numbers were added to the Lord, Barnabas traveled to Tarsus, fetching Saul to Antioch, and for an entire year Barnabas and Saul discipled the church. So effective were the discipleship efforts of the pair that it was at Antioch where outsiders first began to call the disciples Christians—those belonging to Christ (11:24-26).<sup>24</sup> Here again we observe the primacy of discipleship in the church at Jerusalem influencing both the spread of the gospel and the

---

<sup>24</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 273. Polhill observes, “The early usage (of the term “Christian”) in Antioch is perhaps indicative of two things. For one, it is the sort of term Gentiles would have used and perhaps reflects the success of Antioch’s Gentile mission. Gentiles were dubbing their fellow Gentiles who became followers of Christ “Christians.” Second, it reflects that Christianity was beginning to have an identity of its own and no longer was viewed as a totally Jewish entity. Again, the success among Gentiles would have hastened this process in Antioch.”

grounding of new believers in the faith.

The extent to which discipleship in the church at Jerusalem influenced the advancement of the church is perhaps best observed in the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. Having been discipled himself both at Damascus and at Jerusalem, discipleship became the centerpiece of Paul's church planting efforts. This emphasis upon discipleship characterized all three missional excursions of the apostle recorded in the book of Acts.

Commissioned for an initial missionary thrust by the church at Antioch Syria, Paul and Barnabas first proclaimed the gospel in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12). They then sailed to Southern Galatia where they trekked inland to launch the gospel offensive in Antioch Pisidia (13:13-52). From Pisidian Antioch they journeyed to Iconium, then to Lystra, then to Derbe, enjoying successful church-planting in each location (14:1-22). Having completed an extensive expedition of church planting, the terminal point of this first excursion at Derbe was only about 200 miles by land from their sending church at Antioch Syria. Rather than returning by the shortest route, however, Paul and Barnabas reversed course and retraced their steps to all the cities they had visited in Southern Galatia (14:21). This reversal of course tripled the distance of their return to Antioch Syria, extending the grueling journey from 200 miles to roughly 600 miles. Why would this missionary duo take such a circuitous route and travel three times the distance necessary to arrive at their sending church? Luke gives us the answer in 14:21b-23:

They returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch (Pisidia), *strengthening the souls of the disciples*, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (emphasis added)

The present, active participle ἐπιστηρίζων—strengthening—here in Acts 14:22 emphasizes the importance of discipleship in Paul's missionary work.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen,

---

<sup>25</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 663.

the root verb *στηρίζω* means to cause someone to become stronger in the sense of more firm and unchanging in attitude or belief.<sup>26</sup> Coupled with the preposition *ἐπί*, forming *ἐπιστηρίζων*—found only in Acts 14:22, 15:32, 41, and 18:23—the participle indicates an addition to that which already exists.<sup>27</sup> Though the individuals comprising these new churches were already converted and disciplined in the rudiments of the faith, Paul was compelled to return and further disciple them so that they would become increasingly stronger in their faith.

Paul’s practice beginning with his first missionary excursion clearly included not only the establishment of churches, but also the intentional follow-up necessary to ensure the thorough discipling of believers in those churches. Having himself been exposed to the primacy of discipleship both at Damascus and Jerusalem, Paul intentionally returned to these churches to further disciple the believers.

The apostle continued his strategy of intentional, ongoing discipleship during his second missionary tour as well. On the eve of this second excursion, Paul appealed to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36b). The use of the emphatic particle *δή* (*Ἐπιστρέψαντες δὴ ἐπισκεψώμεθα*—“Indeed, let us return and examine”) communicates a sense of urgency that the missionary partners undertake a joint-oversight visit to *πόλιν πᾶσαν*—every city—wherein they planted churches during their first missional endeavor. This return visit was to allow Paul the opportunity to *ἐπισκεψώμεθα*—that is, to carefully inspect and look after the discipleship of the brothers in these fledgling churches.

---

<sup>26</sup>J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based On Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), vol. 2, 228.

<sup>27</sup>Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 945.

Though disagreement arose between the two missionaries over John Mark, leading to a parting of ways between Paul and Barnabas and the forming of the Paul and Silas partnership, the church at Antioch apparently endorsed Paul's desire for discipleship visitation. Paul and Silas were "commended by the brothers to the grace of God" as they departed with such visitations as the stated purpose of their mission (Acts 15:40). Despite the fact that he and Barnabas had already revisited these congregations during their initial return trip, Paul remained vested in their ongoing discipleship.

Paul and Silas departed and first, ". . . went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41). Although Luke makes no prior mention of the establishment of churches in the regions of Syria and Cilicia (excepting Antioch of Syria), Paul's account in Galatians 1:21-24 of his initial preaching of the gospel includes these two regions. Whereas Cilicia borders the terminal point of the first missionary thrust, Paul and Silas' discipling ministry began very naturally with these regions.<sup>28</sup>

Following their ministry in Syria and Cilicia, wherein they doubtlessly further disciplined the believers there, the pair returned to Derbe, then Lystra. Continuing through the cities of Southern Galatia<sup>29</sup> wherein churches were established in the first missional excursion, they strengthened the brothers through discipleship at each stop (16:1, 4). Luke's summary statement informs the reader, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (16:5). The Lukan formulation *αἱ μὲν οὖν ἐκκλησίαι*—"indeed, therefore, the churches"—emphatically links the strengthening and growth of these churches to the intentional discipleship of Paul and Silas detailed in

---

<sup>28</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, International Critical Commentary 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 758.

<sup>29</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 666. Schnabel notes, "It is curious that Luke reported extensively about Paul's missionary work in Pisidian Antioch (13:14-50), mentioning his pastoral visit on the return journey (14:21), but does not mention the city and its congregation here. Paul's subsequent travels (v. 6) leave little doubt that he visited Pisidian Antioch."

verses one through four.<sup>30</sup> This Pauline and Antiochene paradigm of intentional and ongoing discipleship yielded stronger, healthier, reproducing churches. Indeed, Luke’s description of the results of the discipleship ministry of Paul and Silas is strikingly similar to his description of the growth of the churches in Jerusalem and Judea (cf. Acts 6:7; 9:31)—the disciplined churches increased in numbers and influence.<sup>31</sup>

After significant church-planting work in the new territories of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth, Paul returned to Jerusalem and then went down to report to Syrian Antioch (18:22). Thereafter, Paul began his third missional excursion, and he again “. . . departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, *strengthening* (ἐπιστηρίζων) *all the disciples*” (18:23, emphasis added). The emphasis upon continuing discipleship among established believers is clearly a significant priority for the apostle.

Galatia and Phrygia encompassed the now-familiar churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. Here again, just as with the return trip on the first missionary excursion and the initial thrust of the second missionary journey, the Pauline concern was to first strengthen the churches through discipleship. Notably, many of these churches—if not all of them—had already experienced at least two such visits from the discipling apostle! While the new horizons of Ephesus, Macedonia, and Greece beckoned Paul, he did not venture there until he further disciplined these now-familiar churches.<sup>32</sup>

Further, Luke reports, “Paul passed through the inland (ἀνωτερικὰ—upper, or highland) country and came to Ephesus” (19:1). Schnabel offers a compelling insight here:

---

<sup>30</sup>David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England: Eerdmans, 2009), 452.

<sup>31</sup>Marshall, *Acts*, 261.

<sup>32</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* New International Commentary On the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 358.

The . . . comment in 19:1 that Paul “passed through the interior regions” before reaching Ephesus seems to indicate that he traveled from Pisidian Antioch to Apamea (cf. 16:6) and continued on the traverse of the hill road running from Apamea to the valley of the Kaystros River north of the Messogis Mountains and to Ephesus. The journey from Antioch, the capital of Syria, to Ephesus, the capital city of Asia Minor was about 800 miles . . . requiring nine weeks of walking if we assume one day of rest per week. The fact that Paul did not sail from Antioch (Syria) to Ephesus but walked via an arduous inland route confirms his concern for the consolidation of the churches he had established. If he indeed passed through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, this would have been his third visit after establishing the churches in these cities.<sup>33</sup>

Here again is evidence that Paul’s strengthening and discipling efforts were intentional and strategic. Such efforts warranted a rigorously circuitous journey that could have been avoided had his only objective had been to return to Ephesus. The 800 mile journey by foot, much of it through the northern hill-country of the Messogis Mountains, supplanted a comparatively easy sea-voyage from Syrian Antioch to Ephesus. We see, therefore, that the continued discipleship of the believers comprising these churches remained a high priority in Paul’s third missionary journey.

In summary, the priority given to making disciples in the first church at Jerusalem stands as a prominent and didactic feature of Luke’s account of the Acts of the Apostles. Apostolic obedience to the Great Commission literally permeates the narrative, and their faithfulness to disciple influenced the rapid expansion of the church to Samaria and Gentile Caesarea. Indeed, Jerusalem was so convinced of the primacy of discipleship that they regularly dispatched apostles to insure the proper discipleship of new believers as the church began to expand. When Paul assumes the role of missionary and church planter, commissioned by the church at Antioch Syria, his paradigm of ministry is infused with Jerusalem’s discipleship DNA. Discipleship was so central to the spiritual life and expansion of the church that Paul frequently and intentionally traveled hundreds of miles out of his way to ensure that the churches of Asia Minor were sufficiently disciplined in the school of Christ.

---

<sup>33</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 783.

Demonstrably, the making of disciples is the primary employment to which the church is called and commissioned. Churches experiencing decay and decline are well-served when they revisit and embrace the health-inducing discipline of making and maturing disciples. Not only is discipleship multiplicative numerically, but discipleship properly practiced also produces depth, stability and longevity in the spiritual life of the congregation. Indeed, effective teaching of the glorious, authoritative and powerful Lordship and dominion of Jesus Christ, wherein his commandments are consistently held forth and obeyed, produces an unparalleled joy and unquenchable hope in the functional life of the church. In a word, discipleship is integral to church revitalization, as is evidenced by both the Jerusalem church and the paradigmatic practice of the apostle Paul.

### **Discipleship in the Pauline Corpus**

As we argued earlier, Paul's understanding of the entropic principle of spiritual decay and decline at work against the churches of Asia Minor was a source of constant concern for the apostle. Luke's record in Acts highlights the extraordinary efforts of Paul in discipling, then revisiting and strengthening the discipleship of these fledgling churches. Paul recognized that cultural and pseudo-philosophical pressures posed a significant and continual threat to the spiritual health and vitality of the churches comprising this early expansion of the Kingdom of God (cf. Rom 12:2; Col 2:8). In addition to his practice of revisitation, the apostle penned inspired and didactic letters to be read and circulated among the churches. As we should expect, the Pauline corpus is infused with emphasis upon the priority of discipleship.

### **Discipleship in the Romans Letter**

At the time of the writing of the Romans Epistle, Paul had theretofore been hindered from visiting with the believers in Rome (Rom 1:13). Doubtlessly, Paul's recognition of the strategic importance of the church at Rome spurred his desire to visit there. This recognition was also the likely impetus for his writing of the longest and most

systematically reasoned letter of his corpus.

The salutation of this letter is infused with the apostle's deep concern and desire to come and disciple the believers at Rome. Paul asserts, "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen (στηριχθῆναι) you" (1:11). Notice again Paul's use of στηρίζω. Though the apostle did not plant the church at Rome, he recognized their need to be further disciplined, to be established, strengthened and made firm in their faith.<sup>34</sup>

The Romans Epistle is a study in gospel-centric discipleship. Paul declares the thematic principle of his letter in 1:16-17: The gospel is the power of God for salvation because it demonstrates that the righteousness of God is received through faith for everyone who believes. He then posits the universal and desperate need for justification through faith because of the devastating effects of sin (1:16-4:25). In 5:1—8:39 Paul sets forth the results of justification by faith in the dimensions of both the present experience and future hope of believers. Chapters nine through eleven record the apostle's sorrow that many of his fellow Israelites have rejected the gospel, and he grapples with the profound theological implications of their rejection. Chapters twelve through sixteen unfold the orthopraxy flowing from a right understanding of the gospel, and these chapters are pregnant with discipleship relative to the functional life of believers.

Paul's opening statement in chapter twelve gathers the systematic arguments of chapters one through eleven to introduce an instructive indicative: "Therefore (οὖν), I urge you, brothers and sisters, through the mercies of God, to present (παραστήσαι) your bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy, well pleasing to God, which is your rational service"

---

<sup>34</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 62. Morris posits, "The term (spiritual gift) is used here in the more general sense of anything that builds up the spiritual life. Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be strengthened in the faith as a result of the gift God would give them through his ministry. He speaks of strengthening them and gives that as the purpose of his proposed visit..."

(12:1).<sup>35</sup>

The inferential conjunction “therefore (οὖν)” casts the reader back upon the entirety of Paul’s theological arguments formulated from the beginning of the epistle, marking a transition from orthodox soteriology to the orthopraxis of discipleship. In the words of Robert H. Mounce, “Only the Christian faith, rooted as it is in a supernatural act that took place in history (the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ), has the ultimate moral authority as well as the effective power to transform human life according to the divine intention.”<sup>36</sup> Because of the grace, love and mercies of God, whereby believers are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Paul is now discipling the believers in Rome via epistolary injunction to live divinely transformed lives.

The nature of Christian discipleship finds vivid description in Paul’s employment of the aorist infinitive *παραστήσαι* (“present,” “offer,” “dedicate” your bodies). Derived from the nomenclature of sacrifice, this injunction calls believers to acts of dedication to God. The locus of Christian dedication is the entirety of our “bodies,” the earthly tabernacles in which we live, and Paul frames this offering in cultic terms as “a sacrifice, living” (*θυσίαν ζῶσαν*). As disciples of Jesus Christ, our sacrifice is not a slaughtered, bloody sacrifice like unto sacrifices in the Jewish Tabernacle and Temple, but a continual offering of our entire selves to God in all our recreated vitality and aliveness (cf. 1 Cor 5:17; 6:19).<sup>37</sup>

Broadening his depiction of this sacrifice, Paul adds the adjectives “ἁγίαν” (holy) and “εὐάρεστον” (pleasing, acceptable) “to God.” In addition to our sacrifice being

---

<sup>35</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 624. Schreiner’s translation.

<sup>36</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 230.

<sup>37</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 920.

living, it is to be continually cleansed, consecrated entirely to God's purposes, and seeking always to be presented a pleasing aroma unto God (cf. Exod 29:41; Psa 141:2; 2 Cor 2:15). When the three adjectives (ζῶσαν, ἁγίαν, and εὐάρεστον) are taken together, our discipleship consists of an unceasing offering of our entire being, continually cleansed and consecrated to the will of God, ever seeking to please the God who so graciously redeemed us from our sin and reconciled us to himself through his Son. Such sacrifice is λογικὴν λατρείαν—the only rational response of worship (as opposed to the irrational worship of created things) in light of so great a salvation (cf. 1:18-32).<sup>38</sup>

Paul then presents the means by which the Christian disciple can attain to the comprehensive exhortation of verse one: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). The instruction for disciples is two-fold here, set forth first in a negative prohibition, then in a positive exhortation.

First, believers are to resist being “συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ—conformed to this age” (12:2). The imperative verb συσχηματίζεσθε is evocative, calling forth imagery of pressing something into a mold whereby the shape of the thing is defined.<sup>39</sup> Disciples of Jesus Christ are hereby commanded to resist being pressed into the mold of thinking common in this present evil age from which Christ died to deliver us (cf. Gal 1:4; 1 Cor 1:20; 3:18). In a word, the prohibition here is against allowing this evil world (age) to press us into its mold of philosophy and thinking, for such is utterly antithetical to the work and mind of Christ, who is the very wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:20-25; 2:16). Indeed, the vain, empty evil thinking of this present world is captivity and slavery, and must be summarily shunned by sons and daughters of the living God (cf. Col 2:8; Rom

---

<sup>38</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 628. Schreiner connects this rational act of worship with the theme of Romans, stating, “The call to worship (λατρεία) causes the theme of the letter to resurface, for the fundamental sin is the failure to worship (λατρεύειν, latreuein; see 1:25) God.”

<sup>39</sup>Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 979.

8:15).

Secondly—and utterly contrary to being conformed to the thinking of this present evil age—Paul asserts that disciples of Jesus must rather “μεταμορφοῦσθε—be transfigured, transformed, changed completely,” and that by “τῆ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς—the renewal of your mind” (12:2). The passive verb μεταμορφοῦσθε is even more evocative than the previous συσχηματίζεσθε. Matthew employed this term to describe the glorious revelation of Jesus that took place on the Mount of Transfiguration: “And he was transfigured (μετεμορφώθη) before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matt 17:2; cf. Mark 9:2). Matthew’s memorable usage should in turn remind us of Paul’s employment of the term in describing the discipleship process taking place in believers: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (μεταμορφούμεθα) into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18).

Several instructive truths arise from Paul’s inspired imperative. We observe first that the verb μεταμορφοῦσθε is in the passive voice, indicating that this metamorphosis takes place by a power outside of the believing disciple. One is reminded of the ungainly caterpillar, moved along by a power and design completely outside of itself, experiencing a transformation from worm, to chrysalis, to winged, beautiful butterfly. Just so, the inward thinking and outward life of disciples of Jesus undergo a progressive metamorphosis into the very sanctified image of Christ as we gaze in loving obedience upon his glory and beauty (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; John 14:15).<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, by use of the instrumental dative, Paul delineates the means whereby the believing disciples is transformed : “τῆ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς—by the renewal of your mind” (12:2). This mind-renewal stands in sharp contrast to the futile, darkened minds of

---

<sup>40</sup>Longenecker, *Romans*, 923. Longenecker asserts that this metamorphosis “. . . is a complete inner change of thought, will, and desires . . . by means of the ministry of (the) Holy Spirit . . . resulting in a recognizable external change of actions and conduct.”

unbelievers whereby they are alienated from God and given to callous sensuality, greed and impure living. In contradistinction, believers are to put away their old manner of corrupt living and, through the renewing, inward work of the Holy Spirit, live outward lives of true righteousness and holiness, having been recreated after the likeness of God himself (Eph 4:17-24; cf. Tit 3:5). This sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit consists of the believer being renewed in true knowledge of God, and the functional tool of the Holy Spirit is the living, powerful Word of God (cf. Col 3:10; John 17:14-19; Heb 4:11-13).<sup>41</sup> As the disciple's inward man is renewed by the Holy Spirit through living Word, the outward man is sanctified in behavior and conduct.

Thirdly, this transformative mind-renewal equips the disciple, “εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν . . . τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ—in order to test and approve what is the will of God” (12:2). Leon Morris is helpful with the difficult infinitive construction here when he asserts:

The purpose or the result of this (renewal) is not so much that you will be able to test (as NIV) as that “you will test”; the renewal gives more than a possibility. NIV has rendered the one Greek verb by test and approve, which is a good solution of a difficult translation problem. The word here will include test, for Paul is not advocating an uncritical approval, but it will also include approve, for more than the process of testing is in mind. Indeed, there is probably more than approving, for Paul is really saying not only that the Romans would find out that God's will is good, but that having found out, they should put it into practice. He is arguing for the spiritual discernment that ascertains what God wants us to do and then sets itself to do it.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, the mind of the disciple—freed from the enslavement of unregenerate thinking and renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit—comes to discern the moral and spiritual

---

<sup>41</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 629-30. Schreiner connects the mind-renewing work of the Holy Spirit with the truth of the Word of God when he states, “Believers resist the pressure to conform to the present evil age by the renewal of their minds. The downward spiral of thinking traced in Rom. 1:18–32 is reversed in those who are redeemed from sin. Their minds are not given over to futility but are renewed to understand the truth.”

<sup>42</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 435.

will of God. Upon this discernment, the disciple then conforms his life to that will through transformed conduct and behavior modeled upon the mind and example of Christ (Phil 2:5-11; cf. Matt 11:29).

Finally, the transformative, renewing work of the Holy Spirit reveals and inculcates in the disciple that will of God which is “τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον—the good and pleasing and complete” (12:2). While the will of God lived out in the life of the renewed disciple yields a life that is observably good, pleasing and complete, this is not Paul’s focus in adding these three substantival adjectives. Their relation to the will of God rather speaks of that which is good, pleasing and complete in the sight of God.<sup>43</sup> Unfettered from the corrupt thinking of this world, the disciple is now free to participate in a moral and spiritual growth that reflects what is good, pleasing and complete in relation to the very nature and revealed will of God.<sup>44</sup>

In a mere two verses, Paul sets forth a sweeping paradigm of discipleship presented with an astonishing economy of words. Because of the redeeming, justifying mercies of God, the Christian disciple’s life is to become an ongoing sacrifice, animated and consecrated to the purposes of God as a pleasing aroma to God. The disciple resists the world’s way of thinking, exchanging carnal conformity for radical, spiritual transformation through the mind-renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Thus transformed through renewal, the disciple discerns the will of God and lives a life reflective of those things which are good, acceptable and complete in the sight of God.

### **Discipleship in the Colossians Letter**

We have observed that in addition to church planting, the apostle Paul was very intentional to practice the work of continual revitalization in the churches of Asia

---

<sup>43</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 630.

<sup>44</sup>Mounce, *Romans*, 231.

Minor. Personal discipleship of the believers within these churches was integral to the apostle's method for church revitalization. Repeated visits to already established churches and highly concentrated epistles aimed at further rooting and grounding them in the faith characterized Paul's entire apostolic career. This pattern of concern for the revitalization and ongoing discipleship of believers is quite evident in the Colossian epistle.

As noted earlier, the circumstances surrounding Paul's epistle to the Colossians are unusual. It is likely Paul had not visited the region of Colossae, and the possibility exists that Epaphras planted the church there (cf. Col 2:1; 1:7-8; 4:12-13). Further, Richard R. Melick, Jr. plausibly suggests that the church began around A. D. 53-55 while Paul taught in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus, where Epaphras became a student under the tutelage of the apostle.<sup>45</sup>

Douglas J. Moo maintains that Epaphras likely went to Rome to consult with Paul concerning problems arising in the church at Colossae. Epaphras seemingly joined the apostle in his imprisonment (Phlm 23), precluding his ability to personally deliver Paul's letter to the church. That task fell to Tychius and Onesimus (cf. Col 4:7-9). Moo states, "Epaphras's [sic] reason for making this trip to visit Paul was almost certainly that he wanted to enlist the apostle's help in dealing with a dangerous yet slippery variation on the Christian gospel that had arisen in the community."<sup>46</sup> The principle of entropy was apparently operative in the Colossian congregation despite the church having existed only seven or eight years.

While the text sets forth no explicit purpose for the writing of the letter, Pauline cautions abound in this short epistle. He warns the believers in Colossae of those

---

<sup>45</sup>Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary, Vol. 32, (Nashville: B&H, 1991), 164.

<sup>46</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 27.

who would “delude (them) with plausible arguments” (2:4), take them “captive by philosophy and empty deceit” (2:8), pass judgment on them concerning traditions (2:16-17), and deem them unqualified on ascetic and traditional grounds (2:18). Wide speculation exists as to the particular false teaching threatening the church. A relative consensus of scholars agree that the particular invading heresy was likely a syncretistic combination of religio-philosophical traditions.<sup>47</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln states the difficulty of identifying the heresy thus: “Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis on his part.”<sup>48</sup> The difficulty of identifying the particular error notwithstanding, it was a philosophy sufficiently aggressive to warrant Paul taking up his pen out of concern for the well-being of the church.

The apostle’s counter-prescription for the aberrant philosophy is concise and profoundly didactic. His Christ-hymn in 1:15-20 establishes the preeminence of Christ and his gospel in comprehensive, cosmological terms (cf. Col 1:27; 2:2-3, 6-7, 9-15, 17, 20-23). This instructive hymn reverberates throughout the letter, and it serves to strengthen the apostle’s initial warning: “He has now reconciled (you) in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (1:22- 23a). The Colossians were in need of further discipling lest they become unmoored and drift away from the hope of the gospel.

Paul then pens a summary statement of his ministry in 1:24-29. His was a ministry characterized by suffering, and the apostle asserts that his suffering is for the sake of the church, including the church at Colossae, whom he had never seen (1:24-25).

---

<sup>47</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 57. Moo helpfully reviews the wide-ranging speculations about the false teaching at Colossae (pp 46-60).

<sup>48</sup>Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Letter to the Colossians*, New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 561.

The book of Acts and the Pauline epistles well-document the sufferings of Paul for the sake of advancing the gospel of the preeminent Christ, yet the suffering he calls to mind here seem to go beyond resistance to the gospel. Paul asserts, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings (παθήμασιν) for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up (ἀνταναπληρῶ) what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions (θλίψεων) for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (1:24).<sup>49</sup>

Though Paul’s assertion is somewhat startling at first glance, we know that he is not imagining himself to be “filling up to completion” (ἀνταναπληρῶ) the redemptive sufferings of Christ. Indeed, 1:19-20 and 2:13-15 of this very letter—not to mention copious evidence throughout his corpus—make abundantly clear that in Paul’s thought the sin-atonement sufferings of Christ were entirely sufficient to redeem sinners. Further, Paul’s shift from “sufferings” (παθήμασιν) in the first clause of the verse to “afflictions” (θλίψεων) in the second clause is significant, because θλίψεων is never used in the NT of the redemptive sufferings of Christ. Rather, in the words of Moo, “It is not that there is anything lacking ‘in’ the atoning suffering of Christ but that there is something lacking ‘in regard to’ the tribulations that pertain to Christ as the Messiah as he is proclaimed in the world.”<sup>50</sup>

The afflictions Paul experienced in his flesh are everywhere evidenced in his writings, and he understood these afflictions were tightly connected to his union with Christ and his apostolic commission (cf. 2 Cor 4:10-12, 16-18; Phil 3:10-11; Gal 6:14; Acts 9:4, 15-16). As the apostle to the Gentiles and a prolific church planter and revitalizer, Paul endured profound emotional stress for the health of the churches

---

<sup>49</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 150. Moo states, “The language is reminiscent of 1:18, where ‘church’ refers not to a local assembly of believers (as is usually the case in the New Testament) but to the ‘universal church.’”

<sup>50</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 151. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 115-17.

throughout Asia Minor (cf. 2 Cor 11:28; Gal 1:6; Phil 1:30; Col 2:1). Both the innate persecution that arose from Paul's propagation of the gospel and his deep, incessant concern that the churches be strengthened through discipleship were the source of much tribulation and affliction for the apostle. Paul took very seriously the stewardship of making the Word of God fully known (1:25-27). In a very tangible sense, Paul's apostolic commission was one of radical discipleship in all the churches.

His emphasis upon discipleship is expressed in evocative and concise language from the pen of the apostle: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (1:28-29). We observe here Paul's methodological approach to discipling, his ultimate objective in discipling, the intensity of his discipling, and his source of strength for discipling.

The apostle's method for discipling is expressed in one emphatic verb followed by three subordinate participles: "(Christ) we<sup>51</sup> proclaim (*καταγγέλλομεν*), admonishing/warning (*νουθετοῦντες*) everyone and teaching (*διδάσκοντες*) everyone with all wisdom." His employment of *καταγγέλλομεν* frames the declaration with weightiness. The term is used of the communication of that which is sacred, and carries with it the additional sense of the declaration of imperial rule.<sup>52</sup>

Paul's discipleship flowed from a full-orbed proclamation of the sacred, divine mystery hidden in ages past but now revealed in the salvific work of Christ. He who is the incarnate Word of God, the sinless, sin-atonement sacrifice of God, and the resurrected means of God's justification of sinners is the Fountainhead from which all of Paul's discipleship issued. Further, the Christ of Paul's discipling proclamation is the imperial

---

<sup>51</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 159. Moo allows that the shift from the first person singular to the first person plural here is an "editorial we."

<sup>52</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), vol. I, 70-71.

King of kings and Lord of lords who possesses all authority, power and dominion in heaven and earth, and to whom every knee will bow (cf. Matt 28:18; Dan 7:13-14; Phil 2:9-10).<sup>53</sup> Paul's manner of discipleship clearly accords with Christ's Great Commission and the method of discipleship observed in the Jerusalem church.

Paul then supplements his emphatically Christ-centered proclamation with two supporting participles, *νουθετοῦντες* (admonishing) and *διδάσκοντες* (teaching), further explaining his method of discipleship (1:28). As the translations "admonish" or "warn" imply, *νουθετοῦντες* was the Pauline practice of confronting those who were tempted to err with the truth of the Word of God. His usage of the term elsewhere indicates that Paul's discipling admonitions were not insolent or offensive, but were rather appeals accompanied by love, tears, patience and persistence (cf. Acts 20:31; 1 Cor 4:14; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:15). He genuinely desired that his disciples forsake sin and embrace the truth in obedience to Christ. How instructive that the apostle did not swerve from lovingly confronting sin and error in his method of discipleship, despite the often uncomfortable nature of such occasions.

Whereas admonition falls along somewhat negative lines, Paul's discipleship was characterized by the positive *διδάσκοντες* (teaching) of the full-orbed truth flowing from the gospel (1:28). The apostle here sets forth his skilled practice of imparting practical knowledge of Christ to his disciples, a practice that marked his apostolic calling from the very beginning (cf. Acts 13:1). This points us to the balance inherent in Paul's discipleship—he admonished and encouraged, he warned and equipped. The former (*νουθετοῦντες*) without the latter (*διδάσκοντες*) would be "dangerously lacking in content and guidance for everyday praxis."<sup>54</sup> He admonished and taught "with all wisdom,"

---

<sup>53</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 123-24.

<sup>54</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 124.

desiring that his disciples be filled with the wisdom of God in Christ (cf. 1:9, 28; Eph 1:8). Hence we see Paul’s method of discipleship aimed to teach in such a manner that his teaching produced right thinking that led to right living.

The objective of his discipling appears in the final clause of verse twenty-eight: “That we may present everyone (πάντα ἄνθρωπον) mature (τέλειον) in Christ.” He proclaims Christ, admonishing *everyone* and teaching *everyone* to the end that he may present *everyone* mature in Christ. Three times in this verse Paul employs πάντα ἄνθρωπον—every man, everyone. Being no universalist, Paul likely means “everyone” in the sense of all with whom God brings him in contact, all within his sphere of influence.<sup>55</sup> The scope of Paul’s discipling vision is vast indeed. He disciplines with the objective of presenting *all* his hearers τέλειον—mature, or complete—in Christ.

The semantic range of τέλειος is rich. It can signify the quality of being spotless and without blemish, morally upright and blameless, and the mature condition of a faithful disciple.<sup>56</sup> Given Paul’s usage of the term elsewhere, the third sense is likely in view here, though the first two senses are certainly within the context of the Colossian epistle (cf. 1 Cor 2:6; 14:20; Phil 3:15). Paul’s objective in discipling the believers was to see Christ formed in them and then for those believers to grow into maturity in Christ (cf. Gal 4:19; Col 4:12; Eph 4:11-16). Paul’s desire here is likely eschatological in that he wished to present those he disciplined to Christ at his second coming as a spotless bride adorned for her Husband (cf. Col 1:28; Eph 5:25-27).<sup>57</sup> Paul’s vision for discipleship was indeed aspirational in its objective and cosmic in its scope.

The intensity and energy with which Paul labored in making disciples is also instructive: “For this I toil (κοπιῶ), struggling (ἀγωνιζόμενος) with all his energy that he

---

<sup>55</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 160.

<sup>56</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 125-26.

<sup>57</sup>Melick, *Colossians*, 242.

powerfully works within me” (1:29). While *κοπιῶ* is a common verb for “labor,” Paul’s usage of the term in relation to ministry often presents an element of intensity (cf. Rom 16:6, 12; 1 Cor 15:10; 16:16; 1 Tim 4:10). Here, he couples *κοπιῶ* with the participle *ἀγωνιζόμενος*—signifying a striving, fighting, contending effort. The apostle likely has in view the supreme effort and self-discipline of an athlete preparing for and competing in games such as the Olympics (cf. 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:12).<sup>58</sup> Together, *κοπιῶ* and *ἀγωνιζόμενος* express the passionately laborious and disciplined manner in which the apostle disciplined toward maturity those in his sphere of influence.

Finally, Paul identifies the source of the dynamic energy by which he toils and struggles: “with all the energy of him (*ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ*) that he powerfully (*δυνάμει*) works within me” (1:29). In typical Pauline usage, *ἐνέργειαν* (energy) refers to the active, supernatural work of God himself, and so it does here (e.g. 1 Cor 12:6, 11; Phil 2:13; 3:21; Eph 3:7).<sup>59</sup> The dynamic energy by which he discipled believers comes from God. Indeed, this is no ordinary energy, for it is an energy *δυνάμει* (powerfully, explosively) accomplished in the apostle by the immeasurably great power of his omnipotent God who commissioned him an apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Eph 1:19-20; Acts 9:15-18). The energetic discipleship of Paul is fueled by the very power with which Christ was raised from the dead.

In summary, the Pauline paradigm for discipleship expressed in Colossians 1:28-29 is vitally instructive. The person and work of Jesus Christ is the Fountainhead from which Pauline discipleship issued. To correct error, he discipled by admonishing and confronting believers with truth—appeals accompanied by love, tears, patience and persistence. Paul discipled encouragingly by teaching the full complement of truth that flows from the gospel of Jesus Christ. The objective of his discipleship was to present

---

<sup>58</sup>Moo, *Colossians*, 162.

<sup>59</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, 127.

believers mature in Christ, and to this end he labored with great intensity by the dynamic empowerment of Almighty God. Churches today in need of revitalization are well-served to lay hold of Paul's ageless, vibrant and vigorous approach to maturation-oriented discipleship.

### **Discipleship in the Galatian Letter**

Entropy moving the church away from the true gospel was the alarming impetus for Paul's nouthetic letter to the churches of Galatia (cf. Gal 1:6-9; 4:8-11; 5:7). After defending his apostleship, he confronted the church with the gospel truths inherent in justification by faith, the sonship of adoption, and freedom from slavery in Christ (1:11-5:15). The pseudo-gospel teachers (likely Judaizers) plaguing the churches apparently provoked quarrels and internecine strife, unleashing the works of the flesh and threatening the unity of fellowship so vital to their existence (5:13-15).<sup>60</sup> The discipleship answer to this gospel entropy and disunity, according to Paul, was for the Galatians to learn to walk by the Spirit rather than conducting themselves according to the dictates of the flesh (5:16-25).

He introduces this section of epistolary discipleship with a command buttressed by a promise. The apostolic imperative runs thus: Learn to conduct yourselves by the power and leadership of the Spirit. The divine promise stands thus: Those who walk by the Spirit will not surrender to the carnal desires of the flesh (5:16). The desires of the flesh war against the impulses of the Spirit, seeking to enslave the very Galatian believers who had been set free in Christ (cf. 5:1, 13). The Judaist teaching sought to enslave them to the law and sever them from Christ, but Paul reminds them that by walking in the Spirit they are freed by Christ from the law (cf. 5:1-4, 18).

The apostle then extensively catalogues the self-evident, enslaving works of

---

<sup>60</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 242.

the flesh, admonishing the Galatians that those who are slaves to such carnal desires are not sons who will inherit the Kingdom of God (cf. 4:1-7; 5:19-21). Indeed, the works of the flesh distort the gospel and undermine fellowship, the very issues that prompted Paul to write this letter.

In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul then sets forth to the Galatians the virtuous and peaceable fruit of the Spirit, teaching them that such fruit functions in a sphere completely free from regulation by the law (5:23).<sup>61</sup> The fruit of the Spirit illumines the gospel and promotes fellowship, and would therefore remedy the Galatian maladies. We see, therefore, that discipleship was the Pauline solution for the errors and controversies embroiling the Galatian churches. He admonished them to put off the works of the flesh and taught them to put on the fruit of the Spirit—and conduct themselves accordingly.

Finally, Paul drives home the admonition to set aside the vices of the flesh and his teaching to take up the virtues of the Spirit with a corresponding two-fold conclusion. First, he asserts that those who are in Christ intentionally mortify the carnal desires of the flesh (5:24). Secondly, those who have been vivified by the Spirit consequently conduct themselves according to the Spirit. In a word, sanctification in the believing disciple is a process of mortification and vivification—a dying to the flesh to live by the Spirit (cf. Luke 9:23).<sup>62</sup>

Paul's answer to Galatian error and division was discipleship. The churches' entropic decline was the result of their surrender to carnal cravings, and the means of

---

<sup>61</sup>Bruce, *Galatians*, 255-56. Bruce illumines the final clause of Galatians 5:23 (“... against such there is no law”) when he states: “In Aristotle (Pol. 3.13, 1284a) the statement *κατὰ δὲ πᾶν τοιούτων οὐκ ἔστι νόμος* is used of persons who surpass their fellows in virtue (*ἀρετή*) like gods among men. They do not need to have their actions regulated by laws; on the contrary, they themselves constitute a law (a standard) for others (*αὐτοὶ γὰρ εἰσι νόμος*). Paul probably does not quote directly or consciously from Aristotle: the saying may have passed into proverbial currency, like many phrases from Shakespeare or the AV which are frequently quoted without awareness of their source.”

<sup>62</sup>Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 404-405.

recovery was to walk by the Spirit and kill their fleshly desires. Notably, the method of Paul's discipleship observed in Colossians 1:28-29 is evident here in the Galatians letter. Paul's discipleship was nouthetic and didactic. He confronted the sins of the flesh, and he taught the fruit of the Spirit. As many churches are facing similar entropic decline as threatened the churches of Galatia, both Paul's methodology and content here stand as a beacon illuminating the path to revitalization.

In summary of discipleship in the Pauline corpus, every epistle of the apostle Paul had for its objective the discipling of its recipients. It is therefore no surprise that each epistle directly addressed the issue of discipleship. Classic sections on discipleship abound in these epistles. Disciples are urged to put on the whole armor of God in order to stand against the schemes of the devil in the timeless text of Ephesians 6:10-20. Following Christ's example of humility by appropriating the mind of Christ is compellingly set forth in the definitive Christological text of Philippians 2:1-11. Instructions for disciples suffering as good soldiers of Jesus Christ adorn Paul's second letter to Timothy (2 Tim 2:1-13). Powerful directives for teaching disciples to devote themselves to good works appear in Titus 3:1-11. Indeed, each of the apostle's inspired letters to the churches—as well as his pastoral epistles—are fields ripe unto harvest for those engaged in the essential Kingdom work of discipleship.

### **Conclusion**

Discipleship, as we argued above, is the entire, intentional process of proclaiming the authoritative gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples without exception, baptizing those who repent, believe and embrace the Lordship of Jesus Christ—and then teaching them to obey the whole of Scripture. This comprehensive and sustaining mandate given to the church by the glorious, victorious, risen Christ has served to advance the church for more than two thousand years.

As we observed, the discipline of making disciples stands among the most

clearly revealed priorities of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Despite the clarity of our Lord in the Great Commission mandate, however, a lack of discipline in being and making and maturing disciples stands as a common deficiency among churches experiencing decay and decline. This common deficiency leads to aging congregations because the church fails to duplicate and multiply itself. An aging congregation left unchecked by the salubrious discipline of multiplicative disciple-making becomes a congregation spiraling toward its own church-death. Churches exist to carry out the mission given us by our Lord to be disciples who make disciples, and failure to embrace this seminal work signs the church's death warrant. Those churches, conversely, who give due priority to making disciples become, by the enabling of the Holy Spirit, self-replicating across generations.

We demonstrated that the first church at Jerusalem stands as a shining example of a church committed to the making of disciples. This commitment stands as a prominent and didactic feature of Luke's entire account of the Acts of the Apostles, indicating the normativity of discipleship in the life of the church. Apostolic obedience to the Great Commission positively permeates the narrative, and their faithfulness to disciple resulted in the rapid expansion of the church to Samaria and Gentile Caesarea. We observed that Jerusalem was so convinced of the necessity of discipleship that, as the church began to expand, they regularly dispatched apostles to insure the proper discipleship of new believers in new regions.

Further, when Paul assumed the role of missionary and church planter in the book of Acts, his paradigm of ministry was marked with Jerusalem's discipleship DNA. Discipleship was so central to the spiritual life and expansion of the church that Paul often traveled hundreds of miles out of his way to ensure that the churches of Asia Minor were sufficiently disciplined in the school of Christ. Indeed, the prolific church planter and revitalizer was also a master discipler.

We further observed that Paul's great concern and emphasis throughout his

apostolic career was to insure the proper discipleship of the believers in the expanding church. His letters to churches and pastors pulsate with impassioned, nouthetic and didactic instruction aimed at maturing believers in their faith. The apostle clearly understood that discipleship was essential in the battle against the entropic principle operative in the churches. Unless believers became deeply rooted and grounded in their faith, decay and decline would set in, the gospel would be compromised, and the churches would cease to exist as agents of Kingdom advance.

As the landscape of declining, dying churches in our nation is expanding, the Apostolic and Pauline paradigm of persistent, Christocentric discipleship stands as a beacon of hope. The revitalization of churches rests largely upon faithfulness to this Great Commission mandate to be, make, and mature disciples. Churches who faithfully engage this primary spiritual discipline may reasonably expect not only the reversal of decline, but the blessing of Christ's incomparable presence and salubrious growth spanning generations. To that end, we will address practical steps for churches to implement an effective discipleship curriculum in the final chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 9  
THE MEASURE OF MINISTRY IN CHURCH  
REVITALIZATION

Ask any meaningfully-engaged church member what ministries are taking place in their church and that member can likely enumerate a rather impressive list. Ask that same church member to regale you with their church's theology of ministry, however, and a blank stare will likely follow. Further, if you inquire of that member if he or she is aware of anyone in their church who has experienced burnout in ministry, they will likely be able to identify several such individuals. While burnout among clergy garners a great deal of press, burnout among church members engaged in ministry is a common problem in evangelical churches.<sup>1</sup> We would suggest that a correlation exists between ministry burnout and the absence of a clearly articulated theology of ministry.

Ministry disconnected from a sound theology of ministry contributes to another problem common in churches. Many pastors are aware—at least subconsciously—of what we will call the ten-ninety conundrum. Ten percent of the members of a given church carry ninety percent of the ministry in that church. The less-engaged ninety percent of members often do little more than warm a spot on the pew—occasionally. Colin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman recognize this problem when they assert, “The number who identify as Christians is far greater than the number who attend a weekly meeting. Even then, the bulk of the serving and giving in our churches tends to be done by only a few.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Mark Hallock, *Great Commission Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 16. Hallock asserts bluntly, “. . . this is the state of so many of our churches in North America today; they love Jesus, they love the Bible, they want to grow, but they are worn out.”

<sup>2</sup>Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 11.

This common malady of ministry non-participation often emerges when leaders and churches fail to effectively communicate the importance of meaningful, biblical church membership wherein each member is engaged in the work of ministry. Low expectations invariably yield anemic results, and this reality is nowhere more evident than in the average evangelical church. Couple the ten-ninety conundrum with the absence of a clear theology of ministry, and the burnout rate multiplies exponentially.

Healthy churches widely embrace the work of ministry, recognizing the outward and otherward ministry mandates inherent in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Plateaued or declining churches, conversely, are often characterized by an increasingly personalized and internalized ministry focus instead of the requisite outward and otherward focus of Christian ministry. Indeed, the nearer a church draws to the ten-ninety conundrum, the more precipitous the decline of that church becomes. We maintain, therefore, that participation in the work of ministry—or lack thereof—is a reasonable measure of the health or decline of a church.

Contemporary church revitalization literature generally recognizes the importance of ministry in the work of reviving a declining church. Mark Clifton, in emphasizing the pastor’s ministry responsibility in a revitalizing context, urges pastors to love the remaining church members: “You just love them. You let them know how much they mean to you and how much they mean to God. In the process, you warm their heart to the gospel. Remind them of what the gospel is over and over again. Preach it. Teach it. Model it. . . . They know it. Your job is to help them rediscover it with their hearts.”<sup>3</sup> In urging an outward ministry focus with the communication of the gospel as the objective, Clifton advises, “Exegete your community. . . . As you exegete (assess) your community, you will look to meet the unique spiritual and physical needs of your neighbors.”<sup>4</sup> Notice

---

<sup>3</sup>Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 57-58.

<sup>4</sup>Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 63.

that Clifton’s revitalization exhortations issue directly from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

In *Transformational Church*, Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer evaluated more than 7,000 churches and interviewed hundreds of pastors. Their objective was to discover the common denominators in thriving churches. Among their conclusions they assert, “Transformational Churches have moved their membership from the ‘pay, pray, and get out of the way’ mentality to a ‘go, tell and show’ obsession.”<sup>5</sup> Here again, the emphasis upon a going, telling and showing church membership reflects love for God and neighbor and a disciple-making mentality. As the *Transformational Church* analysis clearly indicates, church revitalization leaders must shift the tradition of pastors and leaders exclusively doing the work of ministry to a members-focused ministry paradigm.

In *Simple Church*, Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger draw insights from their study of four hundred healthy churches to make the case for a simplified, strategic approach to church revitalization. Among their findings they discovered that effective, growing churches “have a clearly defined process for moving a person from salvation to spiritual maturity to significant ministry.”<sup>6</sup> Notice the objective here. New converts should never be left to languish in the pews, but rather should be discipled to spiritual maturity in order that they engage in meaningful ministry. Lack of an intentional process for moving members to active ministry will inevitably lead to plateau and decline, and even eventual death of a church as the ten percent slowly burn out doing ninety percent of the ministry.

Edmund Clowney effectively summarizes the work of service (ministry) in three comprehensive categories. He asserts, “The church is called to serve God in three ways: to serve him directly in *worship*; to serve the saints in *nurture*; and to serve the

---

<sup>5</sup>Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 220.

<sup>6</sup>Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 112.

world in *witness*.<sup>7</sup> Here again we see the contours of a theology of ministry drawn from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Revitalized ministry includes the ministry of worship wherein we love God, the ministry of nurture wherein we love our neighbor, and the ministry of witness wherein we proclaim the gospel before the nations.

John S. Hammett, citing the paradigm evident in Acts 2:42-47, identifies five elements of ministry necessary in the church: The ministry of teaching, the ministry of fellowship, the ministry of worship, the ministry of service, and the ministry of evangelism. He then observes, “A church that has no teaching ministry, or that has no evangelistic impact, or whose members never experience fellowship, is an unhealthy church, one whose well-being is severely damaged and whose very being as a church is called into question. . . . A church is no longer a true church when it abandons the functions of a church.”<sup>8</sup> Ministry—in all its biblically mandated dimensions—is the measure of health or unhealth of a church, the measure of its vitality or its decline.

The objective of this chapter is three-fold. First, we will seek to biblically define ministry by establishing a brief theology of ministry in the context of the local church. Secondly, we will trace the practice of ministry in the first church at Jerusalem in the book of Acts, noting their ministry’s vital connection with the already-established biblical priorities of the church. Finally, we will consider the emphasis placed upon the work of ministry in the Pauline corpus, demonstrating the paradigmatic necessity of ministry in the work of church revitalization.

### **A Brief Theology of Ministry**

The term “ministry” is often posited in ecclesial circles if the meaning is self-

---

<sup>7</sup>Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 117 (emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup>John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 221-24.

evident. Indeed, in many churches the term “ministry” is used to describe whatever utilitarian functions the leadership and congregation deem necessary. Despite this common practice, no church of the Lord Jesus Christ possesses the authority to determine its purpose and mission—and therefore its ministries. The authority to prescribe the ministries of the church rests in Christ alone, for it is he who purchased the church with his own blood and it is he who builds his church (cf. Matt 28:16; Acts 20:28; Matt 16:18). Given Christ’s right and authority over the church, any theology of Christian ministry must begin with Christ’s authoritative mandates. While Christ’s imperatives to the church are myriad and well-documented in the Gospels and Epistles, his Great Commandment and Great Commission are the dual fount from which they all issue and to which they all connect.

When deviously pressed to identify the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus responded with a concise summary of the first table of the Ten Commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment” (cf. Matt 22:37-38; Deut 6:5).<sup>9</sup> Jesus then further asserted, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” efficiently summarizing the second table of the Ten Commandments (cf. Matt 22:39; Lev 19:18, 34).<sup>10</sup> Additionally, speaking from the basis of his supreme and all-

---

<sup>9</sup>John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 909. Commenting on this passage, Nolland rightly asserts: “The call to love God has a strong OT pedigree; it occurs no fewer than ten times in Deuteronomy alone (admittedly a place of special concentration). In the Gospel pericope, ‘Your heart’ denotes a response to God from the innermost personal center of one’s being; ‘your life’ (‘soul’) conjures up the role of the life force that energizes us; . . . ‘your mind’ signals the inclusion of the thinking and planning processes. The challenge is to a comprehensive engagement with God with the total capacity of all of one’s faculties.”

<sup>10</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 558. Morris helpfully comments: “Wholehearted love for God means coming in some measure to see other people as God sees them, and all people as the objects of God’s love. Therefore anyone who truly loves God with all his being must and will love others, and this is expressed in the commandment, ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*,’ a commandment that is repeated in the Pentateuch . . . The combination was not unknown in Judaism; thus we find, for example, ‘Keep the Law of

encompassing authority after his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus gave to the church of all ages the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20).

The Great Commandment and the Great Commission of our Lord are definitive for the church. These concisely define the purpose of the church and the mission of the church. Beginning with the first table of the Law, whole-being love for God involves worshipping him as God alone and refusing to bow the knee to idols. Love for God includes revering his holy name by which he is known, and consecrated observance of the Lord’s Day (Exod 20:3-11). In a word, love for God comprehends a worship of him wherein we glorify him and enjoy him. We may rightly express such as the ministry of worship.

Continuing to the second table of the Law, love for neighbor—who is created in the image of God—includes the honoring of parents, by which we learn to rightly honor our elders. Love for our neighbor is not murderous, adulterous, thieving, libelous or covetous. Indeed, love for neighbor shuns excessive anger, every form of hatred, all forms of abuse, all mocking contempt, and every form of lust (cf. Exod 20:13-17; Matt 5:21-30; 1 John 3:15). Love for neighbor as one’s self fulfills these commandments and opens the door to ministering to and seeking the good of all with whom God brings us in contact (Rom 13:8-10).<sup>11</sup> We may rightly identify this

---

God, my children.... Love the Lord and your neighbor’ (Test. Iss. 5:1–2; see also 7:6; Test. Dan 5:3) . . . But, of course, Luke tells us of a lawyer who gave much the same summary (Luke 10:25–28).”

<sup>11</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 469-70. Morris notes, “Paul is saying in strong terms that believers must love the people they do in fact encounter. It is easy to ‘love’ in an abstract way, but Paul wants his readers to love the people they actually meet day by day (with all their faults). Love is something that takes effect in the home, in the marketplace, in the workshop, on the village green, wherever people are met . . . Love is all-important in the servant of God; without genuine love service [ministry] will always be defective.”

comprehensively as the ministry of service.

The Great Commission further defines the purpose and mission of the church and its ministry. Love for God compels us to proclaim the glorious, redeeming work of his Son (2 Cor 5:14). Making disciples is at once both a high expression of love for God and a convincing evidence of love for one's neighbor. This tight connection between the Great Commandment and the Great Commission is an existential impetus that informs and energizes every ministry of the church.

Love for God, love for neighbor and the proclamation and advancement of the gospel, therefore, must shape every aspect of Christian ministry. Ultimately, ministry is the functional activity of the church whereby the mandates of the Great Commandment and Great Commission are fulfilled. Every ministry of the church, therefore, must be examined in light of these mandates. Any ministry of the church that cannot be traced upstream to a terminus in the fount of the Great Commandment and Great Commission should be jettisoned. Conversely, those ministries which can be thus traced upstream are ministries compatible with Christ's authoritative commands and are essential to the church.

Although brief, the foregoing is, in its full-orbed development, a powerful and comprehensive theology for Christian ministry. Ministry burnout among church members (as well as pastors) may be greatly diminished by a joyful emphasis upon the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Further, the effectiveness of Christian ministry in the context of the local church may be significantly enhanced by this thoroughgoing theology of ministry. In a word, any efforts to revitalize church must include a revitalization of its ministry in light of the Great Commandment and Great Commission.

We now proceed to a consideration of ministry in the first church at Jerusalem. As we will discover, the impetus of the ministry of these believers was nothing less than a total commitment to our Lord's Great Commandment and Great Commission.

## Ministry in the Jerusalem Church

The Lukan account of the church at Jerusalem calls attention to both the inward ministry and the outward ministry of the first congregation. Likewise, Luke is careful to highlight that their ministry was both to the physical and the spiritual needs of others, often with the former providing a larger platform for the latter. These first congregants were intentionally a ministering church, and Luke repeatedly calls attention to the manifold blessings of God upon their ministry. Further, the ministry of the Jerusalem church was from the beginning variegated and observably informed by the Lord Jesus Christ's Great Commandment and Great Commission. Luke's summary account of the community-life of the church reveals an immediate vibrancy of ministry: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). This description is pregnant with ministry implications.

We observe first that these newly-baptized believers, numbering approximately three thousand, devotedly enjoyed the ministry of the Word through the apostles. This apostolic ministry of teaching was clearly regarded by the apostles and the church as a principal ministry (cf. Acts 6:1-6). Such teaching was discipleship-oriented and was uniquely authoritative precisely because of its apostolicity. F. F. Bruce rightly asserts, "The apostles' teaching was authoritative because it was delivered as the teaching of the Lord *through* the apostles."<sup>12</sup> We see, therefore, that this teaching ministry accords exactly with the Great Commission, wherein Christ commanded his followers to disciple others by teaching them all that he had commanded them.

Secondly, Jerusalem church dedicated themselves to "τῇ κοινωνίᾳ—the fellowship" (2:42). The inclusion of the definite article is indicative of a distinctiveness in the gatherings of the early church. Doubtless, their burgeoning size as a community in the

---

<sup>12</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary On the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 100.

city distinguished them, but even more so, their commitment to Christ as the Messiah and Lord set them apart as a group unlike any other in Jerusalem. Sharing the common experience of promised and realized infilling of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8; 2:1-4), the church participated together in a life whose locus was anchored in the redemptive work of the crucified and risen Christ. Their common salvation found ministry expression in the intimate sharing of their lives, their experiences, and their possessions (cf. Acts 2:44-45). This inward ministry of the Jerusalem church suggests their obedience to the Great Commandment of their Lord to love one's neighbor as one's self.

Thirdly, this description highlights the church's ministry by asserting that they “προσκαρτεροῦντες . . . τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου—devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread” (2:42). Although scholarship is somewhat divided as to whether there is any eucharistic import in this statement, the church's commitment to breaking bread together likely indicates that the Lord's Supper was observed. Richard N. Longenecker suggests that Luke's placement of “the breaking of bread” between the religiously loaded terms “fellowship” and “prayer” is suggestive of more than an ordinary meal.<sup>13</sup> Luke was likely indicating that the church shared common meals together in which they observed the Lord's Supper during the course of the meal, as did Jesus when inaugurating the Lord's Supper during the Passover meal (cf. Luke 22:7-22; Acts 2:46). We see, therefore, that even common meals were infused with the ministry of table fellowship and worship. As the early church remembered the sufferings of Christ with thanksgiving and praise, they shared together in a common ministry of mutual exhortation and encouragement in obedience to the Great Commandment.

Finally, the text portrays the functional ministry of this Christian community in terms of devotion to “ταῖς προσευχαῖς—the prayers” (2:42). Again, the unusual use of the

---

<sup>13</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, *Luke-Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 86.

plural with the definite article is emphatic. The ministry of prayer was a function of their worship in which they steadfastly prostrated themselves in a posture of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. While their prayer-life likely included the Jewish tradition of appointed times and forms of prayer, it is also evident that extemporaneous, circumstance-driven prayers also characterized their ministry and were powerfully influenced by the passion, resurrection and ascension of the Christ (cf. Acts 4:24-30).<sup>14</sup> Observably, the ministry of prayer was central to the functional life of the Jerusalem church and was demonstrative of their obedience to Christ's Great Commandment.

Luke's description of their dynamic life points to another aspect of ministry common in the Jerusalem church: "And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles" (2:43). The dual description *τέρατα και σημεῖα* (wonder and signs) is used repeatedly to indicate the miraculous ministry of not only the apostles, but also the ministry of Stephen and Philip (cf. 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:13). Additionally, Luke immediately gives a specific example of this ministry of miracles in chapter three where Peter heals a man lame from birth. The summary statement in 2:43 indicates that this is but one of many such miracles (see also 9:32-34, 36-41).<sup>15</sup> The narrative of Acts describes this ministry of miracles as being generally directed toward the physical needs of those outside the church. It is especially instructive, however, that the result of this miracle ministry was the gaining of a larger platform for proclamation of the gospel (cf. 2:1-41; 3:1-4:4; 8:9-13). We see, therefore, that the generally outward-focused miracle ministry of the early church served both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

---

<sup>14</sup>Bruce, *Acts*, 71. Bruce asserts, "As for the prayers in which they participated, the primary reference is no doubt to their own appointed seasons for united prayer, although we know that the apostles also attended the Jewish prayer services in the temple (cf. 3:1). The community's prayers would follow Jewish models, but their content would be enriched because of the Christ-event."

<sup>15</sup>John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 120.

The narrative description further informs us that the members of the Jerusalem church “ἦσαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινά—were together and had all things in common” (2:44). A sense of togetherness (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ—see Grk. Acts 1:15; 2:1)<sup>16</sup> in the providences and mighty acts of God inculcated a ministry of mutual care among these believers. While resource-pooling and joint ownership of possessions was not uncommon among ancient sects, the first Christian fellowship practiced a distinguishing, needs-based ministry approach.<sup>17</sup> Verse forty-five of chapter three and Acts 4:34-37 both suggest the voluntary sale of possessions as need arose, and distribution was made, at least initially, by the apostles themselves. The depth of this congregation’s fellowship found expression in the entire community using their possessions to minister to the needs of one another so that none of the thousands of their members lacked necessary sustenance.

As the number of disciples continued to multiply, a quarrel arose between the Hellenists—the Greek-speaking Jews—and the Hebrews because the Hellenists’ perceived that their widows were being slighted by the apostles in the daily distribution of food (cf. Acts 4:34-35; Acts 6:1). The apostles counseled the church to set aside seven reputable men to administer the daily distribution and thus alleviate apostolic

---

<sup>16</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 151. Bock acknowledges the difficulty of translating the phrase: “The expression of their being ‘together’ (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, *epi to auto*) recalls the unity depicted in 1:15 and 2:1. This expression is repeated in verse 47 (4:26 completes the occurrences in Acts, five of ten in the NT). It is disputed how to translate this phrase, but ‘together’ or ‘at the same place’ is likely (BDAG 363 §1cβ).”

<sup>17</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 87. Marshall asserts, “The first impression we get, then, is that of a society whose members lived together and had everything *in common* (4:33). This would not be surprising, since we know that at least one other contemporary Jewish group, the Qumran sect, adopted this way of life (1QS 6); in their descriptions of the Essenes (with whom the Qumranites are usually identified) Philo and Josephus say the same thing. . . . It appears from the account in 4:32–5:11, however, that the selling of one’s goods was a voluntary matter. . . . What actually happened may have been that each person held his goods at the disposal of the others whenever the need arose.”

involvement in this enormous task (cf. Acts 6:2-4). Agreeing with this counsel, the entire church chose men for the daily distribution, and this vital ministry of the church was thus rescued from factionalism (cf. Acts 6:5-6). Note the evident pleasure of God that this ministry continued unabated as Luke informs us that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7). Here again we find the Jerusalem church ministering in obedience to the Great Commandment.

In summary, the exemplary early church was ablaze with multi-faceted ministry. While the apostolic leadership of the church was certainly involved in its ministry, Luke’s account indicates that a members-focused ministry paradigm began to emerge almost immediately. Note also the similarities between Clowney’s summary of the work of ministry in the church noted above and the shape of ministry in the Jerusalem church. They collectively served God in *worship* (cf. 2:46-47), served one another in *nurture*, and served the world through *witness*. In terms of church revitalization, the Jerusalem believers set an example in the ministry of worship whereby they loved God, in the ministry of nurture whereby they loved one another, and in the ministry of witness whereby they proclaimed the gospel to the nations.

Further, the ministry of the Jerusalem church centered upon the priorities of the church enumerated throughout this dissertation. There was a prayer-focused ministry, a worship-oriented ministry, a fellowship-intensive ministry, an evangelism-concentrated ministry and a discipleship-dedicated ministry. Not only so, ministry in the first church was intentionally focused both inwardly and outwardly. They ministered to their own and to those outside the believing church. These well-attested dimensions of ministry are at once both full-orbed and in accord with a theology of ministry drawn from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Vibrancy of ministry was a measure of the spiritual health and multiplication of the Jerusalem church. Luke’s summary of their ministry-life is punctuated by the oft-recurring epilogue of divine affirmation: “And the Lord added to their number day by day

those who were being saved” (2:47; cf. 5:14; 11:24; 16:5). The Jerusalem church did not merely experience the intermittent blessing of God, they enjoyed a daily, divine affirmation of their ministry priorities and practice, and that divine affirmation served to multiply both their influence and their numbers.

The lessons for the measure of ministry in the work of church revitalization are profoundly evident when we consider the first church at Jerusalem. Inward ministry performed both by the leadership of the church and the membership of the church fortified their fellowship and gained the favor of those outside their fellowship (cf. Acts 2:47). Additionally, their outward ministry to the physical needs of the citizens of Jerusalem gained both the reverence of unbelievers and an enlarged audience for the proclamation of the gospel. Further, the depth of their ministry was of such strength as to withstand both internal threats and external threats (cf. 4:1-31; 5:1-11; 6:1-7). The Jerusalem congregation was a healthy, growing church, and the correlation between their health and their commitment to the work of ministry is unmistakable in the Lukan narrative.

### **Ministry in the Pauline Corpus**

As we have reiterated throughout this dissertation, evidence abounds that the apostle Paul’s paradigm for church revitalization was drawn—at least in part—from his observation of the healthy Jerusalem church. Having observed vibrancy of the church first through his persecution of the believers and then later upon the occasion of his visit with the apostles in Jerusalem, Paul had a firm grasp of healthy ecclesiology from the earliest days of his apostolic ministry.

Further, Paul’s pressing concern for the constant need of revitalization in the churches of Asia Minor doubtlessly compelled him to thoroughly analyze both Scripture and the example of the Jerusalem church. It is therefore no surprise that the epistolary writings of the apostle are weighty with teaching on the necessity and nature of ministry

for perpetuating the health of churches. Indeed, the Pauline epistles include some of the most thorough teaching in the NT relative to ministry in the church. As such, the Pauline corpus is an inspired, timeless repository of divine instruction for church-revitalizing ministry.

### **Ministry in the First Corinthian Letter**

An amalgamation of issues seemingly prompted Paul's writing of First Corinthians. Fissures along the lines of class and philosophical distinctions in the church at Corinth threatened her unity. The Pauline corrective for these fissures was the unalloyed gospel of Christ crucified as the ultimate manifestation of the wisdom and power of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:10-4:21; 11:17-22). Sexual defilement and intramural litigations undermined the purity and witness of the church. The apostle's response to these troubling incongruities informed them that they were the temple of the Holy Spirit and should therefore glorify God with their bodies (cf. 5:1-6:19). Lack of concern for those with frail consciences, in-creeping idolatry, Communion gluttony, and personal pride in spiritual gifts undermined their ministry as a church. Paul's prescription was the more excellent way of unconditional love (cf. 8:1-14:25).

This conflagration of spiritual immaturity converged to produce chaos and confusion, undermining the church's ministry both within and without (cf. 14:22-23). Uninformed zealotry for the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues<sup>18</sup> apparently characterized the gatherings at Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 12:27-31; 13:1; 14:1-25). In their eagerness to display the perceived superiority of their spiritual gifting, some at Corinth apparently interrupted others during worship without regard for the need of interpreters to translate their utterances. This created a chaotic, unifying and even offensive

---

<sup>18</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 286. Schreiner effectively argues that Paul's use of *γλῶσσαι* throughout these texts refers to human languages rather than ecstatic utterances.

atmosphere in the church (cf. 1 Cor 14:5-23, 26-28).

The apostolic corrective for such ministry-debilitating spiritual infantilism was two-fold. Paul first pointed them to the Trinitarian source and purpose of diverse spiritual gifts given to every member of the church. (12:4-11). Secondly, he employed an analogy to illustrate the unifying body dynamic of diverse ministry in the context of the church (12:12-27). Taken together, these two pericopes illumine the contours of a dynamic, salubrious ministry that comprehends the entirety of the church in the whole ministry of the gospel.

A most conspicuous feature of Paul's instruction in 12:4-6 is the Trinitarian dimensions of spiritual gifting. Having established in 12:1-3 that all who authentically confess that Jesus is Lord are spiritual, he then asserts "there are *Διαιρέσεις* (distributions/allotments/apportionments)<sup>19</sup> of gifts, but the same Spirit" (12:4). The Holy Spirit freely and sovereignly distributes ministry gifts in the church. Not only so, "there are allotments of *διακονιῶν* (ministries), but the same Lord" (12:5). Ministries in the church are allotted or apportioned according to the supreme lordship of Jesus Christ (cf. 12:3). Further, "there are apportionments of *ἐνεργημάτων* (activities), but the same God who *ἐνεργῶν* (empowers) them all in everyone" (12:6).<sup>20</sup> The sovereign God supernaturally energizes the activities of everyone exercising their ministry gifting (cf. Phil 2:13).

Over against the disruptive glossolalia pneumatics, Paul asserts that the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—apportions and energizes a diversity of ministry gifts and concomitant activities in the church. Though the gifts are diverse, they reflect a

---

<sup>19</sup>Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary 28 (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 286-87. Taylor considers this translation viable based on the cognate verb *διαιρέω* (apportions) in 12:11.

<sup>20</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 255-56. Schreiner helpfully points out, "The allotted gifts are next described in terms of kinds of working (*energēmata*) or 'activities'. Such activities are the work of God, and Paul uses a verbal form from the same root as the noun, affirming that in everyone it is the same God at work (*energōn*)."

profound unity derived from the very nature of their Source. Anthony C. Thiselton pointedly asserts, “In 12:4–11 Paul continually stresses unity in diversity in order to overcome divisiveness owing to different valuations being assigned to different gifts, with tongues as the implied higher-status gift.”<sup>21</sup>

Because the Triune God sovereignly and freely apportions and energizes ministry gifts in the church, to aspire to preferential status and seek personal glory is to miss entirely both the Source and the purpose of ministry gifts. Indeed, Paul demonstrates the absurdity of such aspirations thus: “ἐκάστῳ (each, everyone) δίδοται (is given) the manifestation of the Spirit for *συμφέρον* (the common advantage)” (12:7). Paul’s corrective for the Corinthians here is three-fold.

First, every (ἐκάστῳ) true believer in the church, without exception, is gifted for ministry by the Spirit. Each member has something to contribute to the overall function of the ministry of the church. This glorious reality forbids the spirit of independency that seeks personal exaltation precisely because the function of the entire church is dependent upon each member exercising their ministry gift. Indeed, the contribution of every member of the community is necessary, else the Triune gifting of each member is insignificant, which we understand cannot be the case (cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Eph 4:7).

Secondly, these ministry gifts are not the product of human will or attainment, but are rather δίδοται—granted, or given—by God himself (cf. 12:4-6). Paul employs the verb δίδοται to yet again stress the supernatural Source of ministry gifts. The Giver chooses to give such gifts sovereignly and under no compulsion (cf. 12:11). When members discover their gifting for ministry, there is no room for boasting or self-glorification, for they only have what they have received from the God who is graciously

---

<sup>21</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 928.

working in them (cf. 1 Cor 4:7).

Thirdly, Paul emphasizes the purpose for which ministry gifts are given. Rather than to produce competitive rivalry and jealousy, God wisely places ministry gifts in the church for the *συμφέρον*—the common advantage, the common good—of the entire body of believers. Leon Morris rightly posits, “Spiritual gifts are always given to be used, and to be used in such a way as to edify the whole body of believers, not some individual possessor of a gift. A schismatic individualism contradicts the purpose of the gifts.”<sup>22</sup> The diverse ministry gifts sovereignly apportioned in the church are designed to result in the edification and building up of the entire church into a mature, unified and highly functional ministry complex (cf. Eph 4:11-16).

The utility of these inspired indicatives is apparent. Every member is gifted for ministry by the Triune God, therefore every member is to contribute to the overall ministry of the church. Self-promotion leading to strife and jealousy is excluded because each member possesses only that gifting which has been graciously given to them without any regard as to merit. The gifts are not the product of human wisdom, nor are they the result of native human ability.<sup>23</sup> Collectively, spiritual ministry gifts are to be used in a manner advantageous to the edification of the entire edifice of the church. When ministry gifts are exercised by the entire congregation, a vibrant, full-orbed and salubrious ministry is the result. Not only does this paradigm produce humility and joyful participation, it resolves the ten-ninety conundrum that leads to burnout in the ministries of the church. Indeed, this Pauline perspective on ministry contains significant implications relative to the health of churches in need of revitalization, as we will demonstrate in chapter ten.

---

<sup>22</sup>Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 166-67.

<sup>23</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 262.

Continuing the instruction concerning ministry gifting in 12:8-10, Paul enumerates an abbreviated list of such ministry gifts (cf. 12:28; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11-12). Here he is further developing the assertion of verse seven, “To each is given.” This list of gifts is not intended to be definitive or comprehensive, nor is the list demonstrative of a hierarchy of gifts. Rather, Paul is emphasizing that spiritual gifts for ministry all originate from the same source, namely the Holy Spirit (cf. 12:11).<sup>24</sup> Again, the apostle is demonstrating the absurdity of schismatic individualism in the ministry of the church.

Paul then employs an analogy to illustrate and reinforce this ministry paradigm. The analogy of the body dynamic in verses twelve through twenty-six develops his prior assertion that diverse ministry gifts exist for the common advantage, the common good of the church (12:7).<sup>25</sup> The analogy is introduced thus: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (12:12).

The contours of the analogy, taken with Paul’s foregoing ministry paradigm, are easily recognized.<sup>26</sup> The human body is one, unified body, yet consists of multiplied, diverse parts. Conversely, though the parts are many in number and diverse in function, they do not comprise many bodies, but one unified body. The image is one of order, structure and organization of individual parts conducive to the functioning of the collective whole.

We might expect Paul to connect the analogy by stating “so it is with the church,” but he rather asserts “so it is with Christ” (12:12). Schreiner is helpful here

---

<sup>24</sup>Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 288.

<sup>25</sup>Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 287.

<sup>26</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 995. Thiselton notes, “. . . use of body (τὸ σῶμα) was a common *topos* in political rhetoric . . . [There are] parallels not only in Plato but also in Livy, Plutarch, Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Epictetus, and other writers. It would be beyond doubt that the Corinthian addressees would be familiar with the ideological nuances of the image as one of order . . . given the understanding of body in the era of Paul.”

when he postulates, “The introduction of Christ indicates that the body is no ordinary body. The members of this body belong to Christ and they express Christ to the world. Paul is not teaching that the church is literally Christ’s body, as if the church incarnates Jesus Christ now in the world. Such an interpretation reads the illustration given here too literally.”<sup>27</sup> Though Paul elsewhere envisions the preeminence of Christ as the head of the church and the church his body (cf. Eph 5:23; Col 1:28), he is here framing the church as those who are *in Christ* (cf. 1:30).<sup>28</sup> The church is the corporate body of Christ insofar as the individual members are closely related to one another, further supporting Paul’s emphasis upon the body dynamic.

The ministry gifts possessed by all believers are the consequence of their “ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι . . . ἐβαπτίσθημεν—having been baptized in one Spirit” into one body (12:13). The point is emphatic—every believer, at conversion, experiences baptism by Christ into the self-same Holy Spirit, and is thus irrevocably united with the one body of Christ.<sup>29</sup> This universal baptism eliminates all categorist and elitist pretensions relative to ministry-gifting in the church. Indeed, baptism in the Spirit transcends the Jew-Gentile,

---

<sup>27</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 263.

<sup>28</sup>Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 54. Commenting on Paul’s use of the phrase “in Christ” in 1 Cor 1:30, Morris states, “Briefly, it shows that the believer is connected to his Lord in the closest possible fashion. Christ is the very atmosphere in which he lives. But we must not interpret this mechanically. Christ is a person. The phrase describes personal attachment to a personal Saviour. E. Best has shown that the expression has a corporate aspect. To be ‘in Christ’ is to be closely related to all those others who are also ‘in Christ’. It is to be part of the body of Christ.”

<sup>29</sup>Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 263. Schreiner maintains, “The most important parallel [to 1 Cor 12:13] comes from the words of John the Baptist, who promised that a coming one would baptize with the Spirit (see Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16). Certainly this prophecy was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost when Jesus baptized his disciples with the Spirit. All the references to baptizing with the Spirit, except for the verse here in 1 Corinthians, are related to John the Baptist’s prophecy. The niv translates the verse in such a way that the Spirit is the baptizer: we were all baptised by one Spirit (cf. csb, kjv, nasb, nkjv). I suggest that the translation of the nrsv is more accurate: ‘For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’ (cf. esv, net). The passive verb suggests that Jesus Christ is the baptizer and the Spirit is the person in which one is plunged at baptism. Another argument in support of this translation is the parallel with the saying of John the Baptist which is referenced five times in the rest of the New Testament. In every instance, then, Jesus is the baptizer and he baptizes with or in the Holy Spirit.” See also Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 297.

male-female, slave-freedman distinctions extant in Paul's day (cf. 12:13; Gal 3:27-28). The organic ministry-life of the church derives from our one Lord immersing us in one Spirit to become one functioning body comprised of many contributing ministry-parts. To drive the point home, the apostle employs a synonymous punctuating clause: "And all were made to drink into one Spirit" (cf. 12:13; John 7:37-39).

Having solidified his argument for unity in diversity and diversity in unity, Paul then employs logic to apply the point in 12:14-24. No member of the body of Christ may opt out when it comes to the exercise of their ministry-gifting. The body is one, yet consists of many member-parts (12:14). If one member prefers the ministry-gifting of another, this preference does not allow the member to disengage from the body, for such is not possible. A foot cannot detach itself from the body because it wishes to be a hand, nor can an ear disengage because it prefers the function of an eye (12:15-6). Such would be unthinkable—even grotesque—relative to the human body, therefore such is unimaginable relative to the body of Christ. Trinitarian ministry-gifting is ordered such that each member must fulfill their own ministry responsibility, not the responsibilities of some other member.

Shifting his focus from individual parts to the body as a whole, Paul furthers the analogous argument. If the entire body aspired to become the eye—a startling image, to be sure—the body would be void of hearing and smelling capabilities, and would therefore be dysfunctional (12:17). Just so, the body of Christ must consist of manifold members spiritually gifted for various ministries, else the entire body is debilitated and deformed. David E. Garland, with amusing pointedness, applies the analogy to the Corinthian church thus: "A church full of glossolalists would be . . . freakish."<sup>30</sup> To forego one's own ministry-gifting and function in pursuit of the ministry-gifting and

---

<sup>30</sup>David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 595.

function of another would be to cripple the entire church, rendering her grotesque and odious to an onlooking world.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have decidedly *not* allotted and ordered ministry-gifting in the church in such an unbalanced, chaotic manner. Paul emphatically asserts, “But in fact (νυνὶ δὲ)<sup>31</sup> God arranged (ἔθετο) the members in the body, each one of them, as he purposed (ἠθέλησεν)” (12:18). His employment of ἔθετο—to set, place, establish, appoint, arrange—emphasizes divine intentionality, design and precision. In placing “each one” of the members in the church, God has established that each member’s ministry-gifting and contribution is essential.

Further, ἠθέλησεν—to desire, will, purpose—reminds us of God’s sovereign will, reflected in his divine decision and decree.<sup>32</sup> God’s electing choice that brings the individual to salvation extends as well to the ministry-gifting and placement of each member in the body that is the church. God chooses no spare parts. He elects no non-essential parts. Every member is placed in the body according to the divine will, design and purpose. Each member, exercising his or her spiritual gifting, therefore contributes to the ministry of the entire church according to God’s sovereign design and decree.

Thiselton, citing Gaston Deluz, demonstrates the utility of the Pauline argument here:

Christians must give up anxiously comparing themselves with each other.... It leads to jealousy [cf. 1:10–12; 3:1–4] and discouragement.... They complain that they are not like so-and-so.... They develop an inferiority complex and lose all the joy of salvation. The foot grumbles because it walks in the dust and carries the whole weight of the body.... Others would like to be the eye which oversees or [especially!] the mouth which speaks.... God knows why he has made each one of us as we are; he knows what use each one of us can be.<sup>33</sup>

What was implicit in Paul’s argument in 12:14-18 he makes explicit in 12:21-

---

<sup>31</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1003. Thiselton states, “The phrase νυνὶ δὲ expresses a logical now, then in a contrastive mode signaled by δὲ. The hypothesis and the analogy is over and done with: now for realities as God has arranged them.”

<sup>32</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1004.

<sup>33</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1004.

26. The implicit message is that no member of the church could reasonably think to detach themselves from the body and say “I do not belong to the body” (cf. 12:15-16). Conversely, if every member served in the same ministry function, the church body would be rendered dysfunctional (cf. 12:17). In the paragraph of 12:21-26, the apostle makes four compelling arguments for the indivisible unity of the church for the sake of ministry.<sup>34</sup>

First, he states explicitly, “The eye *is not able* (οὐ δύναται) to say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (12:21, emphasis added). The member that is the eye οὐ δύναται—is not able, does not have the capability—of asserting its superiority over, and independence from, the hand. One recalls immediately the of hand-eye coordination so vital to the proper function of the human body. To apply the analogy most literally, the seeing ministry of the church (the eyes) cannot function without the doing ministry of the church (the hands). So it is with the head and the feet: The knowledge ministry of the church (the head) cannot be severed from the going ministry of the church (the feet).<sup>35</sup> Stated explicitly, the members of the church have an inseparable need of one another’s ministry-gifting.

Secondly, Paul argues the inverse of supposed superior members and gifting as compared to the assumed inferior. The adversative is strong: “On the contrary (ἀλλὰ πολλῶ μᾶλλον), the parts of the body that seem weaker are essential (ἀναγκαῖά)” (12:22).

---

<sup>34</sup>Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 299.

<sup>35</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1005. Thiselton applies the analogy emphatically to the Corinthian context: “Not only does the rhetoric of the body reassure those with supposedly ‘inferior’ or ‘dispensable’ gifts that they do indeed belong fully to the body as essential limbs and organs, but this rhetoric now explicitly rebukes those who think that 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. It is hardly mere speculation to imagine that those who perceived themselves as possessing the ‘high-status’ gifts of knowledge and wisdom, or of the power to heal or to speak in tongues, could be tempted to think of themselves as the inner circle on whom the identity and function of the church really depended.” See also Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 603.

Employing the phrase ἀλλὰ πολλῶ μᾶλλον—literally, “rather, much more the case” or “even more the point”<sup>36</sup>—he seeks to overturn supposed human wisdom in favor of the wisdom of God. God has chosen what is weak in the eyes of man to shame the “strong” (cf. 1:25, 27). Thiselton is most helpful here, asserting, “The most remarkable thing about Paul’s imagery is not his use of status terms . . . but his claim that the normally conceived body hierarchy is actually only an apparent surface hierarchy. This accords precisely with Paul’s ‘status reversals’ between 1:26–29 and 1:30–31, between 2:1–5 and 2:6–11, and most of all between 1:18–22 and 1:23–25.”<sup>37</sup>

The reversal is stunning. Those members and ministry-giftings which appear (“seem”) weaker in the “wisdom” of status-seekers God declares essential, even indispensable. The inversion continues, yet with greater emphasis: “And on those parts of the body we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require” (12:23-24a).<sup>38</sup> Thiselton captures the word-play well when he transliterates, “Our unpresentable private parts have greater adornment to make them presentable.”<sup>39</sup> The members and ministry-giftings that are supposedly less attractive should receive the greater adornment and honor, for God has thus ordered his Kingdom in divine wisdom (cf. Mark 10:33-35; Luke 9:48; 1 Cor 1:20-31).

Thirdly, and tightly bound to the former, God bestows increased honor upon those members and ministry-giftings who seemingly—according to human wisdom—lack honor, and he does so according to his divine design. Paul declares, “But God has so

---

<sup>36</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1006.

<sup>37</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1007.

<sup>38</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 596. Commenting on the common understanding among commentators concerning the “unpresentable” parts, Garland states, “Genitalia appear to be honorless, are regarded as ‘unpresentable,’ and are shown a special modesty. Their function is not public, and they are kept hidden, but they are essential to the body’s survival.” See also Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1008.

<sup>39</sup>Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1008.

composed (*συνεκέρασεν*) the body, giving (*δοῦς*) greater honor to the part that lacked it” (12:24b). In infinite wisdom, God combines (*συνεκέρασεν*) various members and ministry-giftings in the church to produce a harmonious, united blend.<sup>40</sup> It is precisely the sovereign giving (*δοῦς*) of both ministry-gifting and divinely endowed honor upon the perceived “lesser” members that beautifies the entire body of the church. God composes the ecclesial body thus, Paul posits, “that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (12:25). Such unity in care for one another rules out division in the church.

Fourthly, and finally, Paul reminds us of that which is obvious when we understand the profound solidarity of the body of ministry-gifted members: Whatever affects any individual member—whether negatively or positively—affects the entire body of members. “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (12:26). The analogy here is weighty. We all can relate to the pain and dysfunction that ripples throughout our bodies when even a small, seemingly insignificant limb or organ malfunctions. So it is with the body of Christ, according to Paul (cf. 12:27). Any one ministry-gifted member who suffers—and is thereby disabled from contributing fully to the ministry-function of the church—brings pain and disability to the entire body. Conversely, when any member of the church honorably effectuates their ministry-gifting, the entire church benefits from such healthy ministry and rejoices together with that member.

In summary, Paul’s concern for the health of the ministry-life of the church at Corinth occasioned his penning of this insightful ministry paradigm. A deadly amalgamation of schismatic division, flagrant immorality, blatant idolatry, inconsiderate practices and pride relative to spiritual gifts undermined the ministry of the Corinthian

---

<sup>40</sup>Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 952.

church. Zeal without knowledge characterized their ministry, creating a chaotic, unedifying and even offensive atmosphere in the church.

To correct the church Paul first asserted that the Triune God distributes, apportions and energizes each individual ministry-gift in the church. Not only so, the apostle emphasized that each member of the church—without exception—is gifted for ministry on the grounds of their regeneration and spiritual baptism into Christ. The purpose of these ministry gifts in the church is the edification and unification of the entire body of believers.

When we consider the ten-ninety malady that infects so many declining churches, the utility of Paul's ministry paradigm becomes immediately evident. Far too often church members are allowed membership with no expectation that they discover and engage the ministry-gifting with which they are endowed by God. This shifts the bulk of the ministry to a small handful of faithful members, often over-burdening them to the point of exhaustion and eventual burn-out. Churches and their leadership experiencing this illness have from the inspired pen of Paul a paradigm of ministry wherein every member is a minister, gifted and empowered by the Triune God. This paradigm properly taught and implemented portends tremendous benefit for the revitalization of declining, dying churches.

Secondly, we observed Paul's use of an analogy to illustrate the unifying body dynamic of diverse ministry in the context of the local church. His use of this analogy wonderfully illumines the contours of a dynamic, salubrious ministry that comprehends the entirety of the church in the whole ministry of advancing the gospel. As with the human body, the church is one unified body, yet it consists of multiplied, diverse members. Though the members are many in number and diverse in function, they are never to be considered as merely a collection of individuals, but as one unified body. The image Paul sets forth is one of order, structure and organization of individual parts conducive to the functional ministry of the collective church.

Unity in diversity and diversity in unity is God's sovereign, all-wise design for the church. Here again we see a ministry paradigm that strikes at the root of divisiveness and factionalism so often observable in declining churches. Paul recognized that decline occurs when members fail to properly participate in and contribute to the whole ministry of the church. Conversely, revitalization occurs when more and more members exercise their gifts and contribute to the overall ministry of the church. We understand, therefore, that Paul's inspired, body-dynamic analogy offers a most effective means for reversing the prevailing entropy that grips so many declining churches.

### **Ministry in the Ephesian Letter**

In the Ephesian letter, Paul dedicates the first three chapters to a tightly worded yet expansive theology, Christology and pneumatology relative to the existence and ministry of the church. His notable pivot to orthopraxy in chapter four is immediately preceded by an instructive ecclesial prayer (3:14-21). The apostle's concern in this preparatory prayer is instructive.

His primary concern for the churches of Ephesus is that they be strengthened and empowered by the Spirit for the purpose of comprehending and experiencing the filling fullness (*πληρωθῆτε πλήρωμα*) of God (3:18-19). In the doxological portion of his prayer, Paul links together the insuperable loci of the earthly and heavenly display of the glory of God "in the church" and "in Christ Jesus" (3:21). As the church is filled with the fullness of God in Christ, her earthly ministry displays the glory of God. This prayer prepares readers for the vital instruction of 4:1-16.

The first sixteen verses of chapter four represent one of the most extended exhortative compositions found in the Pauline corpus, drawing especial attention to the instruction. The passage accords well with the movement of thought we observed in 1 Corinthians 12 relative to unity in diversity and diversity in unity. In Ephesians 4, Paul begins with the rock-solid ground of the unity of the church, proceeds to the diversity of

ministry gifts Christ has placed in the church, and concludes that the *telos* of ministry is the church being built up in love and unity.<sup>41</sup> At the heart of this exhortation lies the apostolic concern for the health of the church. As we shall discover, ministry lies at the center of Paul’s exhortation.

The opening verses of this fourth chapter demonstrate a vital connection between the unity of the church and the ministry of the church. His initial exhortation is both insistent and incisive: “I therefore . . . urge (Παρακαλῶ) you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling (κλήσεως) to which you have been called” (4:1). On the ground of the indicatives of chapters one through three, Paul beseeches the Ephesian church to conduct themselves in a fashion concomitant with their high calling by God—a calling that is pregnant with the implications relative to the ministry of the church.

In his prayer of thanksgiving for the Corinthian church, Paul associates the believers’ “calling” both with spiritual gifting for the work of ministry and their unified fellowship in Christ (1 Cor 1:4-9; cf. 12:4-27). In the first three chapters of Ephesians he similarly emphasizes the unifying, ministry-equipping blessings of our calling. Believers are called *together* into the manifold blessings and hope of salvation—and these blessings equip us for the *ministry* of good works (1:3-2:9). Jews and Gentiles *alike* are, by the cross-work and resurrection of Christ, reconciled *together* with God and called into one *unified* humanity whose *ministry* displays the wisdom of God (cf. 2:13-16; 3:10). *Together*, believers are called into one *cohesive* household of God and *integrated* as a holy, *ministering* temple unto the Lord (cf. 2:19, 21; 4:16). Paul’s opening exhortations in 4:1-16 are predicated upon their having been called by God into a unified fellowship for the sake of God-glorifying ministry.

---

<sup>41</sup>Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1990), 224.

Verses two and three describe the character of this Christian ministry. Living in a manner worthy of our salvation and ministry calling necessitates that we exercise the relational, ministerial graces of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance toward one another in love (4:2; cf. Col 3:12-17). Such hostility-killing graces are the ecclesial outworking of the peace and reconciliation purchased for us by the cross of Christ, and should characterize the ministry of the unified body of Christ (cf. 2:14-18). Further, the fellowship-interwoven ministry of the church is of such primacy that believers should be “eager (σπουδάζοντες—to be zealous, devoted) to maintain (τηρεῖν—to guard, preserve) the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). The fellowship of believers and its Spirit-imbued unity must be zealously guarded against corruption for the sake of our God-glorifying ministry calling.

Paul then underscores the unifying foundation upon which the house of Christian unity and ministry is erected: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (4:4-6). The unity of fellowship in the ministry of the church is not a unity at the expense of orthodoxy, but a unity issuing from the indivisible nature of the triune God. This seven-fold confession is emphatic. The absence of any conjunction and the lack of a verb (“there is” is supplied in most translations) serves as a rhetorical device to lend greater formality to the statement.<sup>42</sup> The confessional dimensions of Paul’s assertions here call attention to the robust foundation of Christian unity and ministry.

Although later confessional methods characteristically begin with a statement regarding God the Father—proceeding to God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and then the church—Paul here reverses the order, beginning with the church (one body) and

---

<sup>42</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 232.

terminating with God the Father. This order likely emerges from the emphasis placed upon the doctrine of the church throughout the epistle (e.g. 1:22–23; 4:15–16; 5:29–30).<sup>43</sup> The unified ministry of the church as one body emerges from her “oneness” under Christ’s headship. Every individual member, through union with Christ, contributes to the proper ministry-function of the whole body so that the peace of Christ reigns and the church experiences salubrious growth. The function of the individual member is never solely for the benefit of the member, but is rather for the advancement of the whole church—because the church is a “one body” ministry organism (cf. 1 Cor 12:7, 27).

Additionally, the church enjoys a unified ministry because there is “one Spirit.” The work of the Holy Spirit in developing the church body is formative and comprehensive. Believers receive spiritual baptism into the Holy Spirit—and hence, into the one body—and enjoy the spiritual gifting and supply of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:13). Each member of the body is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, gifted for ministry by the Holy Spirit, and experiences a peace with God and a peace with one another wrought by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:4; Eph 4:3). Indeed, the one Holy Spirit permeates and animates the ministry of the church with the indivisible unity and fellowship of the Godhead—which work of the Holy Spirit members should carefully avoid quenching (cf. 1 Thess 5:12-19).

By inserting the clause “just as you were called to the *one hope* that belongs to your call” (4:4), Paul reminds his readers of the functional foundation of the entire pericope established in verse one—their calling by God in Christ Jesus. The “one hope” belonging to the believers’ call is redolent and voluminous in the Ephesian epistle. Once they were “without hope” and separated from God (2:12), but now they have “hope in Christ” because of God’s predestining call and the authenticating (sealing) work of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:4, 11-13). The hope of the believer’s redemption, however, is expansive

---

<sup>43</sup>See also Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-13, 20; Col 3:15.

beyond our individual reconciliation to God in Christ.

The mystery of God's will and glorious good pleasure in Christ is revealed to believers, namely that God has irrevocably purposed to unite all things in heaven and earth together in Christ (1:9-10). Andrew T. Lincoln rightly asserts, "The one hope of Ephesians is not something individual and private but corporate and public, hope for a cosmos that is unified and reconciled, a world in which everything is brought together in harmony through that which God has done in Christ."<sup>44</sup> The unifying "one hope" of the church is both ecclesial and eschatological, corporate and cosmic. The God who reconciles and unifies the church in Christ is, through the ministry of the church, reconciling and unifying the entire cosmos in Christ (2 Cor 5:11-21). The ministry of reconciliation and the unity enjoyed by the church in Christ will one day be realized in the entire cosmos. Against the entropy of division and degeneration, this "one hope" of cosmic, Christological harmony should animate in believers an eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the ministry-fellowship of the church (cf. 1:22-23; 3:8-11; 4:3).

A unified ministry-fellowship is further buttressed by the apostolic assertion that the church serves "one Lord" (4:5). Paul elsewhere asserts that Jesus is *Lord* of the church by virtue of his death, resurrection and exaltation (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Rom 10:19; 14:8-9; Phil 2:9-11). More than twenty times in Ephesians Paul ascribes to Christ the designation "Lord." In 1:3, the *Lord* Jesus Christ is the fountainhead from whom all spiritual blessings issue to believers. The *Lord* Jesus is the object of the believers' faith (1:15), and the *Lord* who is the Cornerstone upon whom and in whom the new creation of the holy temple is joined together and increasing in ministry (2:21-22). Christ Jesus our *Lord* is the one by whom the eternal purpose of God to display his wisdom in the ministry of the church is brought to fruition (3:10-11). Christ is the *Lord* whose sovereign rule permeates and fills the cosmos, and he is the head of the church (1:23; 4:10, 15-16).

---

<sup>44</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 239.

To the exclusion of all others, Jesus Christ is *Lord* of all, and Paul holds forth this majestic reality as irrefutable ground for the unified ministry efforts of the church.<sup>45</sup>

Following “one Lord,” the apostle adds the acclamation “one faith” (4:5). When compared with the “unity of the faith” to which all in the church are to aspire, the “one faith” here seems objective in its scope (cf. 4:13; Jude 3). The unifying faith to which the church is called is the comprehensive body of beliefs issuing from attainable knowledge of the Son of God as revealed in the whole of Scripture. Just as there is one Lord—and not many lords—so also there is “one faith” issuing from our Lord, constituting the unifying beliefs of the fellowship and ministry of believers. Peter T. O’Brien states this concisely when he asserts, “There can be only one faith since there is only one Lord.”<sup>46</sup> Fellowship around these eternal truths enables believers to cohere and minister in the face of threats to our unity, whether they be internal or external.

Those of the one body, indwelled by the one Spirit, possessed of one hope, confessing the one Lord, and assenting to the one faith find further unity in having received “one baptism” (4:5). The question of whether Paul is conveying spiritual baptism or baptism by water need not distract from the acclamation. Baptism in water upon confession of faith in Christ—as commonly practiced by the early church<sup>47</sup>—was the outward symbol of the inward experience of spiritual baptism into Christ by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).<sup>48</sup> The ritual of water baptism made public the newly-confessing

---

<sup>45</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 235. Arnold notes: “Gentiles in the churches confessing Jesus as the one Lord would recognize that Artemis of Ephesus was not Lord regardless of the fact that she was acclaimed as such. An abundance of literary, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence points to the fact that Artemis was widely worshiped as lord over the entire cosmos—heaven, earth, and the underworld. The title ‘Lord’ (κυρία) is used often of her in the inscriptions. But there were many other deities who claimed this title also; over against all of them, Paul confesses that Jesus is the one and only Lord (see also Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; 1 Cor 12:3).”

<sup>46</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 284-85.

<sup>47</sup>See Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 36, 38; 10:47–48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5.

<sup>48</sup>Arnold, *Ephesians*, 235. Arnold rightly maintains, “Paul’s confession of ‘one baptism’ here probably indicates the rite as well as all that it symbolizes.”

believer's union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection—and thereby joined the believer confessionally to the fellowship and ministry of the congregation (Rom 6:1–11; Col 2:12). This “one baptism,” of which all believers are recipients, signifies both our unity with Christ and our unity with one another (cf. Gal 3:27, 28; 1 Cor 12:13). Paul hereby further emphasizes the God-ordained unity and ministry-fellowship of the church.

Finally, Paul punctuates the unity confession by asserting there is “one God and Father of all (πάντων), who is over all (πάντων) and through all (πάντων) and in all (πάντων)” (4:6). This acclamation is pregnant with the weight of glory as Paul posits the Fatherhood of God, the transcendent, universal sovereignty of God (*over all*), and prescient omnipresence of God (*through all and in all*). Some scholars take the “all (πάντων)” adjectives as masculine, meaning “*all of us*” or “*all of you*.”<sup>49</sup> Such a reading posits God as Father, Sovereign, and ever-present One of all the redeemed—those in the church.<sup>50</sup> Though the masculine rendering seems to fit the immediate context, a neuter rendering (*everyone, everything*) in a comprehensive, cosmic sense garners support from within the Ephesian letter and the larger Pauline corpus.

We find a clearly cosmological sense of πάντων in that God has sovereignly purposed to “unite all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and on earth” (1:9-10). Similarly, God is said to have omnipotently exalted Christ for the purpose of placing “all things (πάντων)” under Christ's authority (1:22). In Christ, God is “filling all things (πάντων)” with the fullness of the Godhead (cf. 1:23; 4:10; cf. Col 1:19-20). Indeed, the cosmological sense of God being sovereign over all things permeates Pauline thought

---

<sup>49</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 285. O'Brien states: “Although some manuscripts read ‘in us all’ or ‘in you all’, the additional pronouns . . . are generally conceded as a gloss.” In footnote 50, he notes: “One variant reading (cf. D F G K L etc.) has ἡμῶν after πᾶσιν (‘all of us’), and this agrees with ἡμῶν (‘us’) in v. 7, while another reading (preserved in the Textus Receptus) has ὑμῖν (‘to you’) instead after πᾶσιν (‘all of you’). But the shorter reading which omits them both has the strongest textual support: ℞<sup>46</sup> ⋈ A B C P 082 6, etc.”

<sup>50</sup>Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 240. Lincoln cites a number of scholars holding this understanding, including Thomas Kingsmill Abbot (ICC) and Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer (CECNT).

(e.g. 1 Cor. 8:6; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16).

Additionally, God as the Father of everyone in a comprehensive, cosmological sense poses no difficulty to this reading. In 3:14-15 Paul states, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named*” (emphasis added). O’Brien helpfully comments here, “(God) is the Creator of all living things, so that their existence and significance depend on him. On this interpretation Paul is affirming that God is supremely transcendent ‘over everything’ and that his immanence is all-pervasive.”<sup>51</sup> In that everyone exists by the will and creation of God, Paul may well have intended his readers to understand that God is the Primogenitor—the Father—of all the living.

If this interpretation of *πάντων* holds, Paul is thereby placing a rather emphatic punctuation upon an already weighty confession. The one God in whom believers are united is the Father of all creation, the transcendent Sovereign over all things, the omniscient and omnipresent God of all. In this context, the church is “the eschatological outpost, the pilot project of God’s purposes, and his people are the expression of this unity that displays to the universe his final goal.”<sup>52</sup> God himself—in the majesty and glory of his cosmological Fatherhood, sovereignty, omniscience and omnipresence—is the ultimate ground of the unity and ministry of the church.

One would be hard pressed to find a more compelling reason for unity and ministry in the church than Paul’s acclamation of God as universal Father and Sovereign. When this acclamation is coupled with the previous six—all of which flow from the fountainhead of God himself—the apostle has here posited an unshakable foundation upon which the unity and expansive ministry of the church rests. To what end has Paul laid such a sweeping foundation?

---

<sup>51</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 285.

<sup>52</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 286.

The declarative statements of 4:7-10 are enveloped by an *inclusio* that ties the first sixteen verses of chapter four together. Paul moves from appeals for unity (4:1-6), to instructions related to diversity of ministry-gifting (4:7-10), then back again to a stress upon the mature fruit produced by unified ministry (4:11-16). In a word, Paul teaches that the church's unity and fellowship in God—intentionally coupled with the exercise of the Christ-supplied diversity of ministry gifts within the church—produces a unified, ministry-rich, healthy church.

He transitions from the unity of the church's fellowship to the diversity of the church's fellowship with a exhilarating burst of high Christology. Christ graciously bestows an array of functional spiritual gifts to every member of the church (4:7; cf. Rom 12:5-6; 1 Cor 12:1-27).<sup>53</sup> This diversity of ministry gifts is not predicated upon ethnic variety or individual abilities, but upon Christ's triumphant and sovereign distribution of ministry gifts to individual members of the body. Paul buttresses this assertion of Christ's sovereign authority by citing the victory ode of Psalm 68:18: "Therefore it says 'When he ascended on high he lead a host of captives, and he gave<sup>54</sup> gifts to men.'"

The language of Psalm 68 depicts God as the Divine Warrior who triumphantly ascends to Mount Zion upon defeating the enemies of Israel. Paul's application of this OT text to Christ was portended in 1:20-22 when he asserted:

(God) raised (Christ) from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church...

By his sinless life, cross-work and resurrection, Christ the Divine Warrior absolutely

---

<sup>53</sup>O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 287. O'Brien asserts, "Christ sovereignly distributes his gifts to all the members of his body. The recipients are not limited to some special group, such as the ministers of v. 11. Each one of us is to be understood comprehensively since it includes Paul and all his readers (it is thus the counterpart to 1 Cor. 12:7, 11). None misses out on Christ's bounty."

<sup>54</sup>See Arnold, *Ephesians*, 251-53 and O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 290-92 for two excellent considerations of why Paul altered the wording "he received" in Psa 68:18 to "he gave" in Ephesians 4:8.

routed the principalities and powers and rulers and authorities of this present darkness (cf. 1:20-22; 6:12; Col 2:15). Christ the Warrior-King ascended to the right hand of power, leading his ruined, chained captives in a triumphal procession to display their utter defeat (cf. 4:8; Col 2:15; Jude 6; 2 Cor 2:14-16).

To commemorate and eternally exhibit his mighty victory, Christ the conquering Warrior-King “gave gifts to men.” This giving of ministry-gifts in celebration of Christ’s victory is entirely different than the ancient practice of conquering kings dividing the spoils of war among their subjects, though Paul may have the principle in mind (cf. Gen 14; Judg 5:30; 1 Sam 30:26-31).<sup>55</sup> Christ’s royal munificence consists not of gifts captured by conquest, but gloriously variegated ministry-gifts issuing from the inexhaustible riches of his grace and given to the church as a result of his cross-work, resurrection and exaltation. The purpose of these Victor-given ministry-gifts is enablement of the gospel proclamation of his resounding victory in heavenly places and to the ends of the earth (cf. 4:7-10; 3:7-11; Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:8). Indeed, Christ’s ministry-gifts to the church are given to the end that through Christ’s rule the knowledge and worship of God will one day fill the earth as the water covers the sea (cf. 4:10; Isa 2:2; 9:6-7; 11:9; 45:23).

Verses eleven through sixteen establish the effectual, health-inducing growth-promoting nature of Christ’s ministry-gifts given to each member within the church. The equipping Christ-gifts are those of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (4:11). Apostles (*ἀπόστολος*) here likely infers those sent as missionary church planters who start and establish local congregations in new gospel frontiers (cf. Acts 14:4; 1 Cor 9:6; Rom 16:7). Prophets (*προφήτας*) are those specially gifted with mediating and ministering the word of God to the people of God.<sup>56</sup> The ministry-gift of evangelists

---

<sup>55</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 291.

<sup>56</sup>Though not germane to our argument here, the cessationist hermeneutic holds that the gifts of apostles and prophets ceased with the deaths of the twelve and the completion of the canon of Scripture.

(εὐαγγελιστάς) consists of those specially skilled in the communication of the gospel. Finally, the pastors (ποιμένας) are those gifted as overseeing shepherds,<sup>57</sup> and teachers (διδασκάλους) preserve and communicate the apostolic gospel and tradition (cf. 1 Cor 12:28, 29; 14:26; Rom 12:7).<sup>58</sup>

The purpose for which these diverse ministry gifts are placed in the church is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (4:12). The ministry-gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are placed in the church to teach, disciple and model in order that each member is thereby prepared for the work of ministry in keeping with their ministry gifting (cf. 4:7). Paul is not here making a distinction between clergy and laity in relation to ministry, but is rather emphasizing the ministry of all believers.<sup>59</sup> Such discipleship and ministry couples the diversity of Christ’s ministry-gifting in the church with the unifying fellowship of the church to produce the healthy ministry, growth and maturation of the church.

The full-orbed objective of members being well equipped for ministry finds further elucidation in the next clause: “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13). Here Paul reclaims his earlier assertion that the functional

---

Arnold (*Ephesians* 256-57) and O’Brien (*Ephesians*, 298-99) argue against the cessationist position, while Lincoln (*Ephesians*, 249) seems to lend credence to the cessationist view.

<sup>57</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 299-300. O’Brien states, “The term ‘pastor’ is used only here in the New Testament to refer to a ministry in the church, although the related verb ‘to shepherd’ appears several times in this sense (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2; cf. John 21:16), and the noun ‘flock’ is used of the church (Acts 20:28–29; 1 Pet. 5:2, 3). *Pastors*, whose functions are similar to those of overseers (cf. Phil. 1:1) and elders (cf. Acts 20:17, with 28; also 14:23; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17, 19, etc.), exercise leadership through nurture and care of the congregation.”

<sup>58</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 300. O’Brien maintains, “The pastors and teachers are linked here by a single definite article in the Greek, which suggests a close association of functions between two kinds of ministers who operate within the one congregation (cf. 2:20). Although it has often been held that the two groups are identical (i.e., ‘pastors who teach’), it is more likely that the terms describe overlapping functions (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28–29 and Gal. 6:6, where ‘teachers’ are a distinct group). All pastors teach (since teaching is an essential part of pastoral ministry), but not all teachers are also pastors. The latter exercise their leadership role by feeding God’s flock with his word.”

<sup>59</sup>See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, 262-264 for a defense of this interpretation.

ministry of the church enjoys the unity of “one faith” and “one Lord” (4:5). Teaching and discipling in the church aims to unify the fellowship in an ever-maturing understanding of the one faith once for all delivered to the saints. Such maturation in the faith necessarily involves the church increasing in its knowledge of the Son of God in whom God has revealed the mystery of his redemptive purposes and in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge reside. This maturation in the faith and in Christ binds the believers together in an insuperable unity and ministry as the church grows in understanding of and emulative likeness to Christ (cf. 4:13; Col 2:2-3).

Further, this maturation in unity and ministry in the church serves to guard the membership from the ravages of empty philosophy and doctrinal error. Maturation must occur “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (4:14). Satan’s long war against orthodoxy and the philosophy of Christ necessitates a unifying maturation in the faith and in the knowledge of Christ if the church is to avoid being drawn away into ministry- and unity-debilitating error. Indeed, the victorious Christ has placed the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, preaching and teaching gifts in the church precisely to insure that immaturity and instability decrease and maturation increases. Maturation guards against believers being drawn away from the faith by deceitful schemes (cf. 4:14; 6:11). By this ministry-gift-induced maturation, therefore, the church not only experiences healthy growth, but she is enabled to resist all that would undermine and destroy her fellowship and Kingdom-advancing ministry.<sup>60</sup>

Contra being moved about by fallacious doctrine and diabolic schemes of thought, the maturing fellowship of believers is characterized by the ministry of “speaking the truth in love” (4:15). Continuation in this love-driven ministry of the truth of the gospel (cf. 1:13; 6:14) and the full-orbed gospel entailments of the faith causes the

---

<sup>60</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 308.

fellowship of believers to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (4:15). This upward growth stands in juxtaposition to the immature childishness of verse thirteen where immature believers are easily moved away from the faith by every breeze of unorthodox teaching. Further, this ascending growth is comprehensive, touching every aspect of the lives and ministry of believers such that our growth trajectory is Christ-ward (cf. 4:13). The unity of love for one another, love of the truth, and love of Christ converge in the fellowship of the church, producing the dynamic of healthy ministry resulting in spiritual growth.

Ministry-induced upward growth into Christ the Head of the church points to a further ecclesial health dynamic, namely that the whole body of believers is “joined (*συναρμολογούμενον*) and held together (*συμβιβαζόμενον*) by every joint of supply (*ἐπιχορηγίας*)” (4:16).<sup>61</sup> The verbs *συναρμολογούμενον* and *συμβιβαζόμενον* are nearly synonymous and are in the passive voice. Paul intendeds that his readers understand it is Christ, the victorious resurrected Head, whose grace and ministry-gifting joins and holds the body of believers together (cf. Col 2:19). The prepositional phrase “when each part is working properly” recapitulates the language of 4:7. Each member (part) is given grace and ministry-gifting by Christ through which—as they come in contact with the rest of the body—their properly functioning, Christ-given ministry contribution imparts nourishment from the Head, promoting the healthy maturation of the whole body.<sup>62</sup> Here again we see the salubrious nature of the ministering fellowship of believers joined and held together by Christ the Head.

The final clause of this expansive pericope mixes physiological and

---

<sup>61</sup>Though sometimes translated as a verb (e.g. “is equipped”), *ἐπιχορηγίας* (supply, support, provision) is a genitive noun identifying a characteristic of the substantive (joint).

<sup>62</sup>O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 314. O’Brien asserts, “While the empowering for growth comes from above, members of the body themselves are fully involved in the process. Paul continues the physiological language, using it metaphorically to speak of the divine energy being channelled [sic] by every supporting ligament [joint]. The ligaments make contact with other parts of the body and are the channels which extend nourishment from the head.”

architectural metaphors. Grace-gifted and held together by Christ her Head, the fellowship of believers is enabled by him to “make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (4:16) This ministry-induced growth is multifaceted. First, numerical growth in the fellowship of believers is in view whereas multiplied members are necessary for both the completion of a well-proportioned body and a well-constructed temple (cf. 4:16; 2:20-22). Secondly, growth in knowledge of the faith and the Son of God must characterize the fellowship and ministry of the church (4:13) Thirdly, growth in mutual love is indispensable to the health and ministry of the fellowship of believers (cf. 4:2, 15, 16). A properly fellowshiping, unified body of believers may reasonably expect—through Christ’s empowerment—to grow and build itself up into a healthy, effective and vital ministry instrument of Kingdom advancement.

In reflection upon this pericope, we understand that maturity in size, maturity in knowledge, and maturity in love are the fruit of a unified, ministry-gifted fellowship wherein believers are ministering as one body in one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God as universal Father. Though diverse by the multifaceted ministry-gifting of Christ, the church comprises a unified body experiencing equipping for the work of ministry whereby the Kingdom of God is spread to the ends of the earth. Given these fruits of maturation and growth issuing from a unified, ministering fellowship of believers, declining churches should embrace and promote Paul’s ministry-centered paradigm to the Ephesians as an inspired and effective means for church revitalization.

In summary of the ministry emphasis observable in the Pauline corpus, we maintain that the apostle recognized the entropic principle at work in the ministry function of the churches to which he ministered. Having observed the vibrancy of ministry in the Jerusalem church, Paul sought to replicate the paradigm throughout the churches of Asia Minor. The necessity of church-wide, fully engaged ministry for the advancement and perpetuation of the health of churches is, therefore, a recurring theme in

Paul's epistolary injunctions.

Division and crippling discord characterized the church at Corinth, and this reality was in no small part attributable to their crass misunderstanding of the nature of the ministry-gifting work of the triune God. The body-dynamic corrective employed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 is vitally instructive for the revitalization of ministry in declining churches. Paul informs us that the Triune God sovereignly distributes, apportions and energizes each ministry-gift in the church. Not only so, the apostle stressed that every member of the church—without exception—is divinely gifted for ministry on the grounds of their regeneration and spiritual baptism into Christ. The purpose of these ministry gifts in the church, Paul informs us, was the edification and building up of the entire body of believers.

Likewise, Paul instructed the Ephesians church concerning the vitality of a full-orbed, every-member-engaged ministry perspective. Christ the victorious Warrior-King wonderfully gifts each member of the body according to the riches of his grace. Functioning within the auspices of one Spirit, one unifying hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God as universal Father, every member is equipped for the work of ministry. As each member contributes to the needs of the body through their Christ-gifted ministry, the church experiences growth in numbers, growth in knowledge of Christ, and growth in love for one another. Such ministry-driven growth produces a church that is a healthy, effective and vital ministry instrument of Kingdom advancement.

Finally, while time and space do not here allow a full exposition of the text, Paul posits in Romans 12:3-8 an abbreviated paradigm of church ministry strikingly similar to the 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 pericopes. He again iterates that the church is one body consisting of many members in Christ, each having differing but essential functions (12:4-5). Paul then urges the exercise of individual ministry gifts in proportion to the grace given (12:6-8). Here again, the primacy of active, intentional ministry in the context of the local church is abundantly evident. Equipping the saints for

the work of ministry clearly consumed much of Paul's missional and church revitalization efforts. His example and inspired epistles offer to the contemporary church and her leadership an indispensable tool for reversing decline and degeneration.

### **Conclusion**

Ministry participation is a meaningful measure of the spiritual health of a local church. Significant non-participation in the work of church ministry among the membership contributes to church deterioration and decline. Our work with and analysis of plateaued and declining churches points to ministry non-participation being a common malady among such congregations. The aforementioned ten-ninety conundrum—wherein ten percent of the membership carries ninety percent of the ministry load—contributes to ministry burnout in unhealthy churches, further advancing the unhealthiness of many congregations. Given these realities, we contend that leaders who intentionally engage declining churches with a thoroughgoing theology of church-wide ministry participation may reasonably expect a measure of revitalization to ensue.

Our analysis of the exemplary first church at Jerusalem revealed a congregation-wide embrace of the work of Christian ministry in obedience to their Lord's Great Commandment and Great Commission. Indeed, this exemplary church was ablaze with multi-faceted and far-reaching ministry. Their vibrant participation in ministry served to strengthen their fellowship and enhance their spiritual growth together. Further, their ministry to those outside the church platformed their proclamation of the gospel, yielding an expanding audience for their evangelistic endeavors. The congregation-unifying depth of their ministry was of such strength as to withstand both internal threats and external threats to their existence and unity. Again, the Jerusalem congregation was a healthy, growing church, and the correlation between their health and their commitment to the work of ministry is unmistakable in the Lukan narrative.

We have contended throughout this dissertation that Paul was both a church

planter and a church revitalizer. He recognized the entropic principle warring against the church, and he accordingly sought reform and revitalization to counter the degenerating effects of this principle. Our brief survey of the Pauline corpus identified a recurring theme of ministry being essential to the health of the churches. Indeed, the practice of equipping the saints for the work of the ministry consumed much of Paul's missional and church revitalization efforts.

The apostle penned a comprehensive paradigm of church ministry. He carefully revealed the triune Source of ministry gifting in the church. He meticulously delineated the purpose of ministry in the church, pointing us to the edifying effects of ministry. Paul argued convincingly for unity in diversity and diversity in unity as God's sovereign, all-wise design for ministry in the church. Finally, he asserted that salubrious growth occurs when the saints are equipped for ministry and exercise their ministry gifting.

The apostle indicated that division and degeneration occur when members fail to properly participate in and contribute to the whole ministry of the church. Conversely, we may reasonably conclude that revitalization occurs when more and more members exercise their gifts and contribute to the overall ministry of the church. We understand, therefore, that Paul's inspired, body-dynamic analogy offers a most effective means for reversing the prevailing entropy that grips so many declining churches. Revival and revitalization, health and increase, church growth and Kingdom advancement—at least in part—depend upon leadership of declining churches utilizing this most emphatic paradigm. Churches must have a clearly defined process for moving a person from salvation to spiritual maturity to significant ministry. We will offer a number of suggestions for implementing this ministry paradigm in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 10

### IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION

Evangelical denominations and leaders are increasingly awakening to the pressing need of church renewal. The proliferation of publications, consulting ministries and organizational focus upon church revitalization evidence a mounting concern as the number of North American churches closing their doors is nearing epidemic proportions. Some fear the church in the United States is following Great Britain, where it is now estimated only six percent of the adult population are practicing Christians.<sup>1</sup> The unfolding evidence of ecclesial decline is daunting, to say the least, but Mark Hallock offers a most appropriate reminder for such a time as this:

Now, you can hear all of the stats of declining and dying churches and get incredibly discouraged fast. That is until you remember who our God is! Until you remember that our all-powerful, almighty, sovereign God loves to redeem broken things! Our God loves to do the impossible when everybody else has given up hope. That is our God. He brings dead things back to life. He brings resurrection when resurrection seems foolish.<sup>2</sup>

Further, it is most helpful to remember in this current milieu that church declension is not a new phenomenon. Our survey of the NT demonstrated that an entropic principle has been warring against the church from her inception. The church as a vital, healthy, spiritual organism does not naturally flourish in a sin-cursed, fallen world. Even the earliest churches were not inexorably inclined toward health and growth, but toward unhealth, division, decline, and even death. Indeed, as we noted earlier, of the churches

---

<sup>1</sup>ComRes Global, “Church of England—Church Mapping,” March 31, 2017, <http://comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Church-of-England-Church-Mapping-Survey-Data-Tables.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Hallock, *Great Commission Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 22.

established in the NT, not one exists today.

Despite the current environment of church declension, however, there is much cause for hope. Jesus informed us that the powers of hell would war against his church until his return—yet he declared he will sovereignly build his church despite this resistance (Matt 16:18). Paul clearly recognized the ecclesial tendency toward sin-induced entropy, and he spent his entire apostolic career analyzing and combating this propensity. Church degeneration and decline, we see, was a clear concern from the very beginning of the Great Commission enterprise. To that end, God has graciously equipped us with a paradigm for church reclamation in the pages of his inspired, infallible and profitable Word (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17). Indeed, we have a full-orbed body of instruction for addressing precisely the condition in which we find many of our churches. Such divine provision is cause for joy, gratitude and great expectation.

The contentions of this dissertation portend significant implications for the urgent and ever-necessary work of church renewal. We desire to offer in this chapter practical means whereby the Pauline paradigm for revitalization—rooted in Christ’s Great Commandment and Great Commission—may be implemented by churches and their leaders. The biblical paradigm for the revitalization of plateaued and declining churches is both timeless and unbound by geographic location because it is formulated in the inscripturated Word of God. Practice of these prescribed Kingdom priorities is effective precisely because they are God’s prescription for the renewal, maintenance and advancement of the church to the end of this age.

Again, Paul models for us a well-ordered concern and standard for the renewal of unhealthy local churches. While the work of church revitalization is certainly multidimensional, the six-fold emphasis herein delineated is grounded in the Pauline revitalization model evidenced during the very infancy of the church. As such, we maintain that these priorities should form the core of contemporary revitalization efforts. To reiterate, the Kingdom priorities upon which Paul focused for the revitalization of

churches in the first century are prayer, worship, fellowship, evangelism, discipleship and ministry. After addressing the pressing need of repentance in church revitalization, we will address the application of these disciplines individually.

### **Revitalizing Repentance**

An oft-overlooked—yet utterly indispensable—element of biblical church revitalization is corporate repentance. We have demonstrated that the priorities of the church issue from the dual fountainhead of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Churches experiencing unhealth and decline have invariably failed to embrace and obey our Lord’s imperatives and mandates. Failure to obey is sin, and the presence of sin necessitates emphatic confession and humble repentance. Corporate disobedience requires corporate confession and corporate repentance. John J. Murray is helpful here:

The church in all generations is dependent utterly upon the favor of God and the light of his countenance. This is so in the case of the individual Christian. When we backslide and turn away from the Lord we are visited with his Fatherly chastisement and the hiding of his face. The way of return to God is always by way of confession, humility and repentance (James 4:6-10). What is true of the individual is also true of the corporate body.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, when we consider the formidable opposition to the church operative in our culture today, our need for the presence, favor and lighting countenance of our God is undeniable. The need for luminous ecclesial victories in this present darkness is pressing, just as it has been from the time of mankind’s fall into sin. In our current milieu, a reminder of how God’s people have achieved victory in the past is most expedient.

The forty-fourth Psalm reminds us precisely how God’s people overcame their enemies when Israel entered the land of Canaan: “For not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm save them, but your right hand and your arm, and the

---

<sup>3</sup>John J. Murray, “Does the Church Need Repentance,” Banner of Truth, May 4, 2016, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2016/church-need-repentance/>.

light of your face, for you delighted in them” (Psa 44:3). The Psalmist subsequently contrasts Israel’s then-current state with their former victorious entry into the land: “But you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies” (44:9). Further still, “You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us” (44:13).

Why this utter reversal from national victory to national defeat and derision? God’s indictment of the nation is strong: “What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you” (50:16-17). Israel’s sin, her disobedience, resulted in God withdrawing the might of his arm and the light of his countenance. How might the nation recover and once again enjoy the victory-producing favor of God? The path to restoration is clear: “Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver! The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to the one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God” (50:22-23). Nothing short of humble, unqualified repentance and a return to obedience would suffice (Psa 51).

This same need for corporate repentance is evident in the Christ-letters to the seven churches in Revelation.<sup>4</sup> At least five of these seven churches were in need of revitalization. Andrew M. Davis, points to the revitalization-potency of these letters, asserting, “Careful study of the letters to the seven churches provides powerful insight into Christ’s zeal for the ongoing revitalization of the church in every age. Revelation 1-3 clearly indicates that the slide of local churches from health toward death has been an ongoing issue for twenty centuries.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the need for corporate repentance and revitalization appears in the very first letter, addressed to the Ephesians.

---

<sup>4</sup>The call for corporate repentance is evident in the letters to Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Laodicea. The call to corporate repentance is absent only in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, both of which are commended for their faithfulness in keeping the word of Christ.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 15.

After commending the church for her doctrinal fidelity in exposing false apostles, the ever-present Christ<sup>6</sup> identifies the egregious sin of the Ephesian church: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev 2:4). G. K. Beale effectively argues that the church at Ephesus, though careful to preserve the apostolic doctrine, had waxed cold in their original love and zeal for first-order priority witnessing to the outside world of the glory of the apostolic gospel (cf. Matt 24:12-14; 1 Cor 15:1-4).<sup>7</sup>

This abandonment of their love for the gospel and its advancement constituted a direct disobedience of our Lord’s Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20). Christ’s call for their repentance is quite compelling: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (2:5). Except the church repent of her disobedience, Christ will withdraw the witness-empowering presence of the Holy Spirit (cf. Zech 4; Matt 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-25).<sup>8</sup> The exhortation is clear. Ephesus should repent of her loss of evangelistic zeal and seek to recapture the work of evangelism that was once her priority. Failure to repent and evangelize will result in Christ’s withdrawal of the Holy Spirit, and the Ephesian church will cease to exist. The church will die.

The warning could not be more explicit. Plateaued and declining churches have invariably grown cold toward one or more of the Christ-mandated priorities of the

---

<sup>6</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 229. Beale points out, “Christ’s introduction of himself as holding the seven stars and walking among the seven golden lampstands, which refers back to ch. 1, directly relates him to the problem of the Ephesian church. He is always in their midst and therefore is keenly aware of how they are living.”

<sup>7</sup>Beale, *Revelation*, 229-32.

<sup>8</sup>Beale, *Revelation*, 231. Beale contends, “The lampstands also generally represent the power of the Spirit, since this is how the lampstand is implicitly identified in Zech. 4:6, although we have seen more precisely that John views the ‘lamps’ as the Spirit that burns on the ‘lampstands’ (the churches), thus empowering them for witness.”

church, disobeying the clear commands of our Lord. This disobedience constitutes corporate sin, and corporate sin calls for corporate confession and repentance. Absent repentance, the downward spiral to eventual death becomes an irreversible certainty. This we know by the word of none other than Christ himself. Just as with Israel, the removal of the Holy Spirit from the church constitutes a withdrawal of God's favor and empowerment.

We see, therefore, that repentance stands as a first-order work in any revitalization context. As we observed with the first church in Jerusalem, vigorous obedience to the priorities issuing from the Great Commandment and Great Commission of our Lord is met with God's favor and blessing. Absence of this vigorous obedience constitutes sin, and sin necessitates humble confession and conscious repentance. Revitalization leaders must aid the declining church in the corporate work of honest self-examination relative to the Christ-mandated priorities of the church. As disobedience is discovered, public confession should be made and the church, through Holy Spirit-conviction, should experience a season of godly sorrow that leads to earnest and corrective repentance (cf. 2 Cor 7:9-11; 13:5-10).

Though laborious and uncomfortable, this toil of corporate self-examination, confession and repentance is indispensable to the work of church revitalization. Without repentance, the trend of declension is irreversible and the death of the church is certain. Conversely, when repentance takes place, the work of renewal and revitalization has truly begun. Indeed, such repentance holds the sweet promise of God's faithful cleansing, renewal and restoration; and the church is thereby prepared for genuine and zealous commitment to the priorities given to her by her Lord. In a word, repentance revitalizes.

### **Revitalizing Prayer**

Despite copious biblical data relating to prayer and God's outpouring of blessings on the praying church, Aaron Earls identifies a troubling trend when he reports

that fifty-five percent of U. S. Protestant pastors indicate they no longer hold Wednesday night prayer meetings.<sup>9</sup> Further, our work with churches in need of revitalization indicates that even those churches who still hold prayer meetings are experiencing poor attendance and participation. This trend runs parallel to the well-documented decline of our churches. As we contended in chapter four, spiritual plateau and decline are directly correlational to the marginalization of prayer in the life of the church.

We are convinced that prayer is a sure measure of a church's health. The prayer-life of a church is a barometer of God's blessing—or lack thereof—upon her ministry. Prayer is a gauge of the Holy Spirit's presence with a church, and the Holy Spirit's presence with a church most assuredly determines her effectiveness as a church. When devotion to prayer wanes, the church experiences plateau and decline. When prayer-commitment waxes, God hears from heaven and endows the ministry of the church with divine power.

In chapter four we identified the primacy of prayer as a recurring feature in the didactic Pauline corpus. Paul situated the power of prayer in the omnipotent, mediatorial work of the Holy Spirit. He consistently prefaced the exhortations of his ecclesial letters with instructive, revitalization-targeted, thanksgiving-filled prayers. Didactically, Paul urged upon the churches a rigorous, comprehensive devotion to prayer to counter-balance the entropic inclination to plateau and decline. The apostle clearly envisioned prayer as an efficient and indispensable means of church revitalization.

Prayer is the spiritual discipline of the church that empowers all work for which the church is commissioned. Prayer stands, therefore, at the epicenter of all that the church is and all that the church does. Again, God simply will not use a church that refuses to pray. A church devoted to the paradigmatic discipline of prayer, however, has

---

<sup>9</sup>Aaron Earls, *Wednesday Night Still a Church Night for Most Congregations* (Lifeway Research, 2019), <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/09/10/vast-majority-of-churches-still-have-wednesday-night-activities/>. Despite the title of this article, the research cited indicates the Wednesday night “activities” reported have virtually nothing to do with intentional corporate prayer.

every reason to expect the outpouring of God’s blessing and power upon her ministry. In a word, intentional, dependent, devoted, gospel-centric, Kingdom-focused prayer is a most pressing need in churches experiencing the entropic ravages of decay and decline. To that end, we will now consider practical ways in which leaders and churches may prioritize and revitalize prayer.

First, pastors must be men of prayer. Charles E. Lawless, Jr. states that the “secret” behind a praying church is simply this: “They have a pastor . . . who believe(s) that prayer matters.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as goes the pastor, so goes the church. A praying church begins with a praying pastor. Pastors laboring in the trenches of revitalization ministry must be men of prayer who are known as men of prayer. They must model prayer before their congregants. A most effective means for doing this is to include a pastoral prayer in the liturgy of Lord’s Day worship. Pastor’s should pray intentionally and passionately for their church in this public setting, and should do so as a matter of regular practice. The ecclesial prayers of the apostle Paul, liberally scattered throughout his epistles, are an excellent starting-point for effective pastoral prayers.

Secondly, pastors should teach extensively on the subject of prayer. Too often this most fundamental spiritual discipline is assumed as an entirely innate function of new believers. Consequently, church members are often left to learn to pray by a form of osmosis. They listen to the prayers of others, appropriate an amalgamation of phraseology, and cobble them together to form a prayer. This common malady is not known for producing prayer warriors.

We recall that Jesus’s disciples specifically requested that he teach them to pray. This request yielded the divinely instructive Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1-4; cf. Matt 6:9-15). Revitalizing pastors should lead their congregations through an in-depth study of

---

<sup>10</sup>Charles E. Lawless, Jr., *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 14.

the Lord's Prayer to reinvigorate commitment to prayer. A most helpful resource for this endeavor is R. Albert Mohler's *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down*.<sup>11</sup>

Further, revitalizing pastors are well served to teach extensively on the subject of praying God's Word. Scripture is filled with recorded prayers that are most instructive for praying the will of God for the people of God, and these prayers are a rich resource for deepening our prayers. The Psalms likewise are well-suited to enriching both the breadth and depth of a church's prayer-life. Donald S. Whitney's *Praying the Bible*<sup>12</sup> and the classic Puritan collection of prayers *The Valley of Vision*<sup>13</sup> are both excellent resources for teaching congregations to pray Scripture.

Thirdly, many revitalization pastors will discover that prayer meetings are often dominated by broadly general (and sometimes trite) prayer requests for the "sick and afflicted." While we certainly need to pray for such, we must move the congregation to pray for much more. Pastors may find it helpful to use a whiteboard to suggest expanded categories of prayer concerns. These might include praying specifically concerning the biblically-mandated priorities of the church, praying for those who are lost (by name), praying for missionaries (by name), the community, schools, teachers, government officials, praises for answered prayer, and objects of thanksgiving. Another helpful approach might be to stop and pray for each request/praise as it is articulated, allowing for greater focus and excluding overly-generalized prayers.

Fourthly, Lawless suggests the need for a designated, well-qualified Prayer Coordinator.<sup>14</sup> The work of the Prayer Coordinator would be to organize and promote the prayer ministry of the church. Such promotion might include publishing a weekly prayer-

---

<sup>11</sup>R. Albert Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018).

<sup>12</sup>Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

<sup>13</sup>*The Valley of Vision*, edited by Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003).

<sup>14</sup>Lawless, *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry*, 28-31.

guide, enlisting and overseeing a prayer team, planning and organizing special prayer emphases in the church, insuring that prayer is integrated into every ministry of the church, and coordinating with prayer leaders from neighboring churches.

Fifthly, pastors might lead the church to designate a prayer room within the facilities of the church grounds. A prayer room should be tastefully decorated, comfortably furnished, and well-lit. Bibles, a membership roll, a list of the church's priorities, published prayer lists, prayer request forms, and print resources on prayer should be supplied in the prayer room. To the extent possible, the church should make the prayer room available for prayer twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Church members (and even non-member residents of the community) should be encouraged to regularly spend time in prayer at this location. Further, times of special prayer-emphasis might include scheduling volunteers to pray in one-hour increments around the clock.<sup>15</sup> Having a designated and properly promoted prayer room constantly reminds the church of her dependence upon God.

Sixthly, a revitalizing pastor should lead the church to budget for prayer. Whereas prayer is indispensable in the life of the church, monetary resources should be allocated to enrich and advance the church's prayer ministry. A prayer budget might fund a stipend or salary for the Prayer Coordinator, prayer-guide costs, bringing in speakers to teach on prayer, or even a prayer hotline for receiving prayer requests. Budgeting for prayer can indicate a commitment to prayer and can serve to remind the church of the primacy of prayer.

Finally, current digital technology might be used to establish a prayer request text platform. The Prayer Coordinator or other designated member could receive prayer requests via text or phone call, then publish those requests immediately via the text

---

<sup>15</sup>I.e. Critical cases before the Supreme Court of the United States, national elections, community disasters, appeals for revival/revitalization, times of special thanksgiving, etc.

subscription service. Church members “subscribe” to receive prayer request via text, enabling the majority of the church to receive prayer requests immediately. As with the above suggestions, a prayer request text service is a constant reminder to the entire church of her commitment to prayer.

The objective here is to prioritize prayer in the functional life of the church. While certainly not exhaustive of ways to instill a culture of prayer, these suggestions might serve to begin moving the church toward a greater commitment to the vital discipline of prayer. The more a church prays, the more that church will experience revitalization; and the more a church experiences revitalization, the more that church will pray.

### **Revitalizing Worship**

In chapter five we argued that worship of God is the purpose for which we were created. The Christ-restored ability to rightly worship God is an indispensable priority and privilege of the church. Worship is the intuitive occupation of the believer whereby, through God’s appointed means of grace he receives of God’s grace by faith and then responds in adoration, praise, honor-giving, glorification, enjoyment and obedience toward God. Worship was the glad occupation of our first parents in the Garden, and worship will be the exhilarating, delightful work of heaven for eternity—and worship is the joyful privilege of the church wherein renewal and dynamic spiritual growth take place.

The Lukan record reveals that the Jerusalem church was vitally engaged in the worship of God regulated by the terms of worship established in Scripture. Their worship embraced devotion to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the Lord’s Table, prayer, praise and thanksgiving, and awe-filled wonder at the mighty works of God. Worship for the Jerusalem church was of first-order primacy. Declining churches invariably become stagnant in the discipline of worship, and revitalization leaders must strive to resuscitate

an uncompromised, biblically-informed wonder-inducing worship of the living God in such churches. Revitalization leaders serve their churches well when they seek to emulate the worship-devotion and practice of the Jerusalem congregation.

We further demonstrated that the Pauline corpus is pregnant with the primacy of worship, containing extensive instruction pertaining to the specifics of worship in the corporate gatherings of the church. In Paul's letters, worship is framed as the rational response of the redeemed, a sacrificial presentation to God of our entire being, an orderly submission to the Lordship of Christ, graced with the peace of Christ, and governed by the word and wisdom of Christ.

Because the redeemed church was purchased and recreated in Christ for the purpose of worshiping God, worship must be a primary focus of revitalization leaders. It has been our observation that plateaued and declining churches often lack intentionality, discipline and structure in their corporate worship gatherings. This lack of discipline, following the entropic principle, invariably produces a repetitive corporate worship that soon becomes dulled and mundane. As a result, congregants come and go unmoved and unchanged. Worse still, the unregenerate see nothing of the glory of God in the worship of the church, and they continue unabated down the path of destruction (contrast with 1 Cor 14:24-25). We maintain that a more liturgical approach to worship holds the potential of helping breathe revitalization life into the worship of the church.

Our Protestant heritage summarizes the biblical elements of God-glorifying, Christ-honoring worship under five headings: Read the Word, pray the Word, preach the Word, sing the Word, and see (in baptism and the Lord's Supper) the Word.<sup>16</sup> Whereas these headings efficiently summarize the clearly commanded biblical *elements* of worship, worship *forms* refer to the manner in which the elements are performed. The

---

<sup>16</sup>Matt Merker, *Corporate Worship: How the Church Gathers as God's People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021) 82. Merker points out that the Regulative Principle, concerned with the biblical elements of worship, is in view when these five headings are cited.

following propositions for revitalizing worship take the commanded elements of worship and seek to offer forms, or liturgies, or patterns whereby the worship elements may be arranged, resulting in greater intentionality and discipline in the worship of the gathered church.

### **Call to Worship**

When the church gathers for corporate worship, the typical ingathering is accompanied by a buzz of greetings and perfunctory conversations. We suggest that a scriptural call to worship, issued promptly at the designated time for worship to begin, is helpful in focusing the congregation. Distracted minds and hearts need to be refocused on why they are gathered—to worship the living God; to praise, laud and bless his name for his mercy, grace and goodness; to hear from and respond to their Maker and Redeemer.

Calls to worship may be drawn from passages such as Psalms 99:1-3, 136:1-3, Isaiah 55:1-7, or Revelation 5:12-13. This serves the worship element of reading the Word and prepares congregants for the high calling of worshiping the living God in spirit and in truth. Though taking only a few moments, a scriptural call to worship powerfully reminds congregants that God has taken the initiative—he is calling the meeting to order.

Another form of a call to worship is that of a prepared exhortation based upon situational and circumstantial issues in the church. Whereas there is a pressing need for maturity in worship among plateaued and declining churches, leaders may use the call to worship as occasion to call for maturity in worship. Such calls may be formulated from biblical principles of worship applied to circumstances and situations extant in the church. Though admittedly requiring wisdom and careful thought on the part of the revitalizing pastor, such exhortations to maturity in worship may be compellingly framed. Douglas Wilson's *Exhortations: A Call to Maturity in Worship* is a helpful resource for this form of a call to worship in that the exhortations he offers lend themselves to

circumstantial adaptation.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, revitalization leaders may employ hymns as effective calls to worship. When this form is used, the worship leader should preface the hymn by calling attention to the structure of the song in relation to God's call for his people to worship him. Hymnodic calls to worship might include "Come, Thou Almighty King," the "Doxology," "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven," "How Great Thou Art," "Come, Let Us Worship and Bow Down," "All Creature of Our God and King," or "Be Exalted, O God." When choosing a hymn as a call to worship, care must be taken to ensure that the hymn either calls upon God to empower the worship or calls upon the worshipers to aspire to the worship of the living God.

## **Prayer**

Prayer led by a spiritually mature Christian is a congregational act of worship. Revitalization leaders should give attention to ensuring those who lead in prayer are informed beforehand, so that they are prepared in heart and mind to lead this act of worship. Those who lead in prayer should offer biblically-informed prayers, keeping in mind the worship-element of praying the Word.

Such prayer is a congregational act of worship in that believers should pray silently together as the prayer-leader prays audibly. Further, set times of prayer should focus variously upon elements of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, as well as elements of the sermon to be preached. In a word, worshiping congregations should pray the Word, pray the Word together, and pray the Word intentionally.

A further prayer concern for revitalizing pastors is the pastoral prayer. The pastor standing before the church and intreating God on behalf of his congregation is at once both compelling and instructive. The Pauline letters to the churches are adorned

---

<sup>17</sup>Douglas Wilson, *Exhortations: A Call to Maturity in Worship* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2000).

with powerful pastoral prayers, and are a rich storehouse for informing the pastoral prayers of revitalizing pastors. These prayers are part of the inspired canon of Scripture, and whereas he was much concerned for the revitalization of the churches to which he wrote, pastors in revitalization contexts have in Paul's prayers rich fields from which to glean.<sup>18</sup> These pastoral prayers should be a consistent feature in the worship of the gathered church. Two resources for enhancing the element of the pastoral prayer are *Praying With Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D. A. Carson<sup>19</sup> and C. H. Spurgeon's *Lessons From the Apostle Paul's Prayers*.<sup>20</sup>

## **Singing**

Singing is a commanded element of worship in Scripture, engaging the heart and mind of congregants in the giving of praise to God (cf. Psa 27:6; 108:1; Eph 5:19-21). Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs focus worshipers upon the perfections and attributes of God, the redemptive work of Christ, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Revitalization leaders should work to ensure that songs offered during worship accord with the Word of God. In many revitalization contexts, the songs traditionally sung by the congregation unduly focus upon the needs and desires of the individual, reflecting the autonomous spirit of the age. Where this is the case, the revitalizing pastor must patiently teach and lead the congregation to embrace God-glorifying, Christ exalting, theologically sound songs and hymns.

Further, song selection for times of worship should be done in view of the

---

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Rom 1:8-10; 10:1; 15:5-6, 13; 1 Cor 1:4-9; 2 Cor 1:3-7; 2:14-16; 13:7-9; Eph 1:3-23; 3:14-21; Phil 1:3-6, 9-11; Col 1:3-14; 1 Thess 1:2-3; 2:13-16; 3:9-13; 5:23-24, 28; 2 Thess 1:3-4, 11-12; 2:16-17.

<sup>19</sup>D. A. Carson, *Praying With Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

<sup>20</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *Lessons from the Apostle Paul's Prayers* (N.p.: Cross-Points Book, 2018).

songs preparing the congregation for the hearing and receiving of the preached Word. To aid in this process, we suggest that pastors submit their sermon title, texts, outline and a listing of sermonic themes to the worship leader three to four weeks in advance. When coupled with the topical index of songs commonly listed in hymnals, this will significantly improve the song selection process, helping to ensure that the singing worship of the congregation is such as accords with Scripture. Singing the Word thus is extraordinarily didactic, and will serve to enhance the congregation's understanding of the preached Word.

### **Affirmations of Faith**

Affirmations of faith are brief, variable readings that serve the purpose of encapsulating or summarizing one or more aspects of the Christian faith. Such affirmations may include sections of Scripture,<sup>21</sup> historic confessions and creeds such as the Apostle's Creed or the Athanasian Creed, or even specific articles of the Baptist Faith and Message. When regularly woven into the fabric of our worship, affirmations of faith can solidify the unity of the church in its doctrine, aid us in humbling ourselves before the truths of Scripture, and provide a testimony before our children and attending non-believers.

We suggest that affirmations of faith are most effective when the congregation participates in the recitation. This might take the form of the affirmation being read in unison by the congregation, or the worship leader reciting a sentence aloud, then the congregation reciting the following clause, and so forth. Another form of faith-affirmation might be to have one half of the congregation recite a line, then the other half antiphonally reciting the next line, and so forth.

As with the call to worship, affirmations of faith may be expressed in song.

---

<sup>21</sup>I.e. Deut 6:4-5; Psa 23 & 46; Matt 5:3-36; Rom 6:3-10; 1 Cor 15:3-8, 20-28; Eph 2:4-10; Col 1:16-17.

When utilizing a song as an affirmation of faith, the worship leader should beforehand identify the song as such and point to one or more foundational truths in the verses to engage the congregation. Songs as affirmations of faith might include “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” “Great is Thy Faithfulness” “O God Our Help in Ages Past,” “Before the Throne of God Above,” “In Christ Alone,” or “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand.”

### **Confessions of Sin and Assurances of Pardon**

Meaningful engagement with God in worship occasions the prominence of God’s holiness. Holiness recognized should lead to the counter-recognition of our sinfulness and requisite confession. We believe corporate confession of sin is a necessary element of biblical worship (cf. James 5:16; 1 John 1:9). As with other elements of worship, confessions of sin are best drawn from Scripture and its implications. Scriptural confessions might include passages such as Psalm 25:6-18, Psalm 40:11-13, Psalm 51, or 1 John 1:8-9. Additional resources for written confessions of sin include *The Valley of Vision*,<sup>22</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook*,<sup>23</sup> and *O Come, Let us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church*.<sup>24</sup> As with calls to worship, such confessions may be read in unison, responsively, or antiphonally.

We suggest that corporate confession of sin should be followed by a period of reflective silence, allowing individual worshipers time to privately confess personal sins before God. Such combination of corporate and private confession reminds congregants not only of the need of confession, but of the gravitas of entering into the presence of holy God.

---

<sup>22</sup>*The Valley of Vision*, Arthur Bennett, ed., (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003).

<sup>23</sup>*The Worship Sourcebook*, Emily R. Brink and John D. Witvliet, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

<sup>24</sup>Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1980.

Sin rightly confessed occasions the need for assurance of pardon. Confessed sin assaults the conscience, and this is precisely where the good news of the gospel—that God in Christ forgives our sin—is most reassuring. Assurances of pardon in Scripture are manifold, including such rich passages as Psalm 32:3-5, Psalm 103:8-14, Isaiah 53:5-6, Micah 7:18-19, John 3:16, Romans 5:8-9 and 1 Peter 2:24. Additional resources for written assurances of pardon may be found in the immediately forementioned literature, as well as Bryan Chapell’s *Christ Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*.<sup>25</sup> Assurances of pardon should be proclaimed with great joy and gladness of heart, either by the worship leader or by the congregation in unison. As with all the elements of biblical worship, confessions of sin and assurances of pardon should be Scripture-centric.

### **Scripture Reading**

Appointed times of oral Scripture reading was normative in the Jewish worship of God from as early as the Pentateuch (Deut 31:9-12; cf. Neh 8:1-12). The Christian church retained the honored position of Scripture reading in worship, and we now have a long and established pattern of the practice coming to us through the liturgy, doctrine and history of the church.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, any reasonable consideration of church history must conclude that Scripture reading is a hallmark of authentic worship.

The powerful Word of God creates (Gen 1:3; Psa 33:9), controls (Psa 147:15-18), persuades (Jer 23:28-29), performs his purposes (Isa 55:11), and regenerates (James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:3). Despite the self-evident power of the Word of God, our experience indicates a paucity of intentional, ordered Scripture reading in churches experiencing decay and decline. Because the Word of God possesses inherent efficacy, pastors

---

<sup>25</sup>Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>26</sup>Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*, 220-21.

laboring in the trenches of revitalization should give primacy to the reading of the Word in the worship of the church (cf. 1 Tim 4:13).

We contend that pastors and teachers should not only read the text of Scripture publicly, but we should read Scripture well. Reading Scripture well requires an exegetical grasp of the passage being read. As well, proper grouping of words and phrases, voice inflexions appropriate to the sentiment of the passage, and a requisite gravitas must accompany effective public reading of Scripture. This is necessary for communicating a right understanding of Scripture (cf. Neh 8:8). Revitalization leaders should, therefore, prepare and practice for reading Scripture well in the public worship.

Scripture reading selections should be conducive to the overall theme the worship service and supportive of the text of the sermon. Additionally, pastors should seek to strike a balance between Old Testament and New Testament readings such that over time the congregation is exposed to the whole counsel of God's Word. Scripture reading is a hallmark of authentic Christian worship, and revitalization pastors should incorporate the reading of the Word into the worship-rhythm of the church.

### **The Sermon**

In plateaued or declining church contexts, the preaching of the effectual Word of God holds the greatest potential for producing the fruit of renewal and revitalization. Because Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness so that the church becomes equipped for the work to which she is called (2 Tim 3:16-17; cf. Eph 4:11-16), we hold that sermon delivery should be primarily expository in nature. Expository preaching aims to communicate to the hearts and minds of God's people what God himself has said. Expository preaching of the Word revitalizes precisely because his Word is God's instrument of revitalization.

Revitalization pastors should therefore preach the Word in light of the gospel and all its transformative entailments. The sermons recorded in the book of Acts and the

Epistles all center upon Christ and his redemptive transformation of sinners. Such preaching focuses upon our fallen, sinful condition and the divine solution for that condition. The entropic nature of sin leads to decay and death, but Christ-centered preaching leads to holiness issuing from grace, holiness motivated by grace, and holiness enabled by union with Christ.<sup>27</sup> Simply put, Christ-centered, gospel-saturated preaching, accompanied by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit, is the means by which God regenerates, renews and revitalizes his people.<sup>28</sup> The revitalizing sermon, therefore, is the God-appointed centerpiece of revitalizing worship.

### **Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

The Christ-appointed ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are elements of worship wherein the gospel is made visible. The revitalizing pastor should maximally utilize these two ordinances to encapsulate the gospel, reinforce the preached Word, and revive the congregation's love and affection for Christ.

Revitalizing pastors should not assume that their congregations fully understand baptism. It is our experience that declining churches often have inordinate numbers of members who conflate baptism with salvation, loosely holding a quasi-view of baptismal regeneration. When baptizing newly-professing believers, the pastor should seize the occasion to preach thoroughgoing sermons concerning what this outward sign of baptism signifies of the inward, spiritual reality of regeneration and union with Christ (cf. Rom 6:1-14).

It has also been our experience that plateaued and declining churches typically observe the Lord's Supper only once or twice each year. We suggest a more regular

---

<sup>27</sup>Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*, 234-251.

<sup>28</sup>See Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) and Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989).

observance is needed, and propose that a monthly observance of the Supper in a revitalization context affords opportunity for the pastor to increasingly buttress the gospel-centered preaching of the Word. To that end, revitalization leaders should prepare effective and evocative communion addresses which connect the OT shadows with the NT realities of our Lord's redemptive sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> Deepening a congregation's understanding of our glorious union with Christ through his sin-atonement sacrifice holds great potential for reviving and revitalizing the church. Revitalized Communion will produce revitalized congregants.

### **Benedictions**

Use of a closing benediction—or blessing—is helpful for reminding the congregation of both the exhortations and promises they have heard in the worship service. This aids the church in returning to the world with our thinking corrected by the Word and our confidence reinforced by the Word. In essence, the benediction should be both an encouragement and a charge for the church to do the will of God in the world to which we are returning.

Benedictions delivered by revitalizing pastors might consist of passages such as Numbers 6:24-26, Romans 15:13 and 33, 2 Corinthians 13:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, or Hebrews 13:20-21. Additionally, pastors in revitalizing contexts should consider fashioning benedictions that summarize the sermon and add words of divine blessing from Scripture. Such benedictions are effective instruments of pastoral care, communicating the love and presence of the heavenly Father so that worshipers exit the service filled with joy and confidence for their work in the coming week.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup>Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002) 179-235. Mathison rightly asserts, "The New Testament account of the institution of the Lord's Supper presupposes a basic understanding of these old covenant types and shadows." For another excellent resource on Communion, see Thomas Dolittle, *A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*, edited by Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1998).

<sup>30</sup>Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*, 254.

In summary, we maintain that a more intentional, liturgical approach to worship is needed in many revitalization contexts. This will aid the pastor in combatting the entropic tendency often affecting corporate worship as he seeks to establish a more disciplined, Scripture-saturated, gospel-oriented and Christ-honoring form of worship in the declining church. Revitalized worship revitalizes the church. A revitalized church will, in turn, offer a vivified worship that strengthens the congregation and confronts the unbelieving with the glories of the gospel. Worship revitalizes, and the revitalized exult in worship.

### **Revitalizing Fellowship**

In chapter six we argued that among the numerous causes of church plateau and decline, internal divisions and strife between church members stands as a particularly debilitating cause (cf. 1 Cor 11:18; 3:3; 1:10). We called attention to a recent Lifeway survey indicating that maintaining unity within the church was the greatest pressure-point cited by Protestant pastors.<sup>31</sup> It is commonly observed that fractured fellowship in a congregation is often a problem in churches experiencing plateau and decline.<sup>32</sup>

Among the causes of fractured fellowship, we contended that the autonomous spirit of the age contributes significantly to this common malady. Community lies at the very heart of what it means to be a functional, healthy church of the Lord Jesus Christ—and individual autonomy is a vociferous disease that gnaws inexorably at the very foundations of the church as a community. We argued likewise that in many plateaued and declining churches the anti-authoritarian spirit of our age undermines the mutual submission inherent in Christian fellowship.

---

<sup>31</sup>Lifeway Research, *Pastors' Views On How Covid-19 Is Affecting Their Church July 2020*, 21, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Coronavirus-Pastors-Full-Report-July-2020.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup>Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 95.

In sharp contrast to divisive autonomism and anti-authoritarianism, Scripture calls the church to a felicity of fellowship that binds the community together with sweet and unbreakable bonds under the Lordship and Word of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christian fellowship rightly understood and biblically practiced is the inspired antidote to debilitating, health-destroying, worship-crippling, witness-diminishing divisions within the local church. It is therefore critical that leaders in revitalization contexts recognize the felicity of Christian fellowship as a means to spiritual renewal.

We demonstrated from Scripture that fellowship is shared, intimate communion with the Father, wrought by the reconciling cross-work and resurrection of the Son, and effectuated by the regenerating, indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. Christians fellowship is predicated upon partaking together in the shared experiences and common goals of all that is entailed in living together as Kingdom citizens. All of these entailments are tributaries of gospel experience, proclamation and advancement.

Further, we established that Christian fellowship consists of participation together in that which is greater than the constituent parts *and* the sum of the gathered church. Fellowship is a shared participation with others in that which is greater than the relationship itself. This fellowship of shared experience, like-mindedness and common objectives binds individuals together within the church in a relationship of mutual care and unifies the congregation in partnership for the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We argued that Luke's account of the Jerusalem congregation's fellowship clearly stands as an exemplar to the church of all ages. They enjoyed fellowship around the table of God's word, the table of shared meals and the Lord's Supper and corporate, and unified prayer. Additionally, their fellowship included ministry to one another's needs and the fellowship of mutual, joyful and public thanksgiving and praise unto God. The Jerusalem church was *devoted* to fellowship, and they practiced fellowship as a matter of intentional discipline. Such devotion to fellowship served to guard the church

against encroaching strife and division and enhanced their gospel witness. Indeed, we discovered in Acts a church functioning with a single-minded unity that only occurs when the redeemed community fellowships around her God-given priorities. Again, God was pleased to continually multiply their influence and numbers as the church practiced the Kingdom priority of Christian fellowship (cf. Acts 2:47; 6:7).

Further, we considered in detail Paul's emphasis upon the felicity of fellowship in his corrective letter to the church at Corinth. In the face of their factionalism and division, Paul repeatedly urged them to embrace the unity of fellowship inherent in their common salvation in Jesus Christ. Indeed, we observed that the primacy of the fellowship of the saints undergirds the entire letter of First Corinthians. Additionally, Paul's letter to the Ephesians called them to a unified fellowship as one body, indwelled by one Spirit, possessed of one hope, grace-gifted by one Lord, coalescing around one faith, one baptism and one sovereign, universal Father. The fruit of such fellowship, according to Paul, would be their maturation in numbers, maturation in knowledge and maturation in love.

In many revitalization contexts, the ever-increasing busyness of lives lived at the individual level has led to a diminution of occasions for fostering fellowship. A current trend in many Southern Baptist churches is toward elimination of Sunday afternoon Training Union<sup>33</sup> and dismissal of Sunday evening worship. Further, a recent Lifeway survey indicated only forty-five percent of U. S. Protestant pastors reported still holding prayer meetings on Wednesday night.<sup>34</sup> Though unintended, this reduction of

---

<sup>33</sup>Our experience indicates that many in our churches today have no idea what Baptist Training Union is. For those unaware, Baptist Training Union was once a common practice in Southern Baptist Churches wherein members met one hour before the evening worship for the purpose of discipleship training.

<sup>34</sup>Aaron Earls, *Wednesday Night Still a Church Night for Most Congregations* (Lifeway Research, 2019), <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/09/10/vast-majority-of-churches-still-have-wednesday-night-activities/>. Despite the title of this article, the research cited indicates that very few of the "activities" reported were for the gathered church, but were rather demographically segregated activities that divide

time spent together has consequently crippled the enjoyment and practice of Christian fellowship in many churches. In short, Christian fellowship is diminished in direct correlation to the reduction of time spent together.

Given the emphasis upon fellowship in the functional life of the Jerusalem church and in the Pauline corpus, leaders in revitalization contexts should focus on the revitalization of healthy fellowship. Christian fellowship is often simply assumed. This is potentially a critical mistake in the work of church revitalization. Fellowship assumed is fellowship taken for granted, and fellowship taken for granted soon disintegrates, especially in a cultural environment of autonomism and anti-authoritarianism.

Revitalization leaders should intentionally and regularly call the congregation's attention to their shared experience in Christ, their joint participation in the life of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and their partnership in the advancement of the gospel. Additionally, broad participation in the church's prayer-life, Word proclamation-life, worship-life and ministry-life should be promoted as essential to the salubrious fellowship and unity of the church. Reminders of these fellowship-inducing realities should be part of the warp and woof of the revitalization leader's hortatory appeals. To that end, Paul's expositions on the vitality of fellowship in the first Corinthian letter and in Ephesians 4:1-16 should be carefully preached and taught.

Additionally, revitalization leaders should revive weekly appointed times of discipleship to aid in revitalizing fellowship. As mentioned above, churches that have discarded Baptist Training Union have significantly diminished their time for unifying fellowship around the Word of God. Regularly scheduled times of discipleship call the church to intentional fellowship together at the spiritual table of Scripture. Likewise, where they have been discontinued, weekly corporate prayer meetings should be

---

rather than unify the fellowship of the church. It is also notable that several of the "activities" reported have little to do with the biblical priorities of the church.

reinstated, and revitalization pastors should accentuate the sweetness of prayer fellowship.

Another means of increasing fellowship in the church is through intentional fellowship meals. While Baptists are often mocked for our “eating meetings,” such practice is certainly evidenced in Scripture. Revitalizing pastors might consider teaching through the many times in the gospels where Christ ate meals with his disciples. Indeed, we see the first church at Jerusalem emulating this very activity from the very beginning of her existence (cf. Acts 2:41-27). Taking meals jointly serves to bind hearts together as the members share their lives with one another over God’s bountiful food-provision. Fellowship meals may also be utilized as an antecedent to times of discipleship, and revitalization leaders might consider establishing designated times for “Fellowship Meals and Discipleship.” Our Lord’s practice of this combination is certainly exemplary.

As the cords of fellowship in a declining church are strengthened, such church may reasonably expect the winds of revitalization to blow supernaturally in her midst. Hearts and lives are bound together, division and descension are marginalized, and Kingdom advancement is enhanced when the church fellowships around her common salvation, Lord and experience. Fellowship revitalizes, and the revitalized exult in fellowship.

### **Revitalizing Evangelism**

In chapter seven we demonstrated from the data that evangelism is in precipitous decline in the churches of our Southern Baptist Convention. Current statistics indicate a 60:1 church members to baptisms ratio, revealing that in the current climate of evangelism it takes sixty church members to realize one conversion *per year*. Further, a 2019 Lifeway survey discovered that fifty-five percent of those who attend church at least once a month say they have not shared with someone how to become a Christian in

the past six months.<sup>35</sup>

The findings of a 2018 Barna Research survey uncovered yet another startling reality.<sup>36</sup> Asked if they had ever heard of the Great Commission, fifty-one percent of U.S. churchgoers said they could not recall having heard the term. Further, twenty-five percent of the respondents had heard the term, but were unfamiliar with what it meant. When taken together, the data indicate that as many as seventy-five percent of U. S. churchgoers have little to no understanding of the Great Commission given to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:18-20.

This paucity of evangelism is not limited to church members. According to a 2014 survey of SBC pastors, only twenty-five percent of respondents claimed to average two or more complete gospel conversations per week. More than sixty percent of pastors surveyed reported they do not present the gospel as often as once per week. Chuck Lawless, Dean of Doctoral Studies and Vice-President of Spiritual Formation and Ministry Centers at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes in the introduction to this survey, “Over fifteen years of church consulting, our research has led to this finding: seldom have we seen a congregation more evangelistic than the church who is led from the pulpit each Sunday.”<sup>37</sup>

Lackluster evangelism is a virtual hallmark in both the leadership and membership of plateaued and declining churches. These statistics on evangelism are correlative to the data indicating that as many as nine out of ten churches in the Southern

---

<sup>35</sup>Aaron Earls, “Evangelism More Prayed for Than Practiced by Churchgoers,” Lifeway Research, April 23, 2019, <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2019/05/23/giving-increases-for-sbc-in-2018-baptisms-attendance-continue-decline/>.

<sup>36</sup>Barna Group, “Sharing Faith Is Increasingly Optional to Christians,” May 15, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>.

<sup>37</sup>Charles E. Lawless, Jr, “Personal Evangelism and Pastors,” Thom S. Rainer, January 21, 2014, <https://thomrainer.com/2014/01/personal-evangelism-and-pastors-14-findings-part-one/>.

Baptist Convention are either plateaued or in decline. We maintain that a causal relationship exists between the former and the latter sets of data. Although a dearth of both pastoral and congregational evangelism is not the exclusive contributing factor in plateaued and declining churches, anemic evangelism is one of the more significant factors. Evangelistic failure leads inexorably to the plateau, decline and eventual death of a church.

We demonstrated that Luke was didactically concerned to record in the book of Acts the faithfulness of the apostles' evangelism. Of the 1,006 verses comprising the twenty-eight chapters of Acts, Luke devoted approximately 500 of those verses to descriptions of the evangelism of church leaders. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he intended to set forth a pattern for emulation. The church throughout the book of Acts was graced with shepherds who led by example in personal evangelism. God was pleased to bless their evangelism, and the church grew exponentially.

Further, we established that as a missionary-pastor and church revitalizer, the apostle Paul practiced personal evangelism reflective of the dimensions of the evangelism practiced by the original apostles. He considered evangelism a grace-entrusted stewardship to be personally practiced and consistently transferred to those whom he disciplined. The apostle deemed pastoral evangelism essential both for the equipping and the revitalization of the church.

The didactic objective of pastoral evangelism is the equipping of the congregation for the work of personal evangelism—and congregational evangelism is essential to the work of church revitalization. As we demonstrated in chapter seven, the Great Commission was delivered to the entire church and is operative for every member of every church of all ages. The leadership of the Jerusalem church led by evangelistic example, and the church emulated their fidelity. Faithful to the command of our Lord, the Jerusalem church—indeed, the entire Jerusalem church—was evangelistically engaged. Further, we demonstrated from the Pauline corpus that Paul clearly viewed evangelism as

an indispensable responsibility and privilege for every member of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Given the primacy of both pastoral and congregational evangelism evidenced in Acts and the Pauline corpus, we maintain that revitalization pastors serve their churches well when they lead by personal example in the discipline of evangelism. Clear and consistent articulation of the gospel in the pulpit is essential, yet the pastor's responsibility does not terminate at the podium. Given the aforementioned quasi view of baptismal regeneration currently prevalent in many churches, gospel proclamation should characterize the pastor's interaction with church members. A consistent holding forth of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is essential for rescuing lost church members, thus the revitalizing pastor must evangelize consistently even within his congregation.

Secondly, pastors laboring in revitalization contexts must endeavor to set before his congregation an observable example of evangelistic practice (cf. 1 Tim 4:12; 2 Tim 4:5). Just as Paul instructed Timothy, who was laboring to revitalize the church at Ephesus, the revitalizing pastor should set an example before his congregation of personal witness.<sup>38</sup> This might initially include the pastor having his deacons accompany and observe him in counseling contexts and visitation in the community. Additionally, we hold that pastors should at all times be discipling and raising up men for leadership in the church. This practice further affords the pastor opportunity to model evangelism before those whom he is discipling.

Thirdly, the revitalizing pastor should emphasize in his preaching and teaching the every-member-responsible aspect of evangelism. As we demonstrated, the book of Acts emphasizes a church-wide approach to proclaiming the gospel. Pastors should call

---

<sup>38</sup>Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 246.

attention to this exemplary church and the resultant blessing of God upon their evangelism. Likewise, the revitalizing pastor should present expositional teaching on congregational evangelism from the rich storehouse of the Pauline corpus. Faithful use of Scripture in this manner will both challenge and equip the declining church for the work of evangelism.

Fourthly, revitalizing pastors should not take for granted that his church members have been properly trained to do evangelism. It has been our experience that very few church members have been meaningfully disciplined in the proclamation of the gospel. The pastor should hold training sessions with the entire church wherein he carefully sets forth the necessary elements of the gospel. While there are any number of methodological approaches to gospel presentation available, we urge revitalizing pastors to carefully utilize only material that presents an uncompromised, full-orbed biblical gospel. This training should also include instruction on creating conversational bridges to gospel presentation that equip members to comfortably engage others with the gospel.

In conclusion, we recall that contemporary literature on church revitalization is virtually unanimous—personal evangelism is requisite for the renewal of the church in the twenty-first century. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson identified a renewed passion for evangelism among the ten most important factors for “Comeback Churches.”<sup>39</sup> Andrew M. Davis contends that every revitalization effort must embrace “the responsibility to be witnesses to lost neighbors, co-workers, family members, and even total strangers.”<sup>40</sup>

In their study of churches experiencing transformation, Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer discovered that “evangelism is a natural part of life for (the churches’)

---

<sup>39</sup>Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 195.

<sup>40</sup>Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 204.

members.”<sup>41</sup> Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest maintain that anemic evangelism is a barrier churches absolutely must overcome to experience renewal.<sup>42</sup> Harry L. Reeder holds that God revitalizes those churches who “stay amazed by the gospel and intentionally seek relationships with the lost so that (they) can share the gospel with them.”<sup>43</sup>

More importantly, Scripture is explicit that evangelism is a most effective means of church revitalization. Evangelism is a vital discipline for combating the entropic principle of decay and decline evident in our churches. Scripture is clear that God is pleased to richly bless intentional efforts to advance the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Evangelism revitalizes and the revitalized evangelize.

### **Revitalizing Discipleship**

In chapter eight, we established that discipleship is the entire, intentional process of proclaiming the authoritative gospel of Jesus Christ to others, baptizing those who repent, believe and embrace the Lordship of Jesus Christ—and then teaching them to obey the whole of Scripture. The making of disciples is the very heart of the Great Commission mandate of our Lord, and stands as an indispensable discipline for the vitality and advancement of the church. Indeed, this comprehensive and sustaining mandate has served to advance the church for more than two thousand years.

Despite the mandate of Christ and salubrious nature of the Great Commission, however, another common deficiency among churches experiencing decay and decline is a lack of discipline in being, making and maturing disciples. A 2015 Barna Research

---

<sup>41</sup>Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 201.

<sup>42</sup>Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 39-49.

<sup>43</sup>Harry L. Reeder and David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2004), 175.

survey revealed the depths of discipleship deficiency in the thinking and practice of many churches.<sup>44</sup> A mere one in five Christian adults polled were engaged in some form of discipleship activity, according to the survey. This finding accords with our observance that plateaued and declining churches often lack an established discipleship curriculum and methodology.

While making disciples is self-evidently reproductive and health-inducing in the life of the church, churches in plateau or decline, as a general rule, have allowed various emphases to displace the primacy of discipleship in the functional life of the church. As new generations of believers arise in such churches, failure to disciple these generations results in their drifting away. The process of new believers coming in the front doors of churches, proceeding through the baptistry, and eventually disappearing via that back doors is an incongruity commonly acknowledged in declining churches.

As a result, swollen membership rolls that do not in any way reflect the so-called “active” membership of the church are common. Further, failure to disciple each successive generation produces a lack of generational diversity within the church, and the church experiences the downward spiral of an aging congregation. At a certain point the process becomes irreversible, and the inevitable decline leads to the death of the church.

We established that the priority given to making disciples in the Jerusalem church stands as a prominent and didactic feature of Luke’s account of the Acts of the Apostles. Apostolic obedience to the Great Commission permeates the narrative, and their faithfulness to disciple influenced the rapid expansion of the church to Samaria and Gentile Caesarea.

When Paul assumed the role of missionary church planter, commissioned by the church at Antioch Syria, his paradigm of ministry was infused with Jerusalem’s

---

<sup>44</sup>Barna Group, “New Research on the State of Discipleship,” December 1, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.

discipleship DNA. Discipleship was so central to the spiritual life and expansion of the church that Paul frequently traveled hundreds of miles out of his way to ensure that the churches of Asia Minor were sufficiently disciplined in the school of Christ. Paul's great concern and emphasis throughout his apostolic career was to insure the proper discipleship of the believers in the expanding church. His letters to churches and pastors pulsate with impassioned, nouthetic and didactic instruction aimed at maturing believers in their faith. The apostle clearly understood that discipleship was essential in the battle against the entropic principle operative in the churches. Unless believers became deeply rooted and grounded in their faith, decay and decline would set in, the gospel would be compromised, and the churches would cease to exist as agents of Kingdom advance.

We contend, therefore, that pastors laboring in the trenches of revitalization should lead their churches to revisit and embrace the health-inducing discipline of making and maturing disciples. Pastors should teach their congregations that discipleship is multiplicative numerically, and discipleship properly practiced also produces depth, stability and longevity in the spiritual life of the church. Revitalization leaders should teach the glorious and authoritative Lordship and dominion of Jesus Christ, holding forth his commandments and calling for obedience. Pastors will discover that faithfulness to Christ's commandments leads to unparalleled joy and unquenchable hope in the functional life of the church.

Amid the landscape of declining, dying churches in our nation, the Apostolic and Pauline paradigm of persistent, Christocentric discipleship stands as a beacon of hope. The revitalization of churches rests largely upon faithfulness to this Great Commission mandate to be, make, and mature disciples. Revitalization pastors who faithfully engage their congregations in this primary spiritual discipline may reasonably expect not only the reversal of decline, but the blessing of Christ's incomparable presence and salubrious, generation-spanning growth.

We suggest developing an intentional and structured discipleship curriculum to

aid in the process of making disciples. We encourage revitalization pastors to carefully develop a discipleship training course drawn from Scripture and the pastor's relational knowledge of his congregation and community. Any number of discipleship curricula are available to aid in this process, but we maintain that modifications will be necessary in order to properly equip each unique congregation. We acknowledge the significant work necessary in this approach, but contend this is a far more effective than the wholesale adoption of any curriculum.

We suggest that several components are necessary in a well-developed disciple training course. Initial discipleship—we will call this “Discipleship 101”—should include teaching concerning church *membership*, including a thoroughgoing explanation of the gospel,<sup>45</sup> baptism,<sup>46</sup> and the Lord's Supper.<sup>47</sup> Discipleship 101 should also incorporate instruction on why the church exists, what are the Kingdom priorities of the church, an explanation of the Church Covenant, exposition of the church's Confession of Faith, and a review of church by-laws. Discipleship 101 orients new believers to the importance, privileges and responsibilities of being a member of the body of Christ.

Secondly, new believers should receive instruction concerning the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. We will call this “Discipleship 201,” and the objective is to move new believers toward *maturity*. This phase of discipleship should include training on Bible reading and study, prayer and worship. Further instruction in the spiritual disciplines should include training for evangelism, ministry in the church, and principles of Christian stewardship. Resources for Discipleship 201 might include Donald S. Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*,<sup>48</sup> *The Path of True Godliness* by

---

<sup>45</sup>See Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>46</sup>See Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H, 2015).

<sup>47</sup>See Mathison, *Given for You* and Thomas Dolittle, *A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*.

<sup>48</sup>Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014). See also Whitney, *Praying the Bible*.

Willem Teellinck,<sup>49</sup> and *Being a Christian: How Jesus Redeems All of Life*<sup>50</sup> by Jason K. Allen. Discipleship 201 should orient the new believer to the disciplines of the Christian life and move them toward spiritual maturity.

Whereas the second level of discipleship seeks to move believers toward spiritual *maturity*, the third level of training should seek to establish understanding of spiritual gifting and discovery of the disciple's individual spiritual gifting for *ministry*. We will call this "Discipleship 301." Although a plethora of spiritual gifting analyses are available, we contend most of these are based upon the presuppositions of Darwinian psychology and should be avoided. Careful teaching from the Pauline corpus should be employed with emphasis upon the Trinitarian gifting of every member for the work of ministry in the church.<sup>51</sup> Two helpful resources for teaching and discovery of spiritual gifts are *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter*<sup>52</sup> by Thomas R. Schreiner and *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts*<sup>53</sup> by C. Peter Wagner. Discipleship 301 should focus on helping new believers discover their spiritual gifting and engage in the work of ministry in the church.

The fourth stage of discipleship should seek to commission disciples to go and make disciples. We will call this "Discipleship 401," and the objective is to move disciples to *mission*. Focused training on how to effectively proclaim the gospel should serve as the foundation of this stage. While there are any number of methodological approaches to gospel presentation available, we urge revitalizing pastors to carefully

---

<sup>49</sup>Willem Teellinck, *The Path of True Godliness*, Joel R. Beeke, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>50</sup>Jason K. Allen, *Being a Christian: How Jesus Redeems All of Life* (Nashville: B&H, 2018).

<sup>51</sup>See Chapter 9 of this dissertation where we treat 1 Cor 12 and Eph 4:1-16.

<sup>52</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (Nashville: B&H, 2018).

<sup>53</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publishing, 2010).

utilize only material that presents an uncompromised, full-orbed biblical gospel. This training should also include instruction on conversational bridges to gospel presentation that equip members to comfortably engage others with the gospel. Finally, the newly-trained disciple should receive instruction on making disciples, utilizing the training they themselves have received.<sup>54</sup>

The revitalizing pastor should work to train every member of the church in making disciples. It has been our experience that in any congregation, very few—if any—of the members have received intentional discipleship training. Further, as the membership is trained to make disciples, we contend that the pastor should assign members to disciple new believers one-on-one, insuring that every new believer is personally discipled for at least the first year of their walk with Christ.

Again, the making of disciples who make disciples holds tremendous potential for the revitalization of plateaued and declining churches. Intentional, church-wide discipleship at the same time both multiplies the church and matures the church. Jesus made disciples, the Jerusalem church made disciples, and the apostle Paul made disciples, resulting in the rapid advancement of the church. This Great Commandment discipline is still mandatory for the church today. Discipleship revitalizes, and revitalized churches make disciples.

### **Revitalizing Ministry**

We argued in chapter nine that ministry participation is a meaningful measure of the spiritual health of a local church. Significant non-participation in the work of church ministry among the membership contributes to church deterioration and decline. Our work with and analysis of plateaued and declining churches points to ministry non-participation being a common malady among such congregations. The common ten-

---

<sup>54</sup>We encourage the development of a Discipleship Manual compiling the material transmitted in “Discipleship 101—104.”

ninety conundrum—wherein ten percent of the membership carries ninety percent of the ministry load—contributes to ministry burnout in unhealthy churches, further advancing the unhealthiness of many congregations. We contend that revitalization leaders who engage declining churches with a thoroughgoing theology of church-wide ministry participation may reasonably expect a measure of revitalization to ensue.

Our examination of the exemplary first church at Jerusalem revealed a congregation-wide embrace of the work of Christian ministry in obedience to our Lord's Great Commandment and Great Commission. This exemplary church was ablaze with multi-faceted and far-reaching ministry. Their vibrant participation in ministry served to strengthen their fellowship and enhance their spiritual growth together. The congregation's ministry to those outside the church platformed their proclamation of the gospel, yielding an expanding audience for their evangelistic endeavors. The congregation-unifying depth of their ministry was of such strength as to withstand both internal threats and external threats to their existence and unity. Again, the Jerusalem congregation was a healthy, growing church, and the correlation between their health and their commitment to the work of ministry is unmistakable in the Lukan narrative. Revitalization pastors should endeavor to expose their congregation to the example of the Jerusalem church.

Paul recognized the entropic principle warring against the church, and he accordingly sought reform and revitalization to counter the degenerating effects of this principle. Our brief survey of the Pauline corpus identified a recurring theme of ministry being essential to the health of the churches. Indeed, the practice of equipping the saints for the work of the ministry consumed much of Paul's missional and church revitalization efforts.

The apostle penned for us a comprehensive paradigm of church ministry. He carefully revealed the triune Source of ministry gifting in the church. He meticulously delineated the purpose of ministry in the church, pointing us to the edifying effects of

ministry. Paul argued convincingly for unity in diversity and diversity in unity as God's sovereign, all-wise design for ministry in the church (1 Cor 12). Finally, he asserted that salubrious growth occurs when the saints are equipped for ministry and exercise their ministry gifting (Eph 4:1-16). Revitalization pastors should employ 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4:1-6 (as well as Romans 12:3-8) to teach and establish a culture of ministry in which every member of the church is engaged.

The apostle indicated that division and degeneration occur when members fail to properly participate in and contribute to the whole ministry of the church. Conversely, we may reasonably conclude that revitalization occurs when more and more members exercise their gifts and contribute to the overall ministry of the church. We understand, therefore, that Paul's inspired, body-dynamic analogy offers a most effective means for reversing the prevailing entropy that grips so many declining churches. Revival and revitalization, health and increase, church growth and Kingdom advancement—at least in part—depend upon leadership of declining churches utilizing this most emphatic paradigm. We contend, therefore, that revitalization pastors must establish a clearly defined process for moving a person from salvation to spiritual maturity to significant ministry.

In the preceding section on revitalizing discipleship we proposed the development of a discipleship curriculum. Discipleship should first move new believers to a full-orbed understanding of the privileges and responsibilities of church *membership*. Secondly, teaching on the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life should move new believers toward *maturity*. The third stage of discipleship, we contended, should move new believers to engage meaningfully with the *ministry* of the church. The objective for revitalization leaders here is to efficiently move new believers from bare membership to ministry involvement as quickly as possible.

Ministry within the church is defined by the Kingdom priorities of the church delineated in this dissertation, namely, prayer, worship, fellowship, evangelism,

discipleship. Revitalizing pastors should equip and engage church members in these variegated ministries within the church such that these Kingdom priorities are well supported and well executed.

Discovering the outward ministry of the church in the context of the community in which the church exists requires the revitalization leader and the church to move outside their own walls. We recommend the commissioning of a demographic and psychographic study of the church community. Local and state Associations often offer this service for member churches, and it is our experience that those services which engage the church in the collection of this data are most effective. A thoroughgoing demographic and psychographic community study will enable to revitalizing leader and church to identify the most effective ministries for reaching their community based upon the actual needs of the community. In structuring these outreach ministries, the revitalizing pastor must ensure that the gospel is front and center.

Helpful resources for developing effective ministries might include such offerings as Michael Lawrence's *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*,<sup>55</sup> Timothy Keller's *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*,<sup>56</sup> and Wayne A. Mack and David Swavely's *Life in the Father's House*.<sup>57</sup> While the work of establishing the necessary panoply of ministries in a local church is admittedly a demanding task, the revitalizing pastor and church may be encouraged, for ministry revitalizes and revitalized churches minister.

---

<sup>55</sup>Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>56</sup>Timothy Keller, *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

<sup>57</sup>Wayne A. Mack and David Swavely, *Life in the Father's House* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996).

## Conclusion

The revitalization of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is a noble calling. Revitalization leaders stand upon the shoulders of a long and distinguished line of men whom God has been pleased to use to revive and sustain his church for two millennia. It is helpful to be reminded that in this current milieu of church decline, this is not a new phenomenon. Again, our consideration herein of the NT demonstrated that an entropic principle has been warring against the church from her inception. The church as a vital, healthy, spiritual organism does not naturally flourish in a sin-cursed, fallen world. Jesus forewarned us that the powers of hell would war against his church until his return—yet he declared he will sovereignly and gloriously build his church despite this resistance (Matt 16:18).

Paul clearly recognized the ecclesial tendency toward sin-induced entropy, and he spent his entire apostolic career analyzing and combating this propensity. Church degeneration and decline, we see, was a clear concern from the very beginning of the Great Commission enterprise. To that end, God has graciously equipped us with a paradigm for church reclamation in the pages of his inspired, infallible and profitable Word (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17). Indeed, we have a full-orbed body of instruction for addressing precisely the condition in which we find many of our churches. Such divine provision is cause for gratitude, joy and great expectation.

For those of us who labor in the trenches of revitalization ministry, we do well to remember this glorious, certain and assuring reality: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27). What Christ died and was raised from the dead to accomplish he will accomplish, and it is our unspeakable privilege to be instruments in the hands of our Redeemer to that end.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Jason K. *Being a Christian: How Jesus Redeems All of Life*. Nashville: B&H, 2018.
- Allison, Gregg R. *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- Arnold, Clinton E. *Ephesians*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.
- Augustine of Hippo. "Letters." Translated by J. G. Cunningham. In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, edited by Philip Schaff, First Series, vol. 1. *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*, with a Sketch of His Life and Work, 209-593. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886.
- Barna Group. "New Research on the State of Discipleship." December 1, 2015. <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.
- Barna Group. "Sharing Faith Is Increasingly Optional to Christians." May 15, 2018. <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>.
- Barrett, C. K. *Acts*. International Critical Commentary 1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Acts*. International Critical Commentary 2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998.
- Beale, G K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary On the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Beougher, Timothy. "32100 Personal Evangelism." Lecture, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, September 8, 2015.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Matthew*. New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Acts*. Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Bounds, Edward M. *The Necessity of Prayer*. Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2018.

- Brauer, Simon G. How Many Congregations Are There? Updating a Survey-Based Estimate.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2017): 438–48.
- Brooks, Phillips. *The Joy of Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Book of the Acts*. Rev. ed. The New International Commentary On the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008.
- Carson, D. A. *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015.
- Carson, D. A. Mark Ashton, R. Kent Hughes and Timothy Keller. *Worship by the Book*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.
- Carter, James E. “Outreach Theology: A Comparison of Southern Baptist Thought and the Church Growth Movement.” *Baptist History and Heritage* 15, no. 3 (1980): 33-56.
- Cassuto, U. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Vol. 1, From Adam to Noah. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998.
- Chapell, Bryan. *Christ Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Christ Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Cheyney, Tom, and Larry Wynn. *Preaching towards Church Revitalization and Renewal*. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2015.
- Ciampa, Roy E., and Brian S. Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Clifton, Mark. *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches*. Nashville: B&H, 2016.
- Clifton, Mark, and Kenneth Priest. *Rubicons of Revitalization*. Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018.
- Clowney, Edmund. *The Church*. Contours of Christian Theology. Downers Grove, IL:

- InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- ComRes Global. "Church of England—Church Mapping." ComRes. March 31, 2017. <http://comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Church-of-England-Church-Mapping-Survey-Data-Tables.pdf>.
- Croft, Brian. *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016.
- Danker, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Davies, W. D. *The Gospel and the Land*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1974.
- Davis, Andrew M. *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.
- Dever, Mark. *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2016.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. new expanded ed. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004.
- Dolittle, Thomas. *A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*. Edited by Don Kistler. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1998.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992.
- Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping Gods Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.
- Earls, Aaron. "Evangelism More Prayed for Than Practiced by Churchgoers." Lifeway Research. April 23, 2019. <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2019/05/23/giving-increases-for-sbc-in-2018-baptisms-attendance-continue-decline/>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Wednesday Night Still a Church Night for Most Congregations." Lifeway Research, 2019. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/09/10/vast-majority-of-churches-still-have-wednesday-night-activities/>.
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament

- Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 2. Edited by Balz, Horst, and Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Fee, Gordon D. *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.
- Frame, James A. *The International Critical Commentary: Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970.
- Frame, John M. *Worship in Spirit and Truth*. Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1996.
- Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *2 Corinthians*. New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999.
- George, Timothy. *The New American Commentary: Galatians*. Nashville: B&H, 1994.
- Green, Gene L. *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Hallock, Mark. *Great Commission Revitalization*. Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018.
- Hamilton, James M. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- Hammett, John S. *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005.
- Hansen, Collin, and Jonathan Leeman. *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.
- Harris, Murray J. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary On the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.
- Henard, Bill. *Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization*. Nashville: B & H, 2018.

- Henard, William David. *Can These Bones Live?*. Nashville: B&H, 2015.
- Hendriksen, William. *Colossians and Philemon*. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004.
- Hurtado, Larry. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.
- James, John. *Renewal: Church Revitalisation Along the Way of the Cross*. Leyland, England: 10Publishing, 2016.
- Jamieson, Bobby. *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership*. Nashville: B&H, 2015.
- Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.
- Knight, George W., III. *The Pastoral Epistles*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.
- Kruse, Colin G. *The Letters of John*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Lawless, Charles E., Jr. "Personal Evangelism and Pastors." Thom S. Rainer. January 21, 2014. <https://thomrainer.com/2014/01/personal-evangelism-and-pastors-14-findings-part-one/>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Lawrence, Michael. *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- Lea, Thomas D., and Hayne P. Griffin. *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H, 1992.
- Lifeway Research. "Pastors' Views On How Covid-19 Is Affecting Their Church July 2020." 2020. <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Coronavirus-Pastors-Full-Report-July-2020.pdf>.
- Lincoln, Andrew T. *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 42. Dallas: Word Books, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Letter to the Colossians*. New Interpreter's Bible. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000.

Longenecker, Richard N. *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary On the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Galatians*. Word Biblical Commentary: Edited by Ralph P. Martin. Vol. 41. Dallas: Word Books, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Acts*. In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, *Luke-Acts*, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Louw, J P., and Eugene A. Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based On Semantic Domains*. Vol. 2. 2nd ed. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.

Lovelace, Richard F. *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979.

MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Lord, Teach Me to Pray: An Invitation to Intimate Prayer*. Nashville: J. Countryman, 2003.

Macchia, Stephen A. *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999.

Mack, Wayne A., and David Swavely. *Life in the Father's House*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996.

Malphurs, Aubrey. *Advanced Strategic Planning: A 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Revision: The Key to Transforming Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014.

Marshall, I. Howard. *Acts*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Gospel of Luke*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians*. New American Commentary, vol. 33. Nashville: B&H, 1995.

Martin, Ralph P. *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral and Practical Reflections*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

- Mathews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 1-11*. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H, 1996.
- Mathison, Keith A. *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002.
- McIntosh, Gary. *Theres Hope for Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012.
- Melick, Richard R., Jr. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*. New American Commentary, vol. 32. Nashville: B&H, 1991.
- Merker, Matt. *Corporate Worship: How the Church Gathers as God's People*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.
- Meyers, Jeffrey J. *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Millar, J. Gary. *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*. New Studies in Biblical Theology. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016.
- Miller, Stephen R. *Daniel*. The New American Commentary. Vol. 18. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.
- Mohler, R. Albert. "The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention: The Numbers Don't Add Up." Albert Mohler. May 31, 2019. <https://albertmohler.com/2019/05/31/the-future-of-the-southern-baptist-convention-the-numbers-dont-add-up>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down*. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Romans*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Morris, Leon. *1 Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Vol. 7. *An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

- Moule, C. F. D. *Worship in the New Testament*. Ecumenical Studies in Worship No. 9. London: Lutterworth, 1961.
- Mounce, Robert H. *Romans*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995.
- Murray, John J. "Does the Church Need Repentance?" Banner of Truth. May 4, 2016. <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2016/church-need-repentance/>.
- Nolland, John. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary On the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.
- O'Brien, Peter T. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Peterson, David. *The Acts of the Apostles*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.
- Pew Research Center. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." October 17, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17?in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.
- Pipes, Carol. "Giving Increases for SBC in 2018, Baptisms, Attendance Continue Decline." Lifeway Newsroom. May 23, 2019. <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2019/05/23/giving-increases-for-sbs-in-2018-baptisms-attendance-continue-decline/>.
- Polhill, John B. *Acts*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.
- Rainer, Thom. *Breakout Churches*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Rainer, Thom S., and Eric Geiger *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2011.
- Rapa, Robert K. *Galatians*. In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, *Romans-Galatians*, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland. Grand

- Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.
- Rayburn, Robert G. *O Come Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1980.
- Reeder, Harry L., and David Swavely. *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2004.
- Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Acts*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament. Vol. 5. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. *I Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Vol. 7, *An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter*. Nashville: B&H, 2018.
- Scott, E. F. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*. The Moffatt New Testament Commentary. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930.
- Spurgeon, C. H. *Lessons from the Apostle Paul's Prayers*. N.p.: Cross-Points Book, 2018
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spurgeon at His Best: Over 2200 Striking Quotations from the Worlds Most Exhaustive and Widely-Read Sermon Series*. Compiled by Tom Carter. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988.
- Stetzer, Ed, and Mike Dodson. *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too*. Nashville: B&H, 2007.
- Stetzer, Ed, and Thom S. Rainer. *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations*. Nashville: B & H, 2010.
- Stott, John R. W. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967.
- Taylor, Mark A. *I Corinthians*. The New American Commentary 28. Nashville: B&H, 2014.
- Teellinck, Willem. *The Path of True Godliness*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Translated

- by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971.
- The Southern Baptist Convention. "The Baptist Faith and Message." The Southern Baptist Convention. Accessed November 7, 2019.  
<http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.
- The Valley of Vision*. Edited by Arthur Bennet. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003.
- The Worship Sourcebook*. Edited by Emily R. Brink and John D. Witvliet. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Van Voorst, Robert E. *Building Your New Testament Greek Vocabulary*. 3rd ed. Resources for Biblical Study. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001.
- Wagner, C. Peter. *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts*. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publishing, 2010
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Healthy Church: Avoiding and Curing the 9 Diseases That Can Afflict Any Church*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996.
- Wanamaker, Charles A. *The Epistle to the Thessalonians*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Whitney, Donald S. *Praying the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014.
- Wilson, Douglas. *Exhortations: A Call to Maturity in Worship*. Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2000.

## ABSTRACT

### ENTROPY AND RENEWAL: THE PAULINE CONCERN AND PARADIGM FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION

Randall Joe Cofield, DEdMin  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Timothy K. Beougher

That the North American church is in a season of sharp decline is a well-studied and well-established factual reality. In our own Southern Baptist Convention, studies indicate that as many as nine out of every ten churches are either plateaued or in decline. Further, analysis of the data suggests that Southern Baptist churches are closing at a disproportionately higher rate than our sister denominations. Taken together, these studies indicate that churches in need of revitalization are not the exception, but rather, the norm.

The escalating crisis of church decline has prompted a plethora of descriptive and prescriptive literature related to the revitalization of the local church. While description of the problem of church decline is fairly consistent across the literature, the prescriptive thrust of church revitalization literature demonstrates far less homogeneity, and to-date the literature is largely anecdotal and case-study oriented.

The need for church revitalization is not a new phenomenon. A survey of the NT indicates that an entropic principle has been warring against the church from the very beginning of her existence. The church as a vital, healthy, spiritual organism does not naturally flourish in a fallen world. Even the earliest churches were not inexorably inclined toward health and growth, but toward unhealth, division, decline, and even death. No church established in the NT still exists today.

The purpose of this study is to establish, by means of a thorough consideration of the NT literature, that church degeneration and decline was a concern addressed from the very beginning of the Great Commission enterprise. The exemplary first Jerusalem church and the Pauline corpus provide for us an identifiable and inspired paradigm for church revitalization that is duplicable and sustainable throughout the church age.

## VITA

Randall Joe Cofield

### EDUCATION

BA, William Carey University, 2015

MDiv, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018

### MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Associate Pastor, Crossroads Baptist Church, Wiggins, Mississippi, 2003-2011

Senior Pastor, Lakeside Baptist Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 2012-2015

Church Revitalization Catalytic Consultant, Louisville Regional Baptist  
Association, Louisville, Kentucky, 2018-2020

Senior Pastor, English Baptist Church, Carrollton, Kentucky, 2018-2020

Senior Pastor, Pine Lake Baptist Church, Vancleave, Mississippi, 2021-