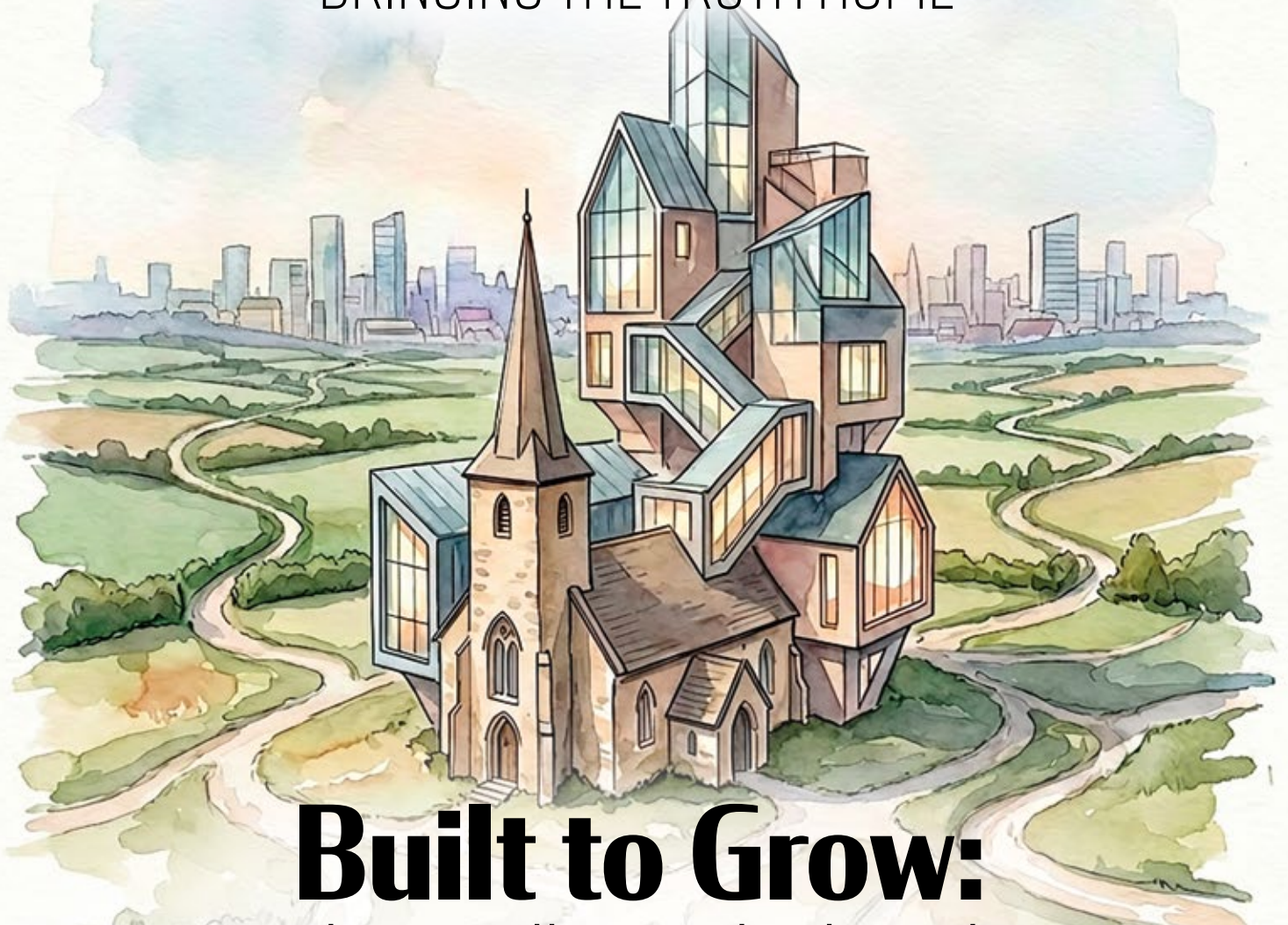


FRONTLINE

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME



Built to Grow: Understanding and Advancing the Mission of the Church

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Built to Grow

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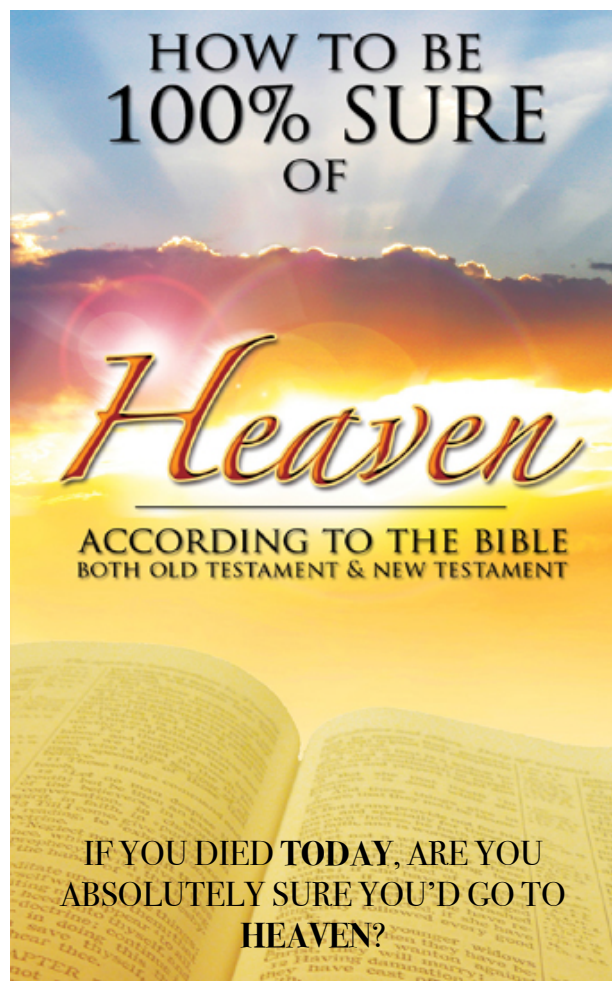
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Built to Grow:

Understanding and Advancing the Mission of the Church

The church is not merely an institution we attend—it is a living body we belong to. It is an organization in the sense that it must be biblically ordered for the purposes of worship, edification, and evangelism. Yet it is also an organism—a living body made up of many members, alive in Christ and growing toward maturity. This means the church is truly *built to grow*.

Too often, growth is measured almost exclusively by numerical expansion. However, Scripture makes it clear that true growth begins with the equipping of the saints for maturity and ministry (Eph. 4:11–16). Numerical increase is ultimately God’s work. Our responsibility is faithfulness.

For many years, the song “Deep and Wide” has been a familiar favorite in children’s ministries—though not without its critics! Still, its title captures an important principle of church growth: depth and breadth must be pursued in the proper order. Both matter, but depth must come first. When a church prioritizes spiritual depth, it shifts from a pragmat-

ic mindset to a theological one. As someone has wisely said, “If we concern ourselves with the depth of our ministry, God will see to the breadth of it.”

This issue of *FrontLine* magazine has been thoughtfully developed with that balance in mind. Dr. David Huffstutler opens by articulating the features of growth in the New Testament church. Pastors must be faithful in these areas, or no true growth is taking place. Pastor Will Cover, a church planter in Houston, shares his experience of establishing a church with an intentional disciple-making focus. His testimony demonstrates that churches can grow both spiritually and numerically when built on the right foundation.

But what about numerical goals? Every faithful pastor desires to see more sheep gathered into the flock—but is that desire biblical? In the core article of this issue, Dr. Greg Stiekes provides a clear and compelling answer. The book of Acts does seem to affirm numerical growth as a worthy aim. Yet the danger remains: elevating a biblical goal into an unhealthy, pragmatic priority.

When numerical growth does come, how should a church respond? Dr. Matt Walker addresses this question by presenting the strategic concept of multiplying through dividing—planting new churches out of existing ones. As he memorably states, “Success is sending, not seating.”

And how are people drawn into the life of a church in the first place? Dr. Jonathan Johnson explores this question through the often-overlooked ministry of hospitality. His emphasis on welcoming without worry highlights how thoughtful structure and genuine care are means God uses to bring people in and establish them for meaningful service.

Finally, Dr. Ryan Martin brings a historical perspective that returns us to a foundational truth: while man is responsible to be faithful, it is God who builds His church. History reminds us that when this order is reversed, the results are both predictable and troubling.

These themes are intended to relieve the tension many feel when considering church growth. On the one hand, some may hesitate to pursue numerical growth at all. On the other, some may pursue numbers at the expense of spiritual maturity. Both extremes miss the mark. Large attendance may reflect opportunity, but transformed lives reflect true ministry success.

As you read *Built to Grow* and reflect on these truths, may God shape your perspective, align your priorities, and guide your efforts—so that your ministry reflects His design and brings Him glory.

Mark Herbster, Associate Editor

A photograph of four men in ancient-style robes and head coverings walking along a dirt path in a hilly, olive-tree-filled landscape. In the background, a small village with stone buildings is visible on a hillside. The men are engaged in conversation, with one gesturing with his hands. They are carrying walking sticks and some have bags slung over their shoulders.

David Huffstutler

Four Features of Church Growth in Acts:

Rediscovering the New Testament Pattern

Thousands converting, miracles abounding, the church expanding, and all while overcoming persecution—what Christian wouldn't love to relive the book of Acts today? Christians everywhere yearn to see similar success in their churches, especially when their churches are

dwindling or even dying. Is there a secret to learn from the early church that we can use to repeat its success today?

As tempting as it is to make this narrative normative, Acts is not exactly a “how-to” guide for immediate, numerical growth in a local church. We find no fail-safe formula that promises instant success. However, as we survey Acts for statements describing church growth, not only do we find good reason to define *growth* beyond mere numbers, but we also find four features of growth that we can expect to see in churches today.

DESCRIPTIONS OF GROWTH IN ACTS

Many point out that Luke thought of growth as more than numbers in Acts. In keeping with his primary theme, the growth of the church is *geographical* (Acts 1:8). Luke does record the church’s *numerical* growth, but he describes the church’s growth in *spiritual* terms as well (e.g., prayer, fellowship, etc.). The following material surveys these statements.

Acts begins with “an hundred and twenty” believers (1:15) led by the twelve apostles (1:26). After Peter proclaimed the gospel to many on the day of Pentecost, “they gladly received his word . . . and the same day there were added unto them about three

thousand souls” (2:41). As time went on, the church matured, and “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (2:47; cf. 2:42–47). Luke approximated the Jerusalem church’s total again shortly thereafter: “the number of men was about five thousand” (4:4). In their plans to oppose the gospel, the Jewish rulers had to admit that the certainty of God’s miraculous power and the name of Jesus had “spread . . . among the people” (4:17). Nonetheless, this number would only increase: “believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women” (5:14). In response to the church’s continued success, the Jewish rulers arrested all the apostles and complained, “Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine” (5:28). They beat and threatened the apostles, and yet the apostles “ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ” (5:42). As a result, “those days” were described as “when the number of the disciples was multiplied” (6:1). As the church tended its practical matters, “the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (6:7).

As the church expanded beyond Jerusalem, Luke still noted its growth but without approximate numbers. In fleeing from Saul’s “great persecution

against the church which was at Jerusalem . . . they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria,” and “they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word” (8:1, 4). Philip the evangelist “went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake. . . . They believed Philip . . . both men and women” (8:5–6, 12). Simon Magus was a curious convert, noted for both his belief and his sin (8:4–13, 18–24). Jerusalem sent Peter and John to confirm the spread of the gospel to Samaria (8:14–17), and as they returned, they likely saw further success as they “preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans” (8:25). Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ, and his convert then took the gospel home to Ethiopia (8:26–39). Christ relieved the persecuted church by calling Saul (Paul) to salvation and service as an apostle (9:1–19), and growth continued in peace: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied” (9:31).

Returning from his trip to Samaria, Peter “was traveling through all those regions” (9:35, NASB) and continued to see conversions. After he healed Aeneas

the paralytic, “all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and turned to the Lord” (9:35). After raising Dorcas (Tabitha) from the dead, “it became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord” (9:42, NASB). While preaching to Cornelius and his household in Caesarea, “the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word” (10:44).

Peter’s success among the Gentiles prepares the reader for further success beyond Judea and Samaria. “They which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen” came as far as Antioch in Syria, “preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only” (11:19). “Some of them” even “spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord” (11:19–21). Jerusalem sent Barnabas to confirm the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch, and through his preaching, “much people was added unto the Lord” (11:24). Barnabas and Saul took a financial gift back to Jerusalem, and after the persecution and death of King Herod, “the word of God grew and multiplied” (12:24).

The gospel stretched further through Paul’s first missionary journey (cf. Acts 13–14). On the island of Paphos, Paul and Barnabas saw the conversion of Sergius Paulus (13:4–12). In Pisidian Antioch, “when

the Gentiles heard this [gospel], they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region” (13:48–49). In Iconium, “a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed” (14:1).

For his second missionary journey, Paul took Silas and returned to Derbe and Lystra. Through their ministry “the churches [were] established in the faith, and increased in number daily” (16:5). In Philippi, they saw the salvation of the households of Lydia and the jailer (16:14–15, 34). In Thessalonica, “some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few” (17:4). In Berea, “many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few” (17:12). In Athens, “certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (17:34). In Corinth, “Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized” (18:8). And more would believe in Corinth: Christ encouraged and promised Paul, “Be not afraid, but speak . . . for I have much people in this city” (18:9–10).

In Ephesus, Paul found disciples of John the Baptist, preached the risen Jesus to them, and “when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. . . . And all the men were about twelve” (19:5, 7). As Paul preached in the school of Tyrannus, “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (19:10). Paul’s miracles and exorcisms highlighted the failures of false exorcists (19:11–16). Consequently, “this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. . . . So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (19:17, 20). Paul’s opponent Demetrius lamented how people turned from idols to God: “Ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people” (19:26).

About thirty years later, when Paul came to the church in Jerusalem, they said to him, “Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe” (21:20). As Paul went from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of power for the uttermost end of the earth, Paul promised the unbelieving Jews “that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it” (28:28). For the next two

years, Paul gave the gospel, “preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (28:31).

With this survey of statements in hand, we find four features of church growth in the early church that we can expect to see in the church at large today.

CHURCH GROWTH BEGINS WITH THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

We cannot take for granted that church growth comes by the explicit preaching of the gospel. The many sermons in Acts elaborate the gospel—salvation through the life, death, resurrection, and ministry of Jesus Christ. (See, for example, the sermons in Acts 2, 7, 10, 13, 17.) What Christ stated to the apostles, He could say to us today: “Ye shall be witnesses unto me” (1:8). The apostles were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, yes, but conversions took place when others spoke of the gospel as well. Those who fled to Samaria and beyond were “preaching the word” (8:4; 11:19) and “preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20). As a result, many believed!

CHURCH GROWTH CONTINUES AS CHURCHES MATURE

Luke records various kinds of initial conversions in new locations—sometimes three thousand at once, a household, or just a single person. Many of his church growth statements, however, are found within summary descriptions of maturing, established churches. These summaries include Jerusalem (2:42–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16; 5:42; 6:1, 7; 12:24); Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (9:31); Syrian Antioch (11:21, 24); multiple cities at once (16:5); and Ephesus (19:10, 17–20). We quoted several of these passages above. Luke highlights their growth in teaching, prayer, giving, unity, service, perseverance, and more. Among these regular characteristics is numerical growth, yes, but alongside spiritual growth (2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20). Faithful, maturing churches should expect to see new conversions.

CHURCH GROWTH OVERCOMES PERSECUTION

The Jewish rulers persecuted the Jerusalem church, but the church continued to grow (4:4; 5:14). God used the persecution of Saul to send the gospel to Samaria and beyond (8:4; 11:20–21). King Herod killed James, but the Jerusalem church persevered

and grew all the more (12:24). The silversmiths in Ephesus attempted to stop the gospel, but it increased and prevailed (19:20). God used Paul's arrest in Jerusalem to take the gospel to Rome (Acts 28:30–31). We do not seek persecution, but when it comes, we know that Christ in His providence and power can use it to build His church.

CHURCH GROWTH SPREADS THE GOSPEL THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

As Christ promised (1:8), the apostolic witness to the gospel was effective in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–9), and to the Gentiles, extending to the uttermost end of the earth (Acts 10–28). Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, anticipating further geographical growth. The Great Commission is a mandate for us to take the gospel to our neighbors, and it extends to all the nations. We partner with missionaries, other churches, and other ministries to achieve this goal.

CONCLUSION

What can we learn about church growth from Acts? As Christians and churches faithfully proclaim the gospel, Christ will build His church. As churches are planted and mature, Christ will continue to grow His church. As persecution comes, Christ will empower the church to

persevere and even prevail in the face of opposition. In all of this, the witness of Christ will spread throughout the world. The book of Acts may not give us a formula for success, but it does describe these features of faithful churches, features that we can pray and even expect to see in our churches today.

David Huffstutler serves as the senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Troy in Troy, Michigan. He previously served as the senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Rockford, Illinois, and has served various institutions as a trustee, chaplain, and adjunct faculty. He and his wife, Holly, have a son and three daughters.



A photograph of four men sitting around a rustic wooden table in a bright, airy room. They are all looking down at open books, likely Bibles, and appear to be engaged in a study or prayer session. The man on the far left is wearing a plaid shirt, the man next to him is in a dark jacket, the man in the center is in a tan jacket, and the man on the far right is in a striped shirt. A white mug is on the table. The background shows a window with light streaming in.

Will Cover

Shaping the Church from the Ground Up:

Rediscovering Growth
Through Intentional
Disciple-Making

The Lord directed my family and me back to my hometown of Houston, Texas, in the fall of 2016 to start Arise Baptist Church. This year marks the ninth anniversary of our church, and we have rejoiced to see the Lord build His church just as He promised to do. I would like to share a testimony to God's faithfulness in some of the ways that He has grown our church. Ephesians 4:15 tells us that God has designed His church to grow. This verse reminds us that we are to grow up into Him (Jesus Christ) in all things.

Church growth is often measured by the numbers, and church

plants especially so. We began with four adults and seven children. Our current Sunday attendance fluctuates between 150 and 175. We have baptized nine people so far this year, and we are currently in a building project that will give us a larger and nicer facility in which to worship and minister to our community. We support missions and have assisted in planting and revitalizing other churches. I now get asked to speak in conferences and to participate in the leadership of church-planting organizations. We have had some measure of success by some human standards, but the only standard that really matters is the one that God has set. Am I more like Jesus than when the church began? Is my family more like Jesus? Are the people that call Arise Baptist Church their home more like Jesus? Are more people like Jesus because Arise Baptist Church exists? How are we intentionally living out the process described in Ephesians 4 of the church leadership perfecting the saints for the work of the ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ?

The goal of Arise Baptist Church is to glorify God. We believe that this is best accomplished by making disciples who make disciples. Pastor and author Jim Putman says, "Church in America doesn't work. The Bible works. And I want to build that church." Jesus modeled for us what it looks like

to make disciples, and then He commissioned His disciples to go and make more disciples. He showed us three simple keys to disciple-making. Making disciples as Jesus did requires an intentional leader, a relational environment, and a reproducible process. As the senior pastor, that starts with me. I don't just preach and teach; I am first and foremost a disciple-maker. Disciple-making isn't just something I do at Arise; it is something I endeavor to live out in every facet of life. That means I am always looking for opportunities to have someone with me, whether it be to make a hospital visit, to encourage a widow, to make a deposit at the bank, or to prepare a new teaching series.

BE AN INTENTIONAL LEADER

I must be intentional not only to be with people but to point them to Jesus. Yesterday, I had lunch with one of the men in my small group, and I had coffee with another man who recently trusted Christ but who hasn't yet developed many basic spiritual habits like church attendance or Bible reading. I am intentionally seeking to develop my relationship with both men because that is the soil in which disciples grow. Both men are disciples, but both need to grow to become like Jesus. One is faithful to church, gives in the offering, and serves as a greeter; the other does not. One

man has been saved for many years, the other just a few months. Both men are equally valuable to God and to our church family, but they have different gifts and different levels of spiritual development.

CREATE A RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Here is the thing that I learned very quickly in church planting. I can lead a Bible study class with a large group of people where I impart Bible knowledge to people that are ready to receive it, but I can't develop deep relationships with a large class. In fact, in a church plant, at least at the beginning, there aren't too many opportunities to speak to a large group. Jesus taught the multitudes, but he discipled the few. Preaching and teaching to large groups is an essential part of Arise Baptist Church just as it was an essential part of Jesus' ministry, but intentionally living in relationship with a small group of people with the goal of pointing them to Jesus is also absolutely essential.

DEVELOP A REPRODUCIBLE PROCESS

Discipling the few is slow and time-consuming. You can't microwave spiritual growth. But making disciples who make disciples will move from addition to multiplication. This makes ministry sustainable. I am responsible to lead intentionally and to model disciple-making for our people, but I am not personally

trying to disciple every person in our church. I am discipling a few, and as they develop spiritually, I will release them to go and disciple others. My group from last fall has now become three groups, with the other two being led by men that I have had the opportunity to develop as disciples and now disciple-makers. I expect by this fall that my group will be led by another man that I am discipling, and my wife and I will be starting a new group for couples.

We don't have groups to try to be trendy or just to help the church fellowship better. They are not designed to be the plug that keeps the ship from leaking. Our groups are the front door to our church.

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They are designed to be the tip of the spear to help us reach our community with the gospel and to intentionally develop and train new disciple-makers. We study God's Word together, we pray for one another, and we enjoy spending time together doing fun activities. We are honest with each other, we are vulnerable about our needs and struggles, and we seek to point each other to God's Word for the answers.

I have eight men in my group, including me. If my group grows by a couple more, we will plan to branch into two groups. If we don't add any new people to the group but we have someone else in the group that can lead it as has been modeled, I will have that person lead the group, and I will go and start a new group with some attenders in our church that are not connected. This process is not rocket science, but it is intentional, relational, and reproducible. It gives each group leader the opportunity to be up close and personal with the people they are discipling, to observe whether or not Christlikeness in attitude and action is really developing rather than just outward conformity to an external standard.

This process is designed to follow Jesus' process with his disciples. It looks like the process demonstrated by Paul as well. It is in line with the principles given by God to parents in Deuteronomy 6. It allows

people of different ages and different levels of spiritual maturity to grow in their relationship with God and with one another. The spiritual infants and children are helped and encouraged by the spiritual young adults and parents. The spiritual young adults and parents are encouraged and challenged by the spiritual infants and children. The individual person is helped to become more like Jesus, and the church as a whole grows spiritually and numerically.

Please don't misunderstand the point of all this. The goal is not to develop a small group process, Sunday school model, or effective church planting strategy. The goal is to make disciples who look like Jesus and who then in turn make more disciples who look like Jesus. Our process at Arise has been developed to help us reach the lost around us and develop new believers as followers of Jesus. Our worship style isn't attractive to a lost world, but our love for each other and our love for each person is attractive. Our buildings need work and the location is less than ideal, but people who are finding joy in serving Jesus and who love being with one another are very attractive to the lost and hurting soul. The church that God is building at Arise Baptist Church is far from perfect. We have had our share of disagreements. Not everyone wants to grow to be like Jesus all the time, includ-

ing me. We won't be fully like Jesus until we are with Him someday. I believe I am more like Jesus than I was when the church started. There are many more people that know Jesus as their Savior and are growing in their relationship with Jesus now than there were nine years ago when the church began. Arise is a gospel lighthouse to our community, and we are developing our own leaders and sending out leaders to serve in other churches. God is building His church, and I am thankful that He lets us have a part in His eternal work.

Will Cover and his wife, Shandi, have been married 20 years and have five children ages 10 to 18. Will pastors Arise Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, a church that he and his family planted in 2017. His passion is making disciples who make disciples.





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Greg Stiekes



The Case for Numerical Growth in Acts:

Rediscovering Biblical Increase

When our churches see no significant growth, we can become somewhat defensive or apologetic, explaining the situation in various ways. We might say, “This is a hard area—people refuse to hear the gospel.” That can certainly be true. Those who try to evangelize in Jewish or

Muslim communities, or in formally “closed” countries like China know what it is to labor long without many converts. In fact, some of God’s mightiest servants faithfully preached and sacrificed for years with little visible fruit to show for it—John G. Paton, Adoniram Judson, David Brainerd, Henry Martyn.

We might also say, “Our church may not be growing in numbers, but we’re growing spiritually.” This distinction is entirely biblical. The New Testament speaks of the growth of the church both in terms of numbers and spiritual maturity. For example, Luke records the miraculous increase in sheer numbers of people who came to Christ under Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19). But when Paul later writes to the Ephesians, he encourages their continued growth almost exclusively in terms of doctrinal integrity and relational unity (Eph. 4:11–16).

We also take solace in the theological point that though we plant and water, God must give the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). This, again, is theologically accurate. If anything eternal will come of our ministry, God Himself has to be directly involved.

Without a doubt, however, numerical growth is one of the expectations of the New Testament church. Without converted souls, there is no church. But how much emphasis does the New

Testament give to numbers of people coming into the church? And what does the New Testament instruct us to do in order to see our churches grow numerically? In this article we will analyze the theme of numerical growth in the book of Acts to discern how ministers of the Word should lead the church with respect to these questions.

NUMERICAL GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN ACTS

In Acts 1:8, Jesus charges His disciples with taking the gospel to the world, beginning at Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. So, throughout the book of Acts, Luke holds up little signposts to report in on how the gospel is advancing. The growth is stirring to trace. The church of Jewish believers begins with 120 men and women (Acts 1:15). Then, on Pentecost around 3000 are added to them (2:41), and Jewish converts are being added daily after that (2:47). By Acts 4:4, the number of men reaches around 5000, not to mention women and children, and by 5:14 the number of both men and women is described as “multitudes.” From there the number of Jerusalem disciples “multiplied greatly” (6:7), and the same could be said for the church in Galilee and Samaria (9:31). Finally, the church at Antioch, with a large Jewish and Hellenist population, sees exponential growth (11:21, 24).

Luke's emphasis on numerical growth continues as he describes the mission of Paul to the Gentiles. He specifically mentions great numbers of people coming into the church when he describes Paul's ministry in Iconium (Acts 14:1) as well in as the Galatian cities in general (16:5). Luke also reports remarkable numbers of people coming to Christ in the cities of Thessalonica (17:4), Berea (17:12), Corinth (18:8), and Ephesus (19:18–20).

Throughout the narrative, Luke calls our attention to fascinating details that demonstrate people being added to the church from every social stratum: a lame beggar (Acts 3:1–10); “a great many of the priests” (Acts 6:7); Samaritans (8:5–13); a Roman centurion (10:1–2, 47–48); the proconsul Sergius Paulus (13:12); Lydia, a business woman (16:14–15); a Philippian jailer (16:30–34); women of high social standing and prominent Greeks (17:4, 12); artisans like Aquila and Priscilla (18:1–3); and so many more.

Luke is not merely reporting details but celebrating the numbers of people who were swelling the churches. We notice his enthusiasm in the growth terminology that pervades the book of Acts. Luke often refers to crowds (*ochlos*) of people in the church (Acts 1:15; 11:24; 13:45), sometimes with the adjectives “great” or “large” (6:7; 11:26; 19:26). He describes the

growth with the word “number” (*arithmos*) or “many numbers” (4:4; 6:7; 11:21; 16:5), and with “multitude” (*plēthos*) or “many multitudes” (5:14; 14:1; 17:4). In addition to these descriptors, Luke also uses a variety of verbs like “add,” or “increase,” or “multiply,” or “join,” to describe the significant numerical growth of the church (2:41, 47; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:24; 16:5; 17:4). In fact, toward the end of the book of Acts, when Paul returns to Jerusalem, the number of Jewish converts is described to him in terms of “many thousands” (21:20). The word used is *myrias*, which technically refers to “ten thousands.” But the word is also used when it is difficult to judge how many because the number is so large.

NUMERICAL GROWTH OF THE CHURCH TODAY

What we see in Acts is nothing short of explosive growth across the first-century Roman world, reaching a wide range of locations and social strata. Though Acts is narrative, Luke’s repeated and consistent portrayal of the church’s expansion is not incidental. He is showing us not only how the Lord built His church, but how He continues to build it as His people fulfill the Great Commission. Therefore, numerical growth is presented as the expected fruit of the advance of the gospel. Though the rate and visibility of numeri-

cal growth may vary across times and places, though we may not see the same level of growth in our own church that we see in another, the trajectory itself is normative. In short, because the church in Acts is consistently portrayed as growing and multiplying, we can safely conclude that our own local churches ought to be growing numerically at some level. *How, then, are we to pursue numerical growth?*

Answers to this question have been offered over the years through countless books, conferences, and seminars. At the start of the modern church growth movement of the 1970s and 1980s, C. Peter Wagner and Donald McGavran focused on understanding social demographics. Who is open to the gospel right now and how can we engage their culture without compromising the gospel's message? Their approach influenced the seeker-sensitive models of Bill Hybels and Rick Warren in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, studies have been published attempting to correct or refresh these earlier ideas. Some of the newer publications emphasize growing a missional church focused on cultural engagement and contextualizing the gospel (Tim Keller, Ed Stetzer). Others argue that the church needs to simplify its mission and get back to intentional discipleship (Andy Stanley, Thom Rainer). Still others argue that smaller gatherings are

more conducive to multiplication, calling the church back to meeting in homes, simpler structures, and less institutionalism (Neil Cole, Tony and Felicity Dale).

In this wealth of propositions and systems for church growth, we can find helpful ideas that encourage the healthy, biblical, numerical growth of churches in various cultures. But we must also proceed with great caution. Much of the church growth literature is focused on answering the question,

How can we see numerical growth in our church?

This is not the question we should be asking. If our goal is numerical growth—if we are interested in counting more bodies—we can always find ways to make that pragmatically happen. But numerical growth alone is no evidence that the Lord is building His church. **Rather, as we read of the birth and growth of the church in the book of Acts, we find that numerical growth is a byproduct of the obedience of the Lord's people.** Jesus instructed His disciples, “Ye shall be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8). Through their obedience to that divine charge, the Lord blessed with a mighty harvest of redeemed church members that continued to increase across the Roman Empire.

THREE FACTORS OF NUMERICAL GROWTH

The question we should be asking, then, is *How must we respond with obedience to the Lord's call to be His witnesses?* When we analyze the church growth passages in Acts with this question in mind, we discover at least *three factors of numerical growth* that were always present as the disciples committed themselves obediently to the work of the ministry.

Factor 1: Witness through gospel proclamation. The first factor we observe is the witness of the death and resurrection of the living Jesus through proclamation—that is, through preaching and teaching. In Luke's reports of the church's progress, people come to Christ and swell the numbers of the church in direct response to this message. The three thousand who flooded into the church at Pentecost respond to the “many words” of Peter's testimony and exhortation (Acts 2:37–41), and their number grew as they “continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine” (2:42). This same response continues again and again. The five thousand men (4:4), the growth of the church at Antioch (11:20–21), the conversions at Iconium (14:1), the explosive growth in Thessalonica (17:3–4) and Berea (17:10–12)—all follow the pattern summarized in Acts 6:7: *as the word of God increased, the number of disciples multiplied greatly.*

This should not be surprising to anyone who understands that faith in Christ comes from the word of God (Rom. 10:17). But when we focus our attention on numbers rather than obedience, we can forget that we are called foremost to bear witness, to give testimony, to share, to proclaim the Word. In nearly every case in Acts, numerical growth follows the advance of the Word. So vital is this connection, in fact, between Word and growth, that Luke repeatedly describes the growth of the church in terms of the advance of the Word itself. In Acts 12:24, “The word of God grew and multiplied.” In Acts 13:49 the word expands through an entire region. In Acts 19:20, “mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.” As Luke describes it, church growth is Word growth.

At present there is a rising tension in evangelicalism between those who continue to emphasize the preaching of the Word and those who argue that numerical growth is more effective through one-on-one discipleship or small groups. We cannot deny that the NT issues a call to make much of preaching—that is, proclaiming the gospel as a herald in the name of a king (e.g., Luke 24:46–47; 1 Cor. 1:21–23; Titus 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:1–5). But we do not see a competition in Acts between preaching to crowds (Acts 2:14–41; 13:44–49; 19:8–10), teaching smaller groups (5:42;

10:24–27; 16:13; 17:2–3, 10; 20:7–11), or witnessing to single individuals (Ethiopian eunuch, 8:26–40; Philippian jailer, 16:29–34; Apollos, 18:24–26). Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he faithfully taught them both “publicly, and from house to house” (20:20). There was no debate about methods, but a consistent, urgent, compassionate saturation of the gospel and the teaching of the Word in response to the call to be the Lord’s witnesses.

Factor 2: Dependence through continual prayer. The birth of the early church began with continual, earnest prayer. The 120 in the upper room “continued with one accord in prayer and supplication” (Acts 1:14), and this same steadfast prayer is one of the daily habits of the Jerusalem church that proceeds their amazing growth (2:42, 47). The first response of the disciples when they experience persecution is to gather together in prayer (4:23–31).

Prayer is the activity the apostles declare must accompany their ministry of the Word (6:4). Even in crisis, as the church prays for Peter, “the word of God grew and multiplied” (12:5, 24).

Why is prayer a necessary factor in numerical church growth? Precisely because prayer is the exercise of our dependence upon the only one who can actually build the church, the triune God Himself. Though we

commonly refer to Acts by its full title, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in truth we could refer to it as “The Acts of the Trinity.” Though Peter and Paul and several others are involved as instruments in the mission of the church, Acts is literally a testimony of the work of God through the Holy Spirit enabling the ongoing work of Jesus Christ. Luke even refers to his Gospel as a treatise “of all that Jesus *began* both to do and teach” (Acts 1:1), indicating that his second book, Acts, is the record of what Jesus *continues* to do and teach. In Acts 2 alone, God the Father has raised and exalted His Son, Jesus (2:32–33), who pours out the Holy Spirit to empower His disciples (2:4, 33), who proclaim the gospel to those whom God has called (2:39), whom Jesus then saves and adds to the church (2:47). The apostles, therefore, are fully aware that any advancement of the church is the work of the triune God whom they serve, and their success in ministry is wholly a product of God’s blessing alone.

Factor 3: Endurance through Spirit-empowered boldness. From its very beginning the church faced significant opposition and persecution. In fact, if the Lord’s church had been merely a human movement, there were several major impediments in its early progress that should have caused it, in the words of Gamaliel, to “come to nought” (Acts 5:38): the beatings and threats the apostles endured from

the Sanhedrin (5:40), the stoning of Stephen and the rise of severe persecution (7:58–8:3), the martyrdom of James (12:1–2) and near-martyrdom of Peter (12:18–19). But what we see is actually the opposite. Because of their obedience to the Lord's commission, the apostles and other early witnesses were filled with great boldness to continue to spread the gospel and watch as the Lord increased His church.

When the apostles were threatened by the Sanhedrin, they cried out to God for boldness to continue to speak the Word (Acts 4:29–30). God answers their request through the Holy Spirit so completely (4:31), that when they are finally beaten for refusing to stop preaching, they rejoice that they have been counted worthy to suffer for Jesus' name, and the Word continues to be proclaimed (5:41–42). The persecution that comes like a hammer blow on the young church after Stephen's martyrdom (7:59–8:3), led by the unconverted Saul of Tarsus, does not crush the witness of the Word but merely disperses the witnesses, who continue boldly to scatter the gospel wherever they go. As a direct result, the Samaritan church begins (8:4–17), the Ethiopian eunuch is saved (8:26–38), and the church at Antioch in Syria—the church that would later become, ironically, Saul's "sending church"—is launched (11:19–21).

After Saul/Paul's dramatic conversion, he himself becomes a model of endurance through Spirit-empowered boldness as he proclaims the gospel in the face of opposition. He and Barnabas "waxed bold" when the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia stood against them, leading to the salvation of many Gentiles and the proclamation of the gospel throughout the entire region (Acts 13:45–49). Paul's same response of boldness, even when he experienced stoning, leads to the church beginning in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (14:1–7, 19–21). In fact, as Luke narrates Paul's journeys, the apostle demonstrates extraordinary endurance in boldly declaring the gospel to the great advancement of the church across various regions of the Roman Empire (16:19–40; 17:1–15; 18:1–17).

THE SECRET TO NUMERICAL GROWTH

The secret to the numerical growth of the church is that there is no secret. There is only obedience. Jesus declared, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), then He called upon His disciples to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). Our burden, then, is not to manufacture numerical results, but to intentionally and faithfully answer this call.

This is both humbling and freeing. It means we do not need to chase methods, anxiously measure outcomes, or compare ourselves with others. Instead,

it means that we give ourselves to what the Lord has already made clear: the witness of the Word through gospel proclamation to those who need to hear, earnest dependence upon the triune God in continual prayer, and bold witness in the face of whatever opposition may come. Where these factors of obedience are present—even in our weakness, even in small beginnings—we rest in the promise that the Lord is at work among us, building His church. This is the same Lord who added daily to the Jerusalem church, who multiplied disciples across Judea and Samaria, and who established His church all the way to the capital of the Roman Empire. He has not changed.

The Lord builds churches with numbers of redeemed people. That means that churches are inherently numerical by definition. So, rather than asking, *How can we grow in our attendance?*, we should be asking, *Are we faithfully bearing witness to the gospel? Are we consistently asking God to save people and bring them into the church? Are we speaking to people with boldness?*

If we will give ourselves in obedience to these activities modeled for us in Acts, we align ourselves with the very means through which the crucified and risen Lord delights to gather His people. And in His

time, and in His way, He will do what He has always done: He will build His church.

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Matthew Walker

Multiplication Through Division: Rediscovering Reproduction Through Church Planting

For as long as I have been a pastor, nearly every time I have attended a pastor's fellowship, someone has asked me, "How many people go to your church?" As a church planter—College Park Baptist Church began in January 2003—I started answering that question by saying, "Oh, about six hundred." When the person asking responded with surprise, I would add, "But only fifty of them show up on any given Sunday."

In the two thousand years since Jesus founded the church, Christians have adopted a single metric for gauging church success: size. What I find remarkable is that out of the many times I have been asked about my church's size, few have asked me about people being saved or the number of baptisms we have performed. No one has ever asked me, "How many churches has your church started?"

We need to rethink what makes a church successful. Too many believers value the size of a church regardless of whether it is fulfilling the missional mandate of Jesus. I believe the success of a church is measured not by how many it seats, but by how many churches it sends. Churches that are focused on Jesus' mission may grow in size, but they will always maintain a corresponding emphasis on church planting.

THE COMMISSION REQUIRES MULTIPLICATION

Jesus commissioned His apostles to "make disciples of all the nations" in Matthew 28:19–20 (NASB). This phrase uses the Greek word *mathēteusate* (μαθητεύσατε), which is the verb in the sentence. The Lord added three participles to explain how to accomplish the task. The first participle, *poreuthentes* (πορευθέντες), precedes the verb and is translated "go" or "going." It is a participle of attendant circum-

stance and therefore assumes the imperatival force of the verb. That means Jesus is not saying “as you are going” or “having gone.” Instead, this participle is the intentional shove behind the Lord’s missional mandate. It is not optional. It is our reason for existing.

The other two participles explain the process of making disciples. Both “baptizing” (*baptizontes*, βαπτίζοντες) and “teaching” (*didaskontes*, διδάσκοντες) are participles of means. In order for a church to make disciples, there must be an emphasis on believer’s baptism and instruction in biblical truth.

Both of these emphases are evident in first-century churches. John the Baptist and Jesus baptized those who repented and believed the gospel, and the early church continued in that tradition. First-century churches were missionally intentional, focused on disciple-making, and committed to gathering new converts into local churches. Though not every conversion story in Acts demonstrates this pattern, most of them do. Evangelistic efforts generally resulted in churches being planted.

PARADIGM SHIFT: THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

The Church Growth Movement shifted the emphasis away from multiplication toward attraction-based growth. The movement’s acknowledged

founder, Donald McGavran, argued that a homogeneous unit is a group of people who share common characteristics such as ethnicity, language, and cultural identity, and that the most effective way to evangelize is to find ways to allow people to maintain their ethnic and cultural distinctives. The more homogeneous they are, the greater the chance that they will hear the gospel. McGavran, a trained sociologist, developed his principle from his observation of growing churches in India, Africa, and South America. He claimed that church growth occurred when churches did not attempt to change the culture of the audience being reached with the gospel, and that the gospel spread more rapidly within same-culture contexts than across cultural boundaries. His book *The Bridges of God* (1955) is considered the starting point of the movement.

McGavran's arguments had a transformative impact on the American church. As he helped establish Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission in 1965 and later published *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970, churches in the United States and other Western countries began adopting his strategies to grow their congregations. While McGavran—and, later, one of his most influential followers, C. Peter Wagner—argued for the importance of church

planting, the broader trajectory of the movement told a different story. Among the unintended consequences of McGavran's work is that churches began to embrace pragmatic approaches to marketing (see Dr. Dave Doran's two articles on church marketing published in the *Detroit Baptist Theological Journal*, Fall and Spring 1996). Using secular marketing strategies helped churches like Willow Creek and Lakewood Church grow into large congregations.

Instead of church reproduction, the emphasis became church consolidation. I live in a suburb of Raleigh, North Carolina. One of the largest churches in our state is not far from here. It has satellite campuses around the city and throughout the surrounding suburbs. This church does not plant new churches—it plants new campuses for its own ministry. The church even has a staff member dedicated to church acquisitions. That is not replication. That is consolidation.

THE PAULINE MODEL: MULTIPLICATION THROUGH DIVISION

In a missions class during my sophomore year at Bob Jones University, my professor, Nelson McGeoch, assigned the class to read David Hesselgrave's book *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*. As a church planter, I have returned to that book many times

over the years. One of its most helpful contributions is Hesselgrave's Pauline Cycle of Missions, which demonstrates that Paul did not travel aimlessly. On the contrary, the apostle intentionally traveled throughout Asia Minor and Greece seeking opportunities to plant churches.

Hesselgrave identifies ten spokes on Paul's ministry wheel. He begins with the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey in Acts 13:1–4. Their church-planting process began by contacting their target audience (vv. 14–16) and communicating the gospel (vv. 17–41). Some of those who heard the gospel were converted and formed a new local church (vv. 43–48). The missionaries later returned to confirm the faith of those who had professed salvation in Christ (14:21–22), ordained new leaders, and commended them to the work (v. 23). After returning to Antioch to report (v. 27), Paul and Barnabas desired to go back and strengthen their relationships with these churches (15:36). This led to a new missionary journey, even though Paul and Barnabas parted ways over the situation involving John Mark (v. 39). Hesselgrave's research demonstrates that the Pauline model for fulfilling the Great Commission was to create new Christian commu-

nities—not to grow one community, Antioch, into a large, monolithic church.

Paul's church plant in Ephesus is a case in point. Not only does one of Paul's central arguments in Ephesians directly undercut McGavran's homogeneous unit concept—the church in Ephesus was to be a union of both Jews and Gentiles in the gospel—but the letter also explains how that unity would develop into a fully functioning church organism (Eph. 4:16). As the Ephesian church matured, its believers were positioned to plant new churches regionally. Many scholars believe that of the churches addressed by Jesus in Revelation 2–3, those addressed immediately after the church in Ephesus were planted out of that congregation. If that is correct, then Paul's church plant in Ephesus became the hub for an entire network of new churches. Its ministry could not be confused with the attraction-based growth model that characterizes so many modern ministries today. Led by Paul's protégé Timothy, the Ephesian church stands as an example for all churches of what genuine multiplication looks like.

RESETTING THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

The best measure of a church's success is how faithfully it follows Jesus' missional mandate in the Great Commission. Success is sending, not seating. A

large church is not inherently wrong for being large—there are many excellent large churches—and a small church is not inherently right simply for being small. Large or small, every church must keep the imperative to make disciples at the center of its mission.

There are likely many applications of this conviction, but I will conclude with three. First, we need to stop thinking about how to get more people into our church and start thinking about how to get more churches into our communities. American culture is not becoming more godly. More than ever, we need a robustly evangelistic mindset that confronts our culture with the gospel. Second, every pastor and layman needs to cultivate a burden for church planting. We need far greater intentionality when it comes to starting new churches. There is no faithful way to obey the “going” command of Matthew 28:19 without it. Finally, an effective way to fulfill this mandate is to work together. While the independent Baptist church movement has many strengths, a lack of interdependence is limiting our effectiveness. One way the FBFI can help address this is by encouraging its membership to think creatively about cooperative, interdependent ministry. The more isolationist we become, the less effective we are in accomplishing the mission.

Perhaps we should stop asking one another how many people attend our churches. Better yet, let us start encouraging each other to plant churches—and reseed the world with the gospel.

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Jonathan Johnson

Welcome Without Worry: Rediscovering Warmth Without Compromise

Pastoring an international church in a mega-city in Hong Kong, one thing is certain: you never know who is going to walk through the door on any given Sunday! Through years of ministry, we have seen unbelievers and believers of all sorts appear unannounced in our services—Sunday school, worship,

and prayer meetings. Atheist or agnostic, Buddhist or Muslim, progressive alternative lifestyle or far-right extremist, you name it, we have probably had it. And among those professing to be Christians, we have seen every conceivable kind of belief, church polity, and denominational conviction. After puzzling over how they found their way to our relatively small, non-affiliated Baptist church, how do we respond? With a warm welcome.

But does this actually work in practice? Could “warmth” and “welcome” be confused with approval or acceptance of what is wrong? Should we be concerned when someone who attends adheres to a false religion, lives in ways that contradict God’s Word, or holds convictions that run counter to the beliefs of our church? Is there a risk that welcoming anyone into our services could shift our focus or weaken our faithfulness? Not at all. By God’s gracious gift, through years of ministry in this context, our church has experienced steady growth—little by little—and, more importantly, a consistent commitment to our standards, practices, and what we sincerely believe is obedience to the clear teaching of Scripture.

The reason this is possible is a truth which may run contrary to expectations. On the one hand, some brethren expect that the way to grow their

churches is to accommodate the felt needs of those who might attend their services. On the other hand, others may expect that letting a visitor know they don't belong is the only way to safeguard their flock. But neither of these options is necessary. Being a church who is friendly to every visitor doesn't have to affect a pursuit of steadfast faithfulness. I would like to briefly explain this unexpected truth of ministry before returning to a quick note on warmth in welcome.

The surprising truth to which I refer is that a church having clear standards about who is who and who does what can aid in growing a friendly church. To phrase it differently, clarity about membership and service helps lead to warmth in welcome. Not only is this fact true in experience, but it is also founded on a balanced understanding of the church as it is described in the Scriptures. The balance is derived from seeing that our churches are called to be open in welcome to visitors, but careful in standards for membership and ministry.

OPEN IN WELCOME

First, consider the Bible's expectation of our being welcoming. Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, calls us to a form of fellowship that welcomes believers of varying convictions. In Romans 14, we are command-

ed to “receive” even “weak” (or worrisome) brethren into our churches, but not in such a way that results in endlessly divisive “doubtful disputes.” The passage also recognizes that believers with such scruples are *expected* to live in community with believers that enjoy freedom in the same areas! There are also needful reminders for the scrupulous (that God is judge of someone’s salvation, not us) and restraint on those with liberty (that God calls us to service, not self-indulgence) which aid in keeping the peace. But the point I wish to emphasize is that our churches are to be places where such friction, and the resulting maturity that arises from resolving it in a biblical manner, is allowed to be present. To receive is to welcome, even knowing that differences exist—or will arise.

Second, Paul’s letters to the churches take into consideration that both believers and unbelievers will be attending our services. For example, 1 Corinthians 14:40 is well known for calling for “all things” in our gatherings to “be done decently and in order.” The context is the Corinthian church’s confusion over the use and abuse of spiritual gifts. But notice that Paul takes his point about the chaos caused by the Corinthians’ misuse of tongues-speaking and drives it home by making special reference to new believers and unbelievers: “If therefore the whole church

be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?” (v. 23). He encourages them to pursue instead the more understandable ministry of prophecy, which is more likely to convict the lost and unlearned (v. 24). Again, the expectation is that these people will have been welcomed into our assemblies, where they can hear the convicting word of God and, hopefully, come to faith in Christ.

As we faithfully declare the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus and seek to develop our own members in His likeness, our hope is that people will come to listen and respond. For this to be the case, our churches should be places where the sinner is welcomed and where those in search of truth and hope come to listen. This doesn't require any change on the part of a local church in its practice of worship or service. In fact, being clear on biblical standards of membership and ministry help provide a counterbalance to being a welcoming church.

CAREFUL IN STANDARDS

While our churches are called to be places of welcome, they are not called to be places where anything goes. In the Corinthians passage above, we read that services are to be held in an orderly way, where the

unlearned and unbelieving are welcome to listen—but not to take a role in the leadership, direction, or even service of the church. Often in our church in Hong Kong, new visitors will appear and say something like this: “I’ve been wanting to find a church where I can be involved and serve. What can I do?” While we heartily welcome everyone to join our services and always kindly let people know that we are thrilled that they are attending, we are in no hurry to place visitors into positions of ministry. It is not just the ministers of God that we avoid rushing into service (1 Tim. 5:22a), but also those serving in other roles in our church.

Belonging to a local church means that individuals move beyond simply being in the place of listening, and become members. And this takes place only after a clear testimony of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and the demonstration of this testimony in baptism. We know that being a part of a local church involves mutual accountability to one another as members of the body of Christ. Not only are pastors called to care for the flock (e.g., 2 Tim. 3–5), but members are also called to help each other along spiritually (Gal. 6:1–2; Jude 1:20–23). Matthew 18 and the sobering challenge of 1 Corinthians 5 remind us that the local church’s pastors, deacons, and members together have the

responsibility to safeguard the purity and testimony of their assembly as representatives of Christ. When one of us goes astray in the local church, it is the task of the other members to seek to aid and restore such a one. This restoration ranges from gentle and private words of humble rebuke to the awful task of publicly dismissing an unrepentant brother or sister who refuses all correction.

FRIENDLY WITHOUT FEAR

What do these two seemingly disparate ideas have to do with one another? How does openness in welcome and carefulness in standards result in a church that is ready—and perhaps even more likely—to grow? In our experience of pastoring in an urban, cross-cultural setting, holding these two biblical ideals in tandem, without dropping either, allows us to be welcoming without being worried. Our church can invite visitors of all sorts and gladly greet unexpected arrivals because we are not at all concerned that they might dilute or disrupt the church. Their presence as listeners, seekers, or even those who wander in from the streets (it has happened!) is seen as a chance for an unbeliever to hear the gospel or for a Christian to hear biblical instruction.

If, as is sometimes the case, these new arrivals wish to get involved or make an impact in our church, there

is an established process that takes place well before this would ever occur. Are they born again? Have they been baptized? Have they been discipled, or are they in need of discipleship? Do they agree with our church's statement of faith and its teachings, as they reflect biblical teaching? If these questions are all answered in the affirmative, and if the new arrivals wish to make our local church their place of membership, then we discuss their willingness to walk in obedience to the word of God and be held (and hold us) accountable to such a life. And this is in reference only to membership. Deciding that someone is fit to serve, especially in roles of teaching or counseling, is a later and longer process of careful discernment.

Why mention such cases? Because it shows that we, as pastors and members, are not worried about the impact of visitors. By cautiously shepherding the flock—which includes keeping a keen eye open for wolves as well as wandering sheep—we are not at risk of false shepherds or fractious divisions arriving in the form of new attendees. Our people know and understand this. They are taught to view each guest as either a brother or sister who has decided to visit us, or an unsaved soul who needs the gospel. If problems arise, we have ways of handling them biblically. But a cold shoulder is not

one of them, and certainly not for a guest. By God's grace, and to His glory, we are seeing our church continue to grow, "little by little, inch by inch." And this growth is occurring, in part, because we are friendly without fear. No new arrivals are made to feel that either pastors or people are doing a threat assessment. Rather, we aim for them to encounter the love of God the Father as shown in the person of His Son, Christ Jesus.

Are there moments where visitors are offended? Will there be times when people turn away with hurt feelings? Yes, of course. But let Christ and biblical teaching be a "stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense" (1 Pet. 2:8; Isa. 8:14), and not us. Ours is the call to "give none offence . . . that they may be saved" (1 Cor. 10:32–33). Those who wish to corrupt the church with ill intentions or those who wish to change the church with the best (but bad) intentions will both eventually bump into our firm but gentle standards that reflect our biblical convictions. But a surprising number are willing to stay, listen, and ultimately be changed themselves by the effectual Word of God and work of the Holy Spirit. And they stayed, in part, because of a warm welcome.

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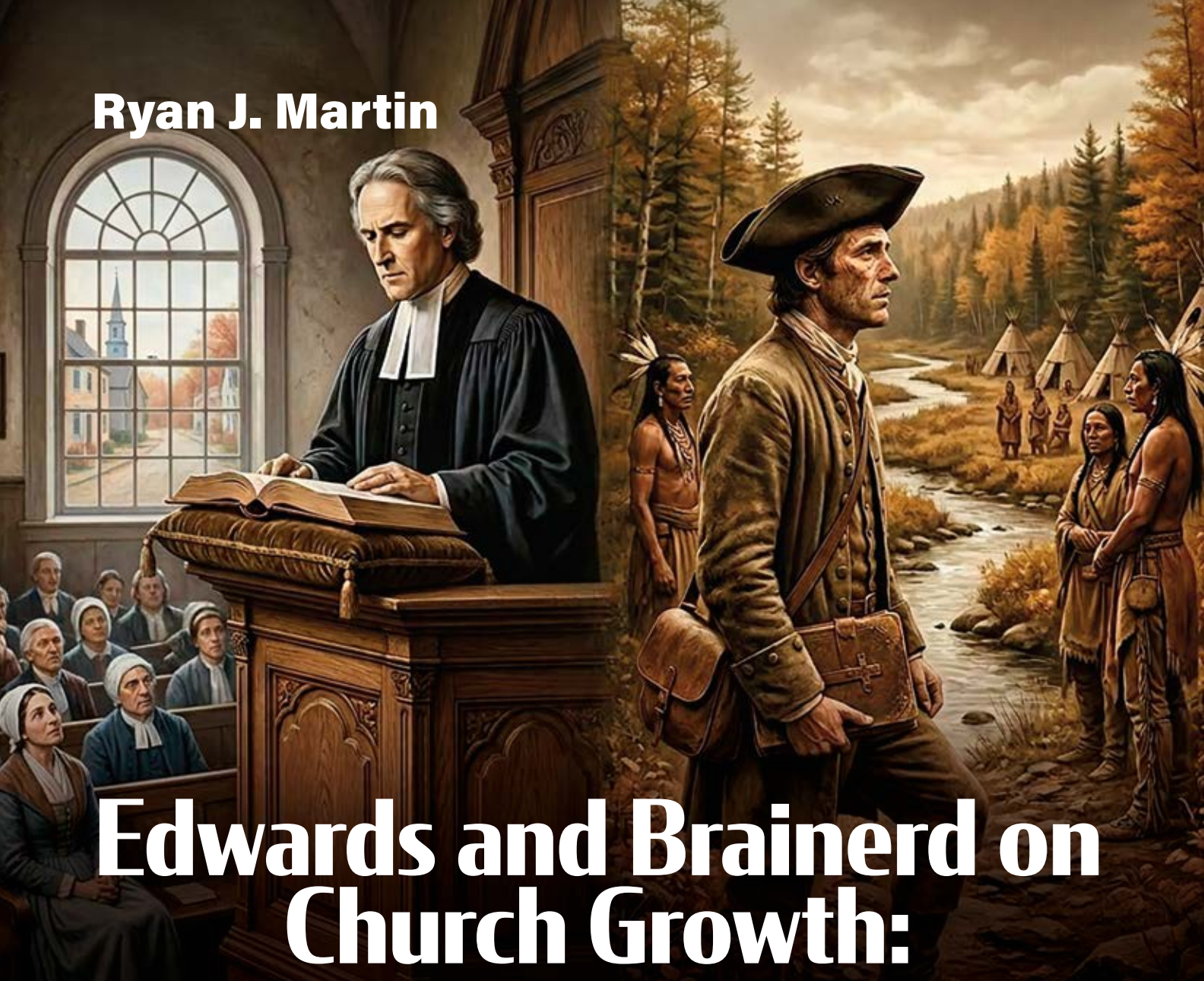
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Ryan J. Martin

Edwards and Brainerd on Church Growth:

Rediscovering Historical Insight

We are unavoidably people of our time. Even the questions we think to ask about life and ministry are influenced by our setting. Yet we belong to something much bigger than the year 2026 or the current cultural moment. We belong to the body of Christ as a whole, and spiritually to our broth-

ers and sisters in Christ throughout the ages. For this reason, when practical concerns of our own times rise to the surface, it is beneficial for us to hear what earlier voices said about the things that concern us.

How did an earlier generation of conservative, Bible-believing American evangelicals think about a topic like “church growth”? To answer this question, this article will consider the times and thought of two men from colonial America: Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), America’s greatest theologian, and David Brainerd (1718–1747), an early missionary to American Indians.¹

HISTORICAL AND DOCTRINAL CONTEXT

Some caveats are necessary. In 1729 Jonathan Edwards became the lead minister of the Congregationalist church in Northampton, Massachusetts, after the death of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. In colonial Congregationalist churches at that time, churches “grew” through infant baptism. Congregationalist ministers did not regard the baptized necessarily to be Christians, but Stoddard himself had something of a “parish” mindset regarding church growth: if someone lived in a town with a church, he was under that church’s authority. Stoddard saw the Lord’s Supper as a “converting ordinance,” and welcomed the baptized-but-unconverted to partake

(a practice Edwards would later reject). To his credit, Stoddard stressed the importance of conversion as well as evangelism of the American Indians.²

Such history is vital for understanding the thought of Brainerd and especially Edwards. In one sense, a pastor like Jonathan Edwards was not concerned with church growth. In fact, he never used the term “church growth” in his writings. Instead, Edwards sought the true conversion of those already baptized and in the church. Moreover, he believed that the Bible prophesied that a coming age of worldwide Christendom was soon to be inaugurated with worldwide conversion to Christ.

Though questions of church polity, the ordinances, and end-times teaching certainly expose some distance between 18th-century Congregationalists and 21st-century Baptists, the older perspective of the former will still prove helpful.

FIVE LESSONS

Both Edwards and Brainerd gave their lives to evangelism and conversion. Edwards himself labored both as a pastor and, during his later years in Stockbridge, as something of a missionary. Both men wanted strong, healthy churches. Throughout their writings, five themes emerge concerning the goals and methods of Christian ministry.

First, God is sovereign over the success of gospel ministry. The early church grew in numbers, as recorded in Acts 2:47, and Edwards said this was because “such as God had ordained to be saved were daily brought in and added to the church” (WJE 24:969).³ When the Great Awakening occurred in New England, Edwards contested that, though some of it was not genuine, the good in it was indeed “a wonderful work of God” (WJE 4:291). Likewise, David Brainerd expressed his conviction that, with respect to his ministry, it was impossible that he could do “anything for the poor heathen” without God’s help, so he determined “to rest on God and leave it to him to do as he pleased” (WJE 7:268). For both these men, any spiritual gains were possible only through God’s Spirit.

Second, for this reason, God’s glory is the end of church growth. When in history God has blessed the church, He has done so to bring Himself glory. Edwards taught that Christ purchased this success through His cross, and thus the success of the gospel is the honor God the Father gives His Son for His suffering and disgrace (WJE 3:398). When God redeems lost sinners, it is for His glory, that “the whole universe” might be “put in subjection to Jesus Christ,” so that “all things may be ordered by him” (WJE 8:488).

In his diary, David Brainerd spoke of praying to God that his ministry work “was not mine,” but God’s “own cause, and it would be for his glory to convert the poor Indians” (WJE 7:256).

Ministers then should seek God’s glory above all else in church work. This, according to Edwards, is what Christ sought in His ministry (WJE 8:485). When they serve as a light of God’s truth to souls, “a minister of the gospel becomes like his glorious Master, and glorifies him” (WJE 25:99). David Brainerd frequently examined his own heart’s motives, lest he desire success for his own glory. “So far as I could judge, I was wholly free from selfish ends in my fervent supplications for the poor Indians” (WJE 7:261). Any spiritual success was for the glory of God.

Third, Edwards believed that, though God’s Spirit did a true spiritual work in hearts (especially during the revivals), nonetheless, not every apparently spiritual result was genuine. From the church in Corinth to the present day, Satan has sought an advantage over Christ’s church “by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true,” and it was especially ministers’ jobs to discern between the true and the false (WJE 2:85–86). Not all church growth is true growth (WJE 4:293).

Fourth, both Edwards and Brainerd emphasized biblical means or methods of church ministry. Their unwavering faith that God will work to save sinners through preaching, teaching, prayer, and holy living is refreshing and convicting. Edwards said, “God will make use of use of means and instruments to achieve his ends. ‘Tis not his manner to stint in the use of means” (WJE 25:446).

Both in practice and in writings, Edwards and Brainerd especially emphasized preaching as what God will use to bring about true ministry success. In fact, they often framed true Christian ministry with expressions like “the success of the gospel,” showing that true ministry was God’s giving success to the faithful proclamation of Jesus Christ (WJE 9:378, 387, 390; 7:202).

Edwards was likely a very good preacher for his time.⁴ He spent many hours each day studying Scripture. In a sermon for a pastoral installation, Edwards preached about the way ministers should go about their sacred work. They should be “diligent in their studies,” make it “very much their business, with the utmost diligence and strictness, to search those holy writings” that were their responsibility, seek “the spiritual knowledge of Christ,” and “walk closely with God” (WJE 25:99–100).

Following the conviction of his grandfather Stoddard, Edwards believed that clear preaching on the reality of hell and God's judgment for sin was essential for true conversions.⁵ To strengthen the ministry of the Word, Edwards on occasion encouraged young people to meet after biblical teaching, spending time "in social religion" (WJE 4:148).

Likewise, in his diary, Brainerd recorded that he sought ministry success by preaching. "Went and preached, first to the Irish and then to the Indians" (WJE 7:249). When Brainerd once came upon some Indians, he greeted the leader and "told him my business, and that my desire was teach them Christianity" (WJE 7:268). When Brainerd experienced "freedom and fervency" in his preaching, he understood it as God's gift to him (WJE 7:263).

Edwards and Brainerd also believed that prayer was an essential means to bring God's blessing upon the preaching of the gospel. One of Edwards' published works, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer* (1747), was a call to all churches to pray together for the gospel's success. This work is colored by Edwards' understanding of the end times, but he held the conviction that the corporate, united prayer of Christians

to God was necessary for “the gospel” to “universally prevail” (WJE 5:333). Similarly, Edwards once preached a sermon from Zechariah 8:20–22 titled “The Suitableness of Union in Extraordinary Prayer for the Advancement of God’s Church” (WJE 25:200).

David Brainerd is a moving example of seeking God in prayer for the gospel’s success. He recorded being “enabled to cry to God for my poor Indians; and though the work of their conversion appeared ‘impossible with man,’ yet ‘with God’ I saw ‘all things were possible’” (WJE 7:255). Another entry reads, “I spent more than an hour in secret retirement,” to pray “for the increase of grace in my soul, for ministerial endowments, for success among the poor Indians” (WJE 7:268). Brainerd spoke of setting apart an entire day to pray for God’s blessing on his ministry (WJE 7:275).

The minister’s example is also an important means God uses for the success of the gospel. “The same things that ministers recommend to their hearers in their doctrine,” Edwards said, “they should also show them an example of in their practice” (WJE 25:94). Brainerd prayed “that God would purge me more, that I might be as a chosen vessel to bear his name among the heathens” (WJE 7:255).

One final lesson is that both men endured suffering for Christ's work. God used Jonathan Edwards greatly during the Great Awakening. But after the revivals, Edwards' congregation would always backslide. Eventually Edwards' Northampton congregation voted to separate from their minister after he taught that only genuine believers should be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Edwards' next ministry, at Stockbridge, a mission post, was slow-going.

Similarly, God used David Brainerd for a brief time in 1746–1747 to see New Jersey Indians turn into a growing assembly of saints. Yet before that success, he spent years toiling with few to no results and died of tuberculosis shortly after his New Jersey success.

Neither of these men led megachurches. They expected to suffer for Christ's Word, and so they did.

FAITH LEADS TO BIBLICAL METHODS

These two ministers remained committed to the biblical means or methods of church work in their simplicity, given by Christ in Scripture. They did not do this because they lacked creativity, but because, for them, going about the work of the ministry in the way God prescribed in the Bible was an act of faith in and obedience to Christ. They believed that mortal men were utterly unable to manipulate spiritual results (WJE 9:400; 7:256).

If God was going to bring about true success for Christ, He was going to do so through the means and methods He had appointed. The present age was one where the church was “in a suffering, afflicted, persecuted state,” Edwards said. So the very success of Christ’s gospel against such foes clearly demonstrated God’s power and proved the truth of the Christian religion (WJE 9:372, 398–401).

Ryan J. Martin is the pastor of Columbiaville Baptist Church of Columbiaville, Michigan, and the author of *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*.



¹ Excellent biographies on Jonathan Edwards include George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale University Press, 2003); Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Banner of Truth, 1987); and Douglas A. Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word: A Model of Faith and Thought* (IVP Academic, 2009). For a sketch of the brief life of David Brainerd, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of*

John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd (Crossway, 2001), 123–59.

² See Marsden, 29–33, 114–24.

³ All citations of Edwards’ works come from the Yale edition, available online at edwards.yale.edu. For brevity, parenthetical citations will appear in the text with “WJE” followed by the volume and page numbers.

⁴ For a corrective to the popular caricature that Edwards spoke in monotone and read from a manuscript close to his face, consider Sweeney, 75–79.

⁵ Marsden, 120–21.



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SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS

2 TIMOTHY 1:13

FIRST PARTAKER

“The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits” (2 Tim. 2:6)

Fellowship, Not in Word Only

*Christian! There is a terrible danger to which you stand exposed in your inner chamber. You are in danger of substituting Prayer and Bible Study for living fellowship with God.
(Andrew Murray)*

*But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.
(Psalm 73:28a, NASB)*

A. W. Tozer didn't often recount what took place in his inner sanctum. But once at a Bible conference he related a milestone experience. Still young in the ministry, he had walked out into a wooded area with a friend, the two having agreed that they would

separate for a time of private Bible reading and prayer. After his friend had found a log and settled down for time with the Lord, Tozer found his own spot further on, knelt down and began to read his Bible. *I was reading about the camp of Israel in the wilderness and how God laid it out in a beautiful diamond pattern, he testified. All at once, I saw God as I never saw Him before. In that wooded sanctuary, I fell on my face and worshipped. Since that experience, I have lost all interest in cheap religious thrills. . . . I came face-to-face with the sovereign God, and since that time only God has mattered in my life.*¹

In his foreword to the Tozer biography in which that account is related, Leonard Ravenhill testified, *I am often asked, "Was Dr. Tozer the greatest preacher you ever heard?" No, but he redeemed the time and hence had an intimacy with God beyond any other man I ever met.*

Intimacy with God, or *daily, devotional communion with God*, was the subject I introduced in my previous column. Certainly we would agree that nothing is more vital to our entire well-being. All else that we experience spiritually—the new birth, growth in grace, mortification of sin, the fruit of the Spirit, transformation—are not themselves the ultimate end. They are the redemptive means to what is. The bright, warm, happy end of all is that we *walk in the*

light as he is in the light and **have fellowship one with one another** (1 John 1:7; **bold** here and below indicates my own emphasis). The Westminster Shorter Catechism (followed by Benjamin Keach's and C. H. Spurgeon's catechisms) asks, *What is the chief end of man?* The answer? *The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.* The apostle John says that this joy is the consequence of fellowshiping with God the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ. He says that he is informing us of this so that by experiencing it our joy *may be full* (1 John 1:3–4).

It ought to be the love of our lives to experience this more and more, and to be enchanted or absorbed with everything else less and less. That must include even our service for Christ, strange as that may sound. How many of the Lord's best ministers, like the two who were unaware of Christ's presence on the Emmaus road, *walk and are sad* so much of their time? If they had the confidence to open their hearts to a friend, they would confess that often they feel themselves to be very much like a Martha, *careful and troubled about many things* in their churches.

Even the great apostle Paul knew those kinds of anxieties over people. *I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain. . . . I stand in doubt of you* (Gal. 4:11, 20). *I had no rest in my spirit* (2 Cor.

2:13). *There is the daily pressure on me [of] concern for all the churches* (2 Cor. 11:28, NASB).

But surely we know the victorious remedy that was taught by Christ and gladly embraced by Paul. *One thing is needful that good part, which shall not be taken away* (Luke 10:42), *that I may know him* (Phil. 3:10). Even before either Paul or our Lord, Asaph recovered from his disillusionment when he realized once again, *As for me, the nearness of God is my good* (Ps. 73:28, NASB). We may need to awake to something of the same realization confessed to Dr. Moody Stuart by an older woman during the 1859 revival in Scotland: *I had long been seeking a distant Christ, and was passing by Christ who was close beside me.*²

But just exactly what is this “knowing” and “nearness” which the Scripture calls *fellowship* or *communion*? In what sense is it *devotional*, and how are we to experience it *daily*? These are the questions for which we’re attempting to find the answers which alone can transform.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNION WITH GOD

In the previous column we considered the New Testament’s use of the word *koinōnia* when it is used to describe our intimate relationship with God (six

times: 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1; 1 John 1:3, 5, 6). Though unused by the Old Testament in this sense, there are passages describing such a thing in other wonderful terms. Three of the most precious of these make use of the Hebrew word for *confidential conversation, friendship, or intimacy* (*sôd*).

- *His lamp shined upon my head . . . the **secret** of God was upon my tabernacle.* (Job 29:3a, 4b)
- *He [God] is **intimate** with the upright.* (Prov. 3:32b, NASB).
- *The **friendship** of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.* (Ps. 25:14, ESV)

Blessed as these experiences must have been for Old Testament saints, what the New Testament is calling *koinōnia* surpasses even them. We can be fully assured of this, in that all the provisions of the new covenant are better and beyond those of the old covenant. But how can this be? What kind of fellowship between two persons could possibly be anything more and better than intimacy?

The revelation with which the New Testament answers this is bound up in what the apostle Paul calls *the mystery of Christ* (Eph. 3:4). Included in it are two things that lift our fellowship to even higher planes than those enjoyed by Old Testament believers.

The first is our having a familial relationship to the first person of the Godhead, a relationship Paul calls υιοθεσία (*huiiothesia*). This is translated *adoption* (Rom. 8:15), *adoption of children* (Eph. 1:5), and *adoption of sons* (Gal. 4:5). It essentially means *sonship* in a legal sense and status. Our possessing this standing is among the most elevating truths of *the mystery of Christ*.

But even more blessedly, we are sons not only legally, but also supernaturally by virtue of the new birth. We are *partakers of the divine nature* (2 Pet. 1:4), and God's *seed* (σπέρμα, *sperma*) *abides in us* (1 John 3:9, NASB). Consequently, in very nature we are His *little children* (1 John 2:1; 3:1), and He is our Heavenly Father (Gal. 4:6). It is this which makes my fellowshipping relationship with Him that of a beloved child with an inconceivably loving Father. But weren't Old Testament saints regenerated also?

My understanding is that they were, though I can't take time here to explain this. But what is absent from the Old Testament's revelation about individual relationship to God is this matter of sonship. There will be much more for us to consider about this, because God's loving manifestations of it to His children lie at the very heart of the way in which we grow in satisfying fellowship with Him. But for now we'll do no more than take serious note of its significance.

The second factor lifting our fellowship to planes higher than those of even the most advanced Old Testament believers is our being indwelt by the Godhead. When by heavenly grace we are *called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord* (1 Cor. 1:9), the resulting relationship isn't merely that God's Son now walks beside us on life's pathway. It is mysteriously far more. We are actually *in Christ Jesus* (1 Cor. 1:30). This is one of the most staggering and ultimately impenetrable truths of all Truth.

And yet there is more. A further truth of union with Christ is what Paul calls, *Christ in you* (plural; that is, all Christians). This miracle makes possible a union between us and Christ that is nothing less than a miraculous mutual indwelling: *ye in me, and I in you* (John 14:20).

It is possible, however, that our conception of this union is somewhat stunted. I need, therefore, to clarify that it is critical to our understanding of how fellowship with God "works" to realize that our union with Christ cannot be fully explained in merely positional terms. It is true that some aspects of it have to do with the legal standing (Rom. 8:1) or the privileged state (Eph. 2:6) that God regards us to have in His Son. But any conjecture that New Testament teaching can be explained by those facts alone is can-

celebrated out by statements such as *Christ **liveth** in me* (Gal. 2:20), *God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son **into your hearts*** (Gal. 4:6), and, as we will see shortly, by Christ's own Upper Room teaching about this.

The glorious, incomprehensible truth is that those who are the sons of the Heavenly Father are not only partakers of His very own nature, but are then united with His only begotten Son in such a way that they and He mutually indwell one another.

A scriptural understanding of communion with God must also take into consideration the fact that we are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Bible students are somewhat divided in their view of whether this was experienced by all Old Testament believers as well. They were all regenerated, but were they all indwelt? That's debated. But all agree that something additional has been taking place ever since Pentecost. Jesus foretold a relationship to the Spirit that wouldn't take place until after His ascension: *I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever* (John 14:16). *If I depart, I will send him unto you* (John 16:7). The result is that the Father sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts (Gal. 4:6) so that our very bodies became *the temple of the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor. 6:19). But there's yet more to be understood about indwelling.

Even the Father Himself *dwelleth in us* (1 John 4:12–13). It is this, in particular, that brings to climax one of the ultimate objectives bound up in the mystery of Christ's saving work. The way Peter expresses that final objective is *that he might **bring us to God*** (1 Pet. 3:18). Once the New Testament finishes revealing what this entails, we realize that it isn't merely that former outsiders now have a new standing before God the Father. That's wonderfully true, of course. But far beyond that, in the most miraculous and nearly inconceivable way, we've been brought to the Father and taken to Himself as ***insiders*** (indwelt and indwelling). *As thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . . . I in them, and thou in me* (John 17:21, 23). What a union! What a fellowship! What a joy divine!

SUMMARY

Here, then, are those things that most distinguish our own fellowship with God from that of a Job or a David or a Moses. Take the experience of Moses, for example. The great, unique difference between him and any other of his office was that God spoke with him *mouth to mouth* (Num. 12:8) and *face to face* (Deut. 34:10). But consider this: the least believer in Christ is (1) the Heavenly Father's beloved child, not merely legally and positionally, but naturally (super-

naturally); and that same believer is also (2) *indwelt* by God! Not by one member only, but by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The “Three-in-One” are *in* a Christian!³ And that same believer, being in Christ, is in Them.

Rooted in his understanding of these two miraculous realities, sonship and indwelling, Paul traced the new covenant progression to fellowship with God as compactly as it could ever be stated: *through Him* [Christ] *we both* [Jews and Gentiles] *have our access in one Spirit to the Father* (Eph. 2:18, NASB). Access is the divine objective. Not merely legal standing, but living fellowship. How is it possible? Paul’s prepositions are critical: *through* Christ and *by/in* the Holy Spirit.

Ours is a communion (*koinonia*) that surpasses even the best of what was experienced by any Old Testament believer. If to you this still seems to be overstated, especially in the cases of the authors of Old Testament Scriptures, there are additional considerations that may help. Consider what is said of John the Baptist’s preeminence over all Old Testament saints before him, and the **relationship** to Christ that made it so. Reflect then upon the fact that the least in the kingdom of heaven is even greater than John (Matt. 11:11), and why this is so. Or do a careful study of the radically transforming effect of the

Scriptures upon the least New Testament Christian (by the indwelling Spirit of God), by comparison with what we're told of the surface effects upon Moses' outward appearance after his meeting with God (2 Cor. 3:17–18). Meditating, even briefly, upon these and other such New Testament realities will help confirm the point for you: *ours is a communion with God that surpasses even the best of what was experienced by any Old Testament believer*. Yet I hope that what we'll consider next will be clinching.

THE INTIMATE POSSIBILITIES

What, then, is the extent of the possibilities for our daily, devotional communion with God? This is where we must once again place four of the Scripture's exact statements before us.

- . . . *ye were called unto the fellowship [koinonia] of **his Son Jesus Christ our Lord***. (1 Cor. 1:9)
- *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion [koinonia] of **the Holy Ghost**, be with you all. Amen.* (2 Cor. 13:14)
- *If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship [koinonia] of **the Spirit** . . .* (Phil. 2:1)
- . . . *truly our fellowship [koinonia] is with **the Father**, and with **his Son Jesus Christ***. (1 John 1:3)

These references put beyond all doubt that our fellowship extends to all three members of the Godhead *individually*: Father (1 John 1:3), Son (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:3), and Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1). These passages—the only ones in Scripture to use the word *koinonia* of the intimate communion we have with God—do not speak of it in any way other than with individual members of the Godhead. It is, of course, entirely appropriate for us to say in generic terms, *I met with God this morning*, or *I try to stay in fellowship with God all day long*. The members of the Godhead are one, and in much of their activity what one does, all may be said to do, even if one predominates in it. But evidently what the New Testament wants us to understand is that when we *meet* with God, and while we're attempting to remain in *fellowship* with Him, it's with individual members of the Godhead that we actually have to do.

The most extensive work ever written about this is John Owen's *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation* (1657; repr., Banner of Truth, 1965). Owen's understanding was that communion between God and us, *consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth*.⁴

What Owen means by this is essentially the understanding we arrived at in the previous column. It is the conclusion (persuasion, if you will) that fellowship with God is not merely the sharing of words through Bible reading and prayer, blessed and necessary to fellowship as these are. But full-orbed *fellowship* is an actual sharing of *persons*. It is God sharing Himself and we, in turn, sharing ourselves. Owen puts it in these words: *communication of **himself** unto us, and then, our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth*. Our sonship by supernatural new birth, in concert with the indwelling of the members of the Godhead, makes possible these Persons' communications of Themselves to us, and ours (starting at the level of our love) to Them. It is this that Owen calls *communion* and then explores through various New Testament passages until his readers have been persuaded to expect this and seek it.

Two years before his death in 1714, Matthew Henry delivered three lectures on *Daily Communion with God*. They dealt almost exclusively with the communion that we have with God in prayer. But Henry's understanding of communion comprehensively was broader and very similar to Owen's. Perhaps he arrived at it by reading Owen. Or it might have come from his father, Philip, who used to hear

Owen preach at Oxford almost weekly during his student years when Owen was vice-chancellor of the University. Regardless, given Henry's integrity with Scripture, we can be sure that he isn't merely parroting Owen when he explained *a life of communion with God* this way:

*All the strength and comfort of a sanctified soul, all its gracious principles, powers, and performances, are from God. **He is the spring and author of all its sensations of divine things, and all its motions towards them.*** (Commentary on Ps. 36:8–9)

I find that Henry's last sentence helpfully elucidates Owen's explanation. I'll put their lines one after the other.

Owen: . . . *communication of himself unto us*

Henry: *He is the spring and author of all [of a sanctified soul's] sensations of divine things . . .*

What Owen means by God's communicating *himself* to us is, in Henry's words, His giving to us *sensations of divine things*. Divine things are things of Himself, like His love, His peace, His joy, His truthfulness and forgiveness, and so on. These things aren't packaged goods that He hands out for us to carry away. The gifts are inseparable from their Giver.

Experiencing them is to experience Him (as our Father, or our Savior, or our Sanctifier). This is communion as Owen and Henry were understanding it. On God's side it consists in His communicating Himself by giving us fresh, or greater, or especially timely *sensations* of what He is and what He does. *In communion with thee . . . by the communications of thy grace to us*, is how Henry expressed it in a prayer.

This, however, is only the Godward side of fellowship. Our part is of the nature of *return*. Again, I'll put Owen and Henry's statements one after the other.

Owen: . . . *our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth*.

Henry: . . . *the return of our devout affections to thee*.

I'll say more about this later, but regarding the way Owen expresses our part—*returnal of that which he requireth and accepteth*—we must be sure that we don't limit this to acts of obedience and service. Those are immensely important, of course. But recall the fatal flaw in the Ephesian church (*thou hast left thy first love*), and remember that what God requires first and most of all is the entirety of our heart (*ourselves* at the core).

Henry puts his finger on this by his use of the word *affections*. There may be actions without affections. But

affections are never in isolation from ourselves. Like thoughts, affections *are* ourselves—our hearts, if you will. And God, indwelling us as He does, *feels* them. This is something beyond His only *hearing* us affirm them in our prayers. The latter may be words without genuine fellowship; prayers in *word only*, like Bible reading in *word only*. But when, in response to His communications of Himself to us, we are returning our affections (as well as our actions) to Him, this is *koinonia in the light*, indeed!

Mark Minnick pastors Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina. His sermons are available at mountcalvarybaptist.org/sermons and on your favorite podcast app: search for “Mount Calvary Baptist Church” and subscribe.

¹ James L. Snyder, *A. W. Tozer: In Pursuit of God* (Monarch, 2009), 158.

² Kenneth Moody Stuart, *Alexander Moody Stuart: A Memoir, Partly Autobiographical* (1899; repr., Banner of Truth, 2023), 135.

³ The indwelling of God in a person, like His locale within a particular place (the temple, for instance),

must always be interpreted within the context of the truths of His immensity (1 Kings 8:27) and omnipresence (Ps. 139:7–12). On the one hand, He is transcendent above and beyond all. On the other, He actually dwells with His people. *For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit . . .* (Isa. 57:15). Such knowledge is *too wonderful* for us, *it is high* and *we cannot attain unto it* (Ps. 139:6). Yet we must not doubt it. Believing it is fundamental to full and joyful experiences of walking in fellowship with God.

⁴ *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, in *Works* (1657; repr., Banner of Truth, 1965), II:8.

BRING...THE BOOKS

“... when thou comest, bring with thee . . . the books.” (2 Tim. 4:13)

John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace

Jonathan Aitken's biography of John Newton is one for the ages. Despite its foreword by a man recently involved in a spiritual fall (Philip Yancey), the content stems from deep and reliable research sources and overall yields a great service to the church in detailing the life of a man greatly used of God in 18th-century Britain.

The book proposes to weave together the three prominent elements of John Newton's journey: *adventure*, from a rebellious upper-class boy to a bewildered and shipwrecked young man; *love*, from an awkward and wondering bachelor to a composed and eloquent husband; and *conversion*, from a notorious and godless blasphemer to a Christlike and exemplary preacher. This was also the literary structure of John Newton's autobiography, *An Authentic Narrative*. But Aitken's book adds a significant amount of material (particularly about Newton's preaching legacy) that make it apropos for the Christian. Aitken, himself a trophy taken from

political disgrace, accomplishes well his purpose of answering the question “Who was John Newton?”

The adventure portion of the story starts the book, chronicling Newton’s upbringing through to his first exposures to the seafaring sphere in his teenage years. Aitken demonstrates that though Newton’s mother died when he was 6, her short but godly influence in his life would prove immensely pertinent to his later conversion. Drawn into the black hole of sin stemming from his unrestrained depravity, Newton found himself the object of constant plot twists that eventually landed him in Africa amid squalid conditions. His final rescue and return home is nearly a shipwreck-adventure story in itself and serves as a transition to his spiritual regeneration.

Aitken takes pains to demonstrate the mystery of providence in Newton’s life despite his resistance to spiritual things. Aitken, a former politician turned Church of England clergyman, brings both a keen sense of experience and an overall Christian worldview to his research and subsequent comments. His presentation of the intrigue of literary character and progression in the record of John Newton’s life makes the book a page-turner.

The early narrative is peppered with accounts of John Newton’s thoughts of and visits to the one who, for him, was love at first sight: Polly Catlett. Eventual

marriage to this higher-class English girl would prove nearly miraculous as Newton was in no way suited for leading a wife. But God's grace fell on Newton's heretofore deaf ears in the form of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. By the time Newton married Polly, amazing grace had taken a wretched sailor and turned him into a sanctified seaman.

The author shows remarkable insight in his conclusions and interpretations regarding parts of Newton's story that are not recorded. For example, Aitken perceives Newton's critical role in preventing William Cowper's suicide: "contemporary evidence suggests that Newton could hardly have done more for Cowper as both a practical and pastoral helper. . . . Newton spent several hours a day with his suffering neighbor and was frequently called to his bedside . . . at inconvenient hours of the day and night."

Newton's conversion story and later ministry is perhaps the most enduring section of his life. Aitken guides the reader through the suspense of Newton's call to the ministry, which entailed six years of having ordination requests rejected before finally being installed as the curate of Olney. Later in London when Newton's reputation as a preacher, author, and mentor increased (both nationally and internation-

ally), he providentially developed a relationship with the spearhead of the abolitionist movement: William Wilberforce. Into his twilight years, Newton's influence continued as that of a sage to whom many flocked for advice and friendship.

Reading this last and most lengthy portion of the book made me feel like I was getting advice from Newton himself as an older man in the ministry. The experienced minister of John Newton's gray-haired years seems almost to preach directly through the pages to the reader, giving encouragement and exhortations, such as the following to Wilberforce: "My heart is with you, My Dear Sir. I see, though from a distance, the importance and difficulties of your situation. May the wisdom that influenced Joseph and Moses and Daniel rest upon you . . . especially to keep you in the habit of dependence upon God and communion with him in the midst of all the changes and bustle around you."

This book is an extremely valuable help for the Christian and the Christian minister. It displays a breadth of knowledge regarding the fallen human condition and gives God's answer of all-sufficient grace for the sinner's need. The book presents a man well-acquainted with the warp and woof of ministerial experience, from its depths to its heights. The

author's own sudden fall from political office and subsequent jail-time conversion make him especially suited for presenting the story of love and mercy that redeemed "a wretch like me." *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* is well worth the read because it tells a story of redemption and reconciliation, to which ministry we have been called.

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STRAIGHT CUTS

“Rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)

God’s Means of Awakening Nineveh

Paul told Timothy, “In the last days perilous times shall come” (2 Tim. 3:1). In 2026 we see evidence of such a time all around us. Is there any hope? Or is our society too far gone? Is it not true that, even in a dark day, “the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save” (Isa. 59:1)?

One place to look for a scriptural answer is Jonah 3, which records the awakening of Ninevites in the 8th century BC. God’s merciful pursuit of His stubborn prophet serves as the intriguing backstory to this instance of mass conversion. The book of Jonah is a Spirit-breathed masterpiece that depicts God’s effectual purpose to save sinners.

Jonah 3 begins with the prophet’s obedience to the Lord’s second command to proclaim divine judgment in Nineveh. Some find it difficult to believe that the people’s response comprises true conversion. But the Spirit declares that “the people of Nineveh believed God” (v. 5) and turned from sin in humility and

prayer (vv. 6–9). These are the elements of *conversion*: faith and repentance. Their response was more than lip-service. This spiritual awakening gripped individual sinners in a great city from top to bottom. But our primary focus is *why* they responded this way.

Some possible reasons can be easily dismissed. These people did not believe and repent because of a benevolent ambassador. The last chapter of the book speaks to the bitter frustration Jonah still harbored in his soul (4:1, 9). We have no indication that the notoriously vicious Ninevites desired to know the true God. In fact, their hearts were “deceitful . . . and desperately wicked,” as is true of all fallen humanity (Jer. 17:9). Nor was spiritual privilege the explanation; they grew up far from the influence of the ancient Near Eastern “Bible Belt.”

If the Assyrians themselves were not the answer, could it have been their life situation? Scholars suggest an array of circumstantial reasons for the Ninevites’ response. Certain conditions may have contributed to a readiness to hear the Lord’s word of judgment—revolt, plague, famine, even a solar eclipse in 763 BC. God evidently prepared the way through an array of destabilizing factors. Yet it is tempting, not only for commentators but for us all, to divert our attention away from what Scripture actually says. Had news of the amazing rescue of Jonah traveled

to Nineveh ahead of or alongside him (as rabbinic scholars taught)? Was Jonah severely disfigured or bleached due to his three-night stay in the intestinal cavity of the fish? Were the Ninevites primed for such a message of judgment because of politics, the economy, or even astronomy? All of these are possible, if not probable. But none of them are the point God makes. Jonah 3 gives a far simpler yet more profound answer.

The chapter begins, “And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time.” Later, it says that “word came unto the king of Nineveh” (v. 6). The term *word* connects back to what the Lord told Jonah to proclaim (v. 2). In other words, the Ninevite response was the result of what Jonah heralded. It was the proclaimed word by which God mercifully turned around the Ninevites. It is by the foolishness of preaching that God in His wisdom is pleased “to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

In response to the scribes and Pharisees, our Lord cited the Ninevites’ repentance as a sobering benchmark. “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here” (Matt. 12:41). If a terse word of judgment from a far-away prophet who

was reticent to herald God's truth caused this great Gentile awakening, should we not depend on the power of the proclaimed word as God's way today?

The Gospels provide another insight into the Jonah account. Christ calls it "the sign of Jonas" (Luke 11:29). God provided divine authentication of His message by sending as His spokesman one who was "as good as dead" for three days and nights. A messenger from God who had gone down to Sheol and been brought back up serves as a wondrous, compelling authorization. Jonah did not give a sign; he was the sign. God miraculously delivered him from death to herald His word.

We may be tempted to think, "If only Jonah could show up downtown this weekend to preach!" But God has "furnished proof *to all men*" of universal judgment to come "by raising [His Son] from the dead" (Acts 17:31, NASB). Faithful proclamation of the gospel is not merely about a Savior who died long ago. It is our risen Lord's personal declaration of "repentance and remission of sins" through the human messenger (Luke 24:47; 1 Thess. 2:13).

In an age of agnostic naturalism, we must not question God's miraculous use of a great fish. And in these difficult days, we must not doubt that Gentiles lacking biblical knowledge and upbringing could repent and be rescued by our gracious and

compassionate God in response to preaching! It is right to pray that God would use circumstances to unsettle the unbelieving. But our confidence is in “the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23, NASB). Whether in ancient Nineveh or contemporary America, the means of salvation remains the same. As Paul exhorted Timothy, “Preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2).

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WINDOWS

“To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, ‘A window shalt thou make in the ark.’” Charles Spurgeon

Promoting Exemplary Ministry

If you are like me, you read the New Testament apostles’ exhortations to godly ministry motives and methods with a yearning to emulate those ideals. Thankfully we are not given precepts only but are also presented with patterns to follow—lives of apostles and prophets who served the Lord faithfully. The apostle Paul is himself a vivid illustration of exemplary ministry, describing throughout his epistles his life of service to the Lord and others. As we seek to encourage ourselves and others to faithfully minister the Word (vocationally or not), we can look to the lives of Paul and others for illustrative instruction.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL CLEARLY AND COMPLETELY

Paul was bold with the gospel message and transparent as a messenger. He appealed to his Thessalonian readers’ knowledge of him and his

ministry multiple times (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11; 4:2): “Ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake” (1:5). They knew that Paul was genuine, bold, sincere, generous, hard-working, godly, and compassionate. They also recognized and received the gospel that God had entrusted to Paul (2:4) “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (2:13). Paul declared, “We were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God” (2:2) and “We were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us” (2:8).

The clear and complete gospel must be heralded by genuine messengers. As Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously wrote to a fellow minister, “It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”¹ Herschel Hobbs, a Baptist pastor in the mid-1900s, saw firsthand the importance of simply preaching Christ.

In 1959 Ramsey Pollard and I, together with our wives, made a mission tour around the world. While in Korea we preached in revival meetings. Missionary Don Jones told us the Korean pastors were surprised at the simplicity of our sermons—the simple plan of salvation. They felt sermons

should be philosophical discourses. Of Ramsey one Seoul pastor said, “Why, all he talks about is Jesus.” I told Ramsey that was the greatest of compliments about his preaching. After all, is not that the goal of all preaching?²

We must beware of sending mixed signals by down-playing any part of the gospel message, even if some aspects of it are not palatable in our area or circle. In relating an account about a faded railroad signal flag, H. A. Ironside warned against a watered-down gospel.

Some years ago a fearful railroad wreck took a dreadful toll of life and limb in an eastern state. A train, loaded with young people returning from school, was stalled on a suburban track because of what is known as a “hot-box.” The limited was soon due, but a flagman was sent back to warn the engineer in order to avert a rear-end collision. Thinking all was well, the crowd laughed and chatted while the train hands worked on in fancied security. Suddenly the whistle of the limited was heard and on came the heavy train and crashed into the local, with horrible effect.

The engineer of the limited saved his own life by jumping, and some days afterwards was haled into court to account for his part in the calamity. And now a curious discrepancy in

testimony occurred. He was asked, “Did you not see the flagman warning you to stop?”

He replied, “I saw him, but he waved a yellow flag, and I took it for granted all was well, and so went on, though slowing down.”

The flagman was called, “What flag did you wave?”

“A red flag, but he went by me like a shot.”

“Are you sure it was red?”

“Absolutely.”

Both insisted on the correctness of their testimony, and it was demonstrated that neither was color-blind. Finally, the man was asked to produce the flag itself as evidence. After some delay he was able to do so, and then the mystery was explained. *It had been red*, but it had been exposed to the weather so long that all the red was bleached out, and it was but *a dirty yellow!*

Oh, the lives eternally wrecked by the yellow gospels of the day—the bloodless theories of unregenerate men that send their hearers to their doom instead of stopping them on their downward road!³

Although Ironside was applying that story to “theories of unregenerate men,” we should not skip over the

warning that even as gospel-believers we are tempted to shy away from faithfully, clearly, and boldly heralding the entire gospel message as revealed in God's Word.

We must preach the gospel message without any ulterior motives. Paul and his team's "exhortation was not of deceit . . . not as pleasing men, . . . neither . . . used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness . . . nor of men sought we glory" (1 Thess. 2:3–6).

Richard Baxter painfully observes, "We are so reluctant to displease men, and so desirous to keep in credit and favor with them, that it makes us most unconscionably neglect our known duty. A foolish physician he is, and a most unfaithful friend, that will let a sick man die for fear of troubling him; and cruel wretches are we to our friends, that will rather suffer them to go quietly to hell, than we will anger them, or hazard our reputation with them."⁴

In contrast to those who seek their own glory, Paul demonstrated the gentleness of a mother (1 Thess. 2:7) as he "exhorted and comforted and charged every one of [them], as a father doth his children" (v. 11).

WORKING HARD AT PREACHING

Paul did not shy away from hard work. In fact, when describing his efforts at Thessalonica he used three different words for work in one verse (1 Thess.

2:9)! Whether it was making tents, preaching the Word, or challenging false teachers, Paul “laboured more abundantly than they all” (1 Cor. 15:10; cf. 2 Cor. 11:23). In Acts 6:4, the apostles referred to their essential task in the Word as “the ministry [service] of the word.”

According to Herschel Hobbs, “A psychologist wrote a book on preaching. He said that in a thirty-minute sermon a preacher expends as much nervous energy as he would in a fifteen-mile hike. Certainly such an exercise is to be done with earnestness.”⁵

Richard Baxter reminds us that it is hard work to adequately exhort our listeners.

To preach a sermon I think is not the hardest part. And yet what skill is necessary to make plain the truth, to convince the hearers, to let in the irresistible light into their consciences and to keep it there, and drive all home, to screw the truth into their minds and work Christ into their affections, to meet every objection that gainsays and clearly to resolve it, to drive sinners to a stand and make them see there is no hope, but they must unavoidably be converted or condemned, and to do all this so for language and manner as is worthy of our work, and yet as is most suitable to the capacities of our hearers.

This, and a great deal more that should be done in every sermon, should surely be done with a great deal of holy skill. So great a God, whose message we deliver, should be honored by our delivery of it!⁶

LOOKING TO THE LORD FOR HIS STRENGTH

Paul humbly asks, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16), and then answers, “Our sufficiency is of God” (3:5)! Charles Spurgeon once shared with a small group of believers his feelings of inadequacy in ministry.

I was lamenting this morning my unfitness for my work, and especially for the warfare to which I am called. A sense of heaviness came over me, but relief came very speedily, for which I thank the Lord. Indeed, I was greatly burdened, but the Lord succoured me. The first verse read at the Sabbath morning service exactly met my case. It is in Isaiah xliii.1: “But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not.” I said to myself, “I am what God created me, and I am what He formed me, and therefore I must, after all, be the right man for the place wherein He

has put me.” We may not blame our Creator, nor suspect that He has missed His mark in forming an instrument for His work. Thus new comfort comes to us. Not only do the operations of grace in the spiritual world yield us consolation, but we are even comforted by what the Lord has done in creation. We are told to cease from our fears; and we do so, since we perceive that it is the Lord that made us, and not we ourselves, and He will justify His own creating skill by accomplishing through us the purposes of His love. Pray, I beseech you, for me, the weakest of my Lord’s servants, that I may be equal to the overwhelming task imposed upon me.⁷

LEAVING THE RESULTS TO THE LORD

The apostle Paul, though greatly blessed, saw team members defect to the world, churches fall prey to schisms and false teachers, and people make shipwreck of their faith. Yet he trusted the Lord for the success of the gospel and left the results with Him (1 Thess. 2:13–3:13; 1 Cor. 3:5–8; 2 Cor. 4:7–18).

M’Cheyne, toward the close of the letter referenced above, challenges our “I” problem. “It is our truest happiness to live entirely for the glory of Christ, to separate between ‘I’ and ‘the glory of Christ.’ We

are always saying, What have *I* done?—was it *my* preaching—*my* sermon—*my* influence? Whereas we should be asking, What hath God wrought?”⁸

G. Campbell Morgan concludes his comments on Peter’s preaching in Acts 2 with the following encouragement:

Finally let us remember for our encouragement that all the results of our teaching and preaching, if we are at the disposal of the Spirit of God, can never be tabulated. If we can tabulate the results of preaching, then the preaching is a comparative failure. But it is not so with any man who will but bring himself, with his ignorance or knowledge, with his weakness or strength, with his halting or eloquence, to the Spirit of God, for the declaration of this evangel. Rome will feel its power, Damascus will feel the effect of it. The far distant places of the world will be the places where the last ripples of the water touch the shore, and he will never know till the Day break. Cast thy bread upon the waters, for after many days thou shalt find it.⁹

Steve Kindstedt has served in various pastoral ministry roles for twenty years.

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- ¹ Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 282.
- ² Herschel H. Hobbs, *My Favorite Illustrations* (Broadman, 1990), 206.
- ³ H. A. Ironside, *Illustrations of Bible Truth* (Moody, 1945), 62–63.
- ⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, chapter 9. Quoted in Elliot Ritzema and Elizabeth Vince, eds., *300 Quotations for Preachers from the Puritans* (Lexham, 2013).
- ⁵ Hobbs, 209.
- ⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, chapter 1, section 1. Quoted in Ritzema and Vince.
- ⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *Twelve Sermons on the Lord's Supper* (Baker, 1980), 101.
- ⁸ Bonar, 282.
- ⁹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Revell, 1924), 95.

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September 18, 2026

New Mexico Regional Fellowship

Manzano Baptist Church

12411 Linn Ave. NE

Albuquerque, NM 87123

Coordinator: Dan Mauldin

October 5-7, 2026

FBFI Annual Fellowship

Faith Baptist Church

500 W Lee Rd.

Tailors, SC 29687

Coordinator: Caleb Phelps

October 24, 2026

New England Regional Fellowship

Heritage Baptist Church

186 Dover Point Rd.

Dover, NH 03820

Coordinator: Taigen Joos

October 26-27, 2026

Central Regional Fellowship

Harvest Hills Baptist Church

9713 N County Line Rd.

Yukon, OK 73099

Host pastor: Jason Shirk

Coordinator: Marcus Heffernan

February 2, 2027

Rocky Mountain Regional Fellowship

Westside Baptist Church

6260 W 4th St.

Greeley, CO 80634

Coordinator: Dan Unruh

March 8-9, 2027

Northwest Regional Fellowship

Highland Hills Community Church

901 S. Pearl St.

Tacoma, WA 98465

Host pastor: Matt Poole

Coordinator: Greg Kaminski

March 15-16, 2027

California Regional Fellowship

First Baptist Church of Pinole

16550 San Pablo Ave.

San Pablo, CA 94806

Host pastor: Kris Solberg

Coordinator: Dan Pelletier

March 15-17, 2027

South Regional Fellowship

Good News Baptist Church

3252 Taylor Rd.

Chesapeake, VA 23321

Host pastor: Mike Ascher

Coordinator: Tony Facenda



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BEST OF *PROCLAIM & DEFEND*

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FEATURED FROM OUR MOST POPULAR ARTICLES:

When You Don't Get Anything Out of Devotions

Ben Hicks | January 2, 2026

A college student comes back to his room after a message that forces him to take a good look at his spiritual life. Not very impressive. It's the beginning of the semester and he decides to do something about it. He's tired of living in the flesh and struggling with the same dumb sins over and over, so he resolves to make changes in his life.

So he goes all in. . . [but then . . .]

Nothing has changed, so he quits.

No, he doesn't quit. . . .

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2026/01/02/when-you-dont-get-anything-out-of-devotions/>

The Draw of Eastern Orthodoxy: Maybe Baptists Should Consider Putting the Word "Baptist" Back in the Church Name

Kevin Schaal | February 8, 2026

A young man recently started on a journey to find God and a biblical place to worship. His friends were investigating Eastern Orthodoxy because it has an extremely prominent representation on YouTube. As he began visiting evangelical megachurches and asking about the differences, he was met with vapid answers.

"Well, we are just glad you are showing an interest in religion."

"Maybe our church isn't for you, and Eastern Orthodoxy is a better fit."

Evangelical church leaders are treating the Orthodox Church like it is another denominational option and not what it actually is—another religion altogether.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2026/02/08/the-draw-of-eastern-orthodoxy-maybe-baptists-should-consider-putting-the-word-baptist-back-in-the-church-name/>

Beware AI-Generated Christian Content

Ben Hicks | February 26, 2026

New technologies like AI are bound to usher in new, unexpected problems. Now, I'm personally optimistic about the future of AI. I have been impressed watching it improve even over the last few years as the technology progresses and people find new and creative ways to use it. But any new technology will have growing pains. The internet has been a great blessing to humanity, but it's also been a source of great evil. As we find ourselves increasingly in the age of AI, we must brace ourselves for new threats we might not even have considered. I want to point one out today: beware of AI-generated Christian content.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2026/02/26/beware-ai-generated-christian-content/>

To find any of the articles or podcasts, search *proclaimanddefend.org* and include the title name (or a portion of the title name) in quotes.

Regional Reports

CALIFORNIA FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Dan Pelletier, Regional Coordinator

We had a great meeting on March 23–24, with Dr. Marty Herron as the keynote speaker. Our group of approximately forty men and women included church members from our host church, Calvary Baptist Church in Porterville. Evangelist Matt Galvan also spoke, and several local pastors and a pastor's wife did workshops on the theme, "By Faith": "Church Planting by Faith," "Navigating Trials by Faith," "Reviving a Struggling Church by Faith," and "Serving with Your Husband by Faith." Dr. Dale Seaman, our wonderful host, led the singing and directed the meetings. We are grateful for what God continues to do here in California as we serve Him by faith. Join us for our next fellowship March 15–16, 2027, at First Baptist Church of Pinole.

Dr. Minnick presented three challenging sessions on prayer and "The Man of God's Ministry of Intercession"—beginning with "Hard to Pray," con-

tinuing with “Dealing with the Difficulties,” and concluding with “With Christ in the Ministry of Intercession.” The ladies had a breakout session, led by Juanita Unruh, entitled “The Art of Pondering,” which focused on deliberately allowing God’s Word to shape their hearts, homes, and walk with Him.

Throughout the half-day, the sessions were punctuated with singing, fellowship, and visits with exhibitors. The conference concluded with a catered lunch from a favorite local BBQ restaurant, providing a relaxed setting for further fellowship, encouragement, and the forming of new relationships. Our next fellowship will be February 2, 2027.



NEW MEXICO FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Dan Mauldin, Regional Coordinator

On Friday, April 10, the New Mexico FBFI regional fellowship met at Manzano Baptist Church in Albuquerque. Due to illness, some could not come, and only five pastors attended. Nonetheless, we had great fellowship together. Manzano Baptist provided refreshments and a delicious lunch. We used the March/April *Frontline* magazine, which was themed “Is Conservatism Enough?” as the outline for our discussion. Our next meeting is scheduled for Friday, September 18, 2026, at Manzano Baptist Church in Albuquerque. The meeting will begin at 10 a.m. and conclude at 3 p.m.

Please consider attending a fellowship in your region! These meetings are times of biblical encouragement, growth, and blessing for both men and women.

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A photograph of a newborn baby lying in a clear plastic hospital incubator. A person's hand is visible, gently touching the baby's back. The baby is wearing a white diaper. The background is slightly blurred, showing a hospital setting.

Heart to Heart

Stephanie Smith

Not Unto Death, but for the Glory of God!

I peered into the incubator yet again. How could she be so little, yet still so perfect? As I rocked in the NICU, I willed my micro-preemie daughter Rachel to take another breath. And then another. Simultaneously, I stroked my still distended belly and prayed for my other daughter, Sarah, to stay in the womb another minute, another hour, another day.

To say that my pregnancy didn't go as expected is an understatement. At just twenty-four weeks gestation, I had gone into labor, likely caused by an in-utero infection. God had sovereignly overruled the expected outcome and allowed me to deliver only one of the twins I was carrying. Now I sat praying for miracles for both of my girls.

The Lord answered in ways my husband Mike and I never dreamed. Obviously, the interval delivery was a miracle. Sarah, the second twin, was born nine weeks after Rachel. Their birthdays are January 16th and March 17th.

At only one pound and ten ounces, Rachel's body needed constant support. One day it was her heart; the next, her liver. Then her kidneys; then her lungs. She had suffered a severe brain bleed due to the trauma of birth on her still undeveloped system. The ventricles inside her brain filled with fluid and caused immense pressure. The doctors' prognosis was bleak. Because Rachel's gestational age had not surpassed the legal threshold, they even recommended abortion—two weeks after she was born! Cerebral palsy was the official diagnosis. Seeing God's healing hand at work in our tiny girl's body as she survived—and then thrived—was further proof of His power.

Another astounding miracle was Rachel's brain function. Although the area of her brain that



controls physical movement is whole and complete, she still relies on adaptive equipment for daily tasks. But while the part of the brain that manages language is severely damaged, Rachel's speech is clear. She started reading at four years old, has memorized many Bible verses, understands God's Word, knows Jesus as her Savior, and enthusiastically praises God! Every day of her life is a testament to God's goodness and omnipotence.

No less of a miracle, Sarah developed typically despite her premature birth, and is now a faithful Christian, contented wife, mother of two, and a birth and bereavement doula for other moms.

Just weeks before these events began to unfold, Mike, then a framer on a custom-home construction crew, had begun to pray that the Lord would teach him to use his mouth for God's glory and for witnessing opportunities. A few days after Rachel's birth, the public relations manager of the hospital asked permission to release our story to the press. We agreed, and the next day, a newspaper reporter came to our hospital room. We carefully shared our experience, and Mike specifically testified that only God could do such a miracle. The story was printed the following day, but with no mention of God.

Then Denver's four television stations heard about the births. Before the formal press conference began, our delivering doctor passed out bright yellow buttons that said, "I believe in miracles!" We put those on, as did many of the hospital staff. With God's help, we again gave witness of His working and our firm trust in Him. This time, the reporters aired our interview in its entirety, and thousands of people in Colorado heard the gospel. We later learned that God had answered Mike's prayer by allowing people around the world to hear that testimony.

Since the twins' birth, the story of Jesus' friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, told in John 11, has been a solid anchor for my soul. The Bible says that when the message that Lazarus was very sick reached Jesus, He did not panic, rush, or worry. He simply stated the purpose of the illness: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby" (John 11:4). This truth did not exempt the family from sorrow or from pain. It did not remove the trial altogether. In fact, Jesus even wept at the grave, though it is hard to tell whether He was weeping over His friend's death or His disciples' unbelief. Maybe it was both. But His example of submission to the Father's purpose has

taught me the right perspective about my daughter's long-term disabilities: they are for God's glory.

Our daughter's cerebral palsy is not a punishment, a mistake, or an oversight on God's



part; it is His perfect will for us. Through it, we are learning complete dependence on our omnipotent God. We have had gospel opportunities with doctors, nurses, and therapists. We have a lot of practice carrying our griefs and sorrows to the only One who can bear them. And we have been reminded that Satan is on a leash and can go no further in harming God's children than our kind heavenly Father allows.

Amid the avalanche of physical demands, uncertainty, and change, God has faithfully demonstrated that only He can meet our needs. By His grace, we can joyfully cooperate with His plan and demonstrate to the world that He is more than enough. We're enabled to partake in the fellowship of His sufferings and receive solace from the God of all comfort, and

we look forward to eternal life with perfect bodies. All this, too, is for the glory of God!

Stephanie Smith is a wife of thirty-one years, mother of five, and Mimi for four. She holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood/elementary education and used it for seventeen years to home-school her children—including those with special needs and learning struggles. She has authored one book, *Watching God Work: Ministry Among the Macushi*, and has hosted a blog and podcast, ThinkBible.online. Her heart's desire is to live for the glory of her Savior and encourage others to do that, as well.



At A Glance

Layton Talbert

Human Forgiveness

As a Christian, am I obligated to forgive everyone who sins against me? Do I forgive only if the offender asks me to? What do I do if the offender *never* asks forgiveness?

One summer, when my daughter was counseling at a Christian camp, one of her campers (I'll call her "Anna") asked whether she was obligated to forgive her father for being verbally abusive to her, even if he never apologized for his behavior. Someone else had told her that she needed to, and she wanted to know if that was right.

So, what do you do if a fellow Christian publicly (or privately) insults you, or libels you, or cheats you? What *do* you tell "Anna" when she asks if she is supposed to forgive her father for his verbal abuse or his manipulative behavior? (Aside to fathers: God help you if you saddle your child with that burden to bear!)

The NT has a lot to say on the subject of forgiveness. The word shows up about 65 times in the NT. Let's start with where the Scripture is clearest and with what all believers should agree on.

The first word on forgiveness in the NT is folded into Jesus' prayer model: "Forgive us our debts" (Matt. 6:12). His initial point is that we need to ask God to forgive *us*. This first step to forgiveness is called confession and repentance (cf. Prov. 28:13). But it doesn't stop there: "forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors*." That's a sobering standard. But Jesus takes it a step further when He zeroes in on that specific part of the prayer, and applies it: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14–15, NKJV). God will forgive you (when you ask Him to) if you forgive others (when they ask you to). Forgiveness is serious business. According to Jesus, if I withhold it from others when they ask me for it, God withholds it from me when I ask Him for it. This passage suggests a first biblical norm regarding forgiveness.

PRINCIPLE 1: WHENEVER THE OFFENDER GENUINELY CONFESSES AND ASKS FORGIVENESS, I AM OBLIGATED TO GRANT IT FULLY AND FREELY.

Peter asked how often he should be willing to forgive someone who sins against him (Matt. 18:21). Jesus' reply implies no limit to my willingness to grant

forgiveness to someone who genuinely asks for it. Then He tells a story about forgiveness (note 18:27, 32) that concludes (18:35) with the same warning as in Matthew 6: God's forgiveness of you (when you ask) hinges on your forgiveness of others (when they ask). Matthew 6 and 18 imply that forgiveness requires repentance; Jesus teaches us to ask for, not assume, the Father's forgiveness. What is implicit in Matthew 6 and 18, however, is explicit in Luke 17:3–4: "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; *and if he repents*, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, *and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,'* you shall forgive him" (NKJV). Other passages also make repentance an explicit condition for forgiveness (Acts 5:31, 8:22; James 5:15–16), but usually the linkage is implied in the context.

Ephesians 4:32 exhorts believers to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another.*" What's the rationale? "*Just as God in Christ forgave you*" (NKJV). How did that happen? You repented. No one is forgiven by God in Christ apart from repenting. The same link between forgiveness and repentance is implied in the sister passage (Col. 3:13).

The connection between confession and forgiveness is not limited to just our initial experience of salvation. In our daily relationship to God, "He is

faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” On what condition? “If we confess our sins” (1 John 1:9).

Why are confession and repentance such a vital part of the forgiveness process? Because without confession, the operation of the grace of God in that life is short-circuited. God could, theoretically, simply dismiss *everyone's* sin on the basis of Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice, and grant release from sin's penalty irrespective of our acknowledgement of our sin. He does not do that. He requires the sinner to confront the weight and the reality, the cost and the consequences of sin, and insists on confession and repentance as the necessary prerequisite to His forgiveness. Confession and repentance are the indication that God has done a necessary work of grace in the heart. Don't cheat the offender of experiencing the grace of God.

Some people tell us that we should dispense forgiveness freely to all offenders, whether they ask for it or not. Such people either do not understand the basis of God's forgiveness, or they suppose that they are more magnanimous than God, or both. This is not about holding grudges until offenders come groveling on their knees. The idea that if you haven't forgiven someone then you must necessarily be bitter against that person is a misconception addressed

below. In the meantime, it is imperative to recognize that true godliness is following God's example; and God requires confession and repentance before He forgives us, because *it is necessary for us as sinners to confront the sinfulness of our own hearts and its consequences*. Only then are we prepared to receive God's gracious gift of forgiveness with the humility and gratitude that it deserves.

Forgiveness is not about making myself or the offender feel better. When you casually absolve all people of everything irrespective of their own attitude toward their sin, you make light of sin, cheapen the grace of forgiveness, and short-circuit the work of God in a person. Sin is ultimately against God not me (Gen. 39:9; Ps. 51:4), so forgiveness is bigger than me; that's why I have to exercise it according to God's rules.

So, as a believer I am obligated to forgive anyone who asks me to. That's not always easy. But nothing in the NT's teaching on forgiveness could be clearer. It is repeatedly demanded by Scripture, exemplified by God, and presented as the condition on which our own confession of sin receives God's forgiveness. There is no wiggle room here. At the same time, some equally biblical caveats are in order.

CAVEAT 1: SERIOUS FORGIVENESS REQUIRES SERIOUS REPENTANCE

The Bible ferociously condemns insincerity and hypocrisy. God delights in “truth in the inward parts” (Ps. 51:6). Apology is not always the same as confession. Regret that something happened is not repentance that admits “I was wrong.” “I’m sorry it happened” does not equal “I did it.” Feigned repentance on the part of the offender does not obligate the offended to extend forgiveness. Jesus requires multiple forgivings of the same person even on the same day (Luke 17:4), but He is clearly not countenancing insincerity on the part of the offender. How do you know if the confession is honest? You’ll have to decide that. The next caveat, however, suggests at least one evidence.

CAVEAT 2: FORGIVENESS DISMISSES THE PAST, NOT THE FUTURE

Biblical forgiveness (like biblical love) is free and sincere, but not gullible, foolish, or lawless. Forgiveness is about redressing past sins and repairing present relationships, not erasing all consequences. If the confessed behavior is a criminal act, personal forgiveness does not cancel out legal responsibility. And if the forgiven behavior is damaging or threat-

ening, there is no contradiction between genuine forgiveness of the past and establishing certain boundaries for the future. Indeed, a mark of the offender's sincerity is his willingness to accept the fallout of his failures alongside genuine forgiveness (see Gen. 44:18–34). True repentance does not try to wheedle its way out of the consequences of sin.

Suppose a business associate displays a pattern of poor judgment; even if he asks forgiveness for each incident, forgiveness does not obligate me to keep him in a position where he can continue to damage my business or its reputation. If a church leader confesses to moral indiscretions and repents, the church is obligated immediately to forgive him and restore him to fellowship, but not to spiritual leadership. If a relative is guilty of a predatory act on a minor, and genuinely repents, forgiveness is required; but setting precautionary boundaries for the future is not only prudent but also an act of genuine love for everyone concerned. If the offender protests that such measures contradict true forgiveness, his protest raises questions about the genuineness of his repentance.

Whenever the offender genuinely confesses and asks for forgiveness, I am obligated to grant it fully and freely just as God in Christ grants it to me. It's important

to start here, where the NT is unambiguous. That's not all the NT has to say on the matter. But this first principle is the single clearest note struck in the NT on the topic of forgiveness. Just as God forgives me when I confess my sins against Him, I am obligated to forgive others when they confess their sin against me.

PRINCIPLE 2: I HAVE NEITHER THE RIGHT NOR THE AUTHORITY TO PRONOUNCE FORGIVENESS FOR SINS COMMITTED AGAINST GOD OR OTHERS.

When Jesus did that (Mark 2:5), some of the Jewish leaders were incensed: "Who can forgive sins but God only?" (2:7; cf. Luke 5:21). They were right. That is exactly why Jesus could do it (Mark 2:10; cf. Matt. 9:6; Luke 7:48–49).

The sinful woman in Luke 7 never says a word in the passage, but weeps what are clearly tears of repentance onto the feet of Jesus (7:48). Jesus observes that she loves much because she has been forgiven much; "but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (7:47, NKJV). Why would someone be forgiven little? What if the implication is that *some are forgiven little because they confess little*? The more we are aware of our sin, the more we will confess; the more we con-

fess, the more we will be forgiven; and the more we are forgiven, the more we will love.

All of the passages we have seen so far either express or assume that forgiveness is my *response* to repentance. We are to forgive others just as God forgives us. God forgives us when we repent and on the basis of our confession. But what about when the offender has not asked—or will not ask—for forgiveness? What then? Are we obligated to forgive anyway? This is where the debate over forgiveness becomes difficult and (ironically) divisive.

PRINCIPLE 3: FORBEAR AND, IF YOU CAN, OVERLOOK; MAKE IT YOUR AMBITION TO BE HARD TO OFFEND.

“Don’t take this personally or anything, but you really blew that Sunday School lesson! If you would take the time to actually *read* the passage, you’d see that . . .” What’s your first response—in fact, your first Christian obligation? “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another” (Col. 3:12–13a, NKJV). The word (*for*)*bearing* means that I maintain my composure under injury or provocation, rather than lashing out in retaliation. “The discre-

tion of a man makes him slow to anger, and his glory is to overlook a transgression” (Prov. 19:11, NKJV). It is the instinct of love to “cover” sin (Prov. 10:12; 1 Pet. 4:8). Some people are so hypersensitive that they see a personal affront in every look or gesture. You’ll make life a lot easier for yourself and those around you if you make it your ambition to be hard to offend (Prov. 12:16; 16:32). But what if the offense is of such a nature that it simply cannot be ignored?

To be continued.

Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.



Jim Tillotson

Essential Elements in Building a Church

I love the theme of this publication. It has caused me to reminisce about the ministry I was involved in before I began serving at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. In the fall of 1997, my wife and I arrived in Edmonton, Alberta, to plant a church. We had served as assistant pastor and pastor's wife for seven years prior—two years unpaid and five years paid. When we arrived in Alberta, no self-supporting Baptist churches of the type we would plant existed in the entire province. All of them were pastored by missionaries. In terms of land area, Alberta is the size of Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana combined, and it would be unimaginable not to have even one self-supporting church in those four states.

God did an amazing work. We started with ten people and served as missionaries. After three years, the church had grown enough to take us on fully, and over the next several years we planted three churches and

helped revitalize another. God led us to start a Christian school and a Bible institute.

As I have reflected on what happened in Canada, and as I have traveled as the president of Faith and visited other thriving ministries, I have thought of certain common denominators. I think in all great works of God there is an element that cannot be explained. God does what He does where and when He chooses. Two people may do exactly the same thing and see different results. With that consideration as a foundation, I do believe there are elements God uses and blesses in building His church.

ELEMENT 1: PRAYER

We are told in James that we have not because we ask not. In Isaiah, Hezekiah faced an overwhelming Assyrian army. Hezekiah had prepared for this confrontation by diverting the water source into the city—an amazing feat known as Hezekiah's Tunnel, which can still be seen today.

However, in spite of all of his planning and preparation, Hezekiah could not defeat such an army. In Isaiah 37:21–35, God tells him that because he had prayed, God would save him. Because he had prayed, 185,000 Assyrians would die in their sleep. Because he had prayed, Sennacherib the Assyrian king would be assassinated.

Because he had prayed, God would add fifteen years to his life (Isa. 38:5).

Prayer makes a difference. At the very beginning of our ministry in Canada, we had Wednesday night prayer meetings. We printed a list of prayer requests that included a long list of people we wanted to see saved and a short list of health needs. In so many churches that is reversed.

We also had the right people praying for us. The Bible says in James that the effectual and fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Some people told me they were praying for me and I thought, “Big deal.” They were spiritual train wrecks, and their prayers wouldn’t make much of a difference. But we also had godly senior saints who said they were praying for us, and we knew that was making a difference.

In our sending church, a lady whom everyone called Grandma Buckingham promised to pray for us when we left for Canada. When we came back after three years to thank our supporting churches and let them know we didn’t need any more support, she told me that she had gotten up every morning at 5 a.m. and prayed for us.

Looking back at our prayer letters, we see times that we would ask for someone by name to get saved.

Many times, they would get saved within a few months.

I also met with a group of fellow missionaries every other month, and we would pray that someday there would be a self-supporting church in Alberta. Many times I can remember Bud Talbert, a missionary to Calgary, praying for specific towns to have a church planted in them, and now some of those towns have churches. It seems that sometimes we are so busy doing the work of ministry that we aren't praying for the ministry, and then we get to see only what we can do instead of what God can do.

ELEMENT 2: AN INTENTIONAL FOCUS AND PLAN TO REACH LOST PEOPLE

Churches are always friendly. They have friendly people at the door greeting and guiding visitors. We went door to door inviting people to our church.

It is important to have a nice, updated website. Most visitors check churches out online before they check them out in person. It is also important to have a clean church with clean bathrooms. Just as people would prepare their home for guests, our church buildings should be prepared for guests. We should put the Christmas decorations away in January, not March.

I believe it is very effective to have special events and invite lost people to come to them: wild game dinners, golf tournaments, men's events, ladies' events, events for moms and tots, anniversary Sundays, church picnics, and Vacation Bible Schools. Thriving churches hold such events and encourage their people to invite their unsaved friends, coworkers, neighbors, and family to come.

We also gave what I called the Magnificent 7 Challenge. The two neighbors on your left, the two neighbors on your right, and the three across from you are people you should invest in. Go out of your way to do good to them and to invite them to your church and home.

There are several more elements that I will share next time, but I hope this gets us thinking about how we can be a part of advancing the mission of the church.

Jim Tillotson has served as the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, since June 2015.





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Stewardship Matters

Corey A. Pfaffe

Church Building Projects

Architectural drawings fascinate me. Floor plans, elevations, site plans, specifications, materials—all in two dimensions to create a three-dimensional structure. Without training and experience as professional draftsmen, we would not want responsibility for what might be assembled.

Nevertheless, church building projects include a role for each of us. From the many building projects described in the Old Testament, we can consider our part in planning, working, and supporting the stewardship of our local church building projects.

PLANNING BUILDING PROJECTS

Building projects are complicated. Our local churches need our very best trained and experienced members to lead these projects.

Physical preparation. For the tabernacle project, Moses had his Bezaleel of Judah and Aholiab of Dan, whom God had gifted “in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” (Exod. 35:30–31). Not only could they do the work, they could supervise others. God put in their hearts that they could teach others (v. 34).

Solomon had his Hiram, who didn’t hew stones or cut wood, but used his logistics skills to assure that quality materials were available for the temple project—on time and on location (1 Kings 5:18).

Financial preparation. In every building project someone must assume responsibility for covering the cost of labor and materials. King Jehoshaphat lacked responsible financial custodians. Money earmarked for a temple repair project was eventually directed to faithful workmen, but only after Jehoshaphat confronted the priests for misappropriating the funds (2 Kings 12:4–16). Planning for construction requires the development of tools to aid decision making by church leaders and congregants. These tools should include the following:

- financial processes, procedures, and policies
- checks and balances to protect the ministry and those ministering

- meaningful financial reports

If debt is required for the project, the demonstration of wise financial management of God's provision will be paramount.

When your church prepares for its next building project, encourage gifted church members to volunteer their efforts. Be ready to engage in the work yourself when your skills match specific project needs.

WORKING BUILDING PROJECTS

Beyond wise planning, the actual work of building offers a picture of cooperation and duty. As a teenager, I had a front-row seat observing men and women faithfully working in the construction of the first building project of Grace Baptist Church of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. My dad—the pastor—made sure that his three sons were onsite as “beasts of burden.”

Members employed in construction trades volunteered many hours. We unskilled workers kept out of the way of the hired contractors and volunteer tradesmen while handling materials, preparing lunches, and keeping the job site clear of debris. Nehemiah reports that skilled workers set beams, hung doors, and installed locks (e.g., 3:3) within the walls encircling Jerusalem—no task for novices,

based on my limited experience. Others appear to have been unskilled Judeans who “put . . . their necks to the work” while some of their fellow countrymen shirked the toil (3:5). Among the volunteers were jewelers and perfumers (3:8) patching walls, providing security, clearing rubbish, and delivering construction materials (4:10–23).

In your church’s building projects, everyone, skilled and unskilled, can pitch in.

SUPPORTING BUILDING PROJECTS

Church building projects are expensive and often stressful. Conflicts can arise over building designs—choices literally set in stone for years to come. Project cost overruns and commitment to years of mortgage payments weigh heavy on our minds.

Ongoing costs. Once built and financed, the church’s costs become relatively fixed and protected from increasing labor and material costs and potential adverse credit conditions. Fixed costs often include commitment to new levels of utilities, insurance, custodial, and maintenance outlays.

Financing costs. I have often recounted to others a general principle that my dad shared with the church body fifty years ago as we prepared to launch into our

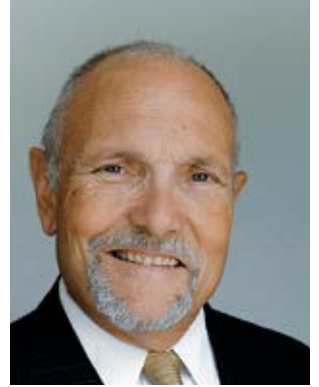
own building program and its obligations: “Before we can break ground, we must have *half in hand*.” The statement still has great merit. Some congregations purchase and fully pay off land to reach a point when they can manage a mortgage. The buildup of cash reserves assures both the members and lending institutions that the tithes and offerings of God’s people are committed to the project.

As a teenager working at a fast-food restaurant, I contributed very little to the financial cost of the project, but I had the privilege of watching the congregation faithfully give. Each week we watched the stereotypical project thermometer rise. The members patiently waited to build until at least 50 percent of the ultimate costs were already covered. With rising construction costs and volatile inflation, this timeless principle remains wise today.

Building projects can put stress on church unity. But they also offer times for God’s people to rejoice in their collective efforts. They have supported godly and gifted leaders and workers. They have sacrificed their time and money. Their cooperation has led to quality facilities dedicated to Great Commission ministry. After Nehemiah shared his vision, the leaders and the residents in Jerusalem responded enthusiastically, “Let us rise up and build” (2:18). Like them, seek to offer

your God-given talents, time, and treasure when your local church is ready to build.

Corey Pfaffe serves as the CEO of MinistryCPA, a certified public accounting firm based in Watertown, Wisconsin. The firm works with ministry clients in virtually every US state and every continent. He and his wife Laurie have served in various lay capacities as members of Calvary Baptist Church of Watertown for more than thirty-five years.





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Jeffery T. King, PhD
Head of Department, Engineering
Bob Jones University

HOW CAN YOU HELP



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Chaplain's Report

by Mike Ascher

CAPT Tavis Long Assumes Command at Naval Chaplaincy School

Chaplains do not typically serve as commanding officers. Throughout their careers, they advise commanders and serve as staff officers. Yet across the US military, there is only one billet where a chaplain may legally assume command—the Naval Chaplaincy School in Newport, Rhode Island. That singular distinction makes a chaplain's assignment to command the school a rare and significant honor.

On March 26, 2026, the Naval Chaplaincy School held a time-honored Change of Command ceremony, formally relieving CAPT Charles Varsogea and welcoming CAPT Tavis Long as the new commanding



officer. The ceremony was presided over by RADM Greg Huffman, the Commander of Naval Education and Training Command. Commander Huffman honored CAPT Varsogea's distinguished leadership while marking the transition of authority.

In his charge of command to CAPT Tavis Long, RADM Huffman said, "You are the right leader at the right time. Our Navy's true asymmetric advantage is our Sailors. As commanding officer, you must invest in your people and train them to the highest standard. Command is not a position—it's an action. Wear command well."

Distinguished guests included senior leaders from across the naval and joint force, among them VADM Peter Garvin, President of the National Defense University; RADM Gregory Todd, Navy Chief of Chaplains; RADM Carey H. Cash, Chaplain of the Marine Corps; RDML Peter Muschinske, Deputy Chief of Chaplains for Reserve Matters; and RDML Darryl Walker, President of the Naval War College.

Family members, mentors, and close friends were also in attendance, reflecting the personal and spiritual foundations that have shaped CAPT Long's ministry. Among them were his parents, CDR Robert Long, USCG (Ret.), and Stephanie Long; his in-laws, Rev. Randy and Teresa Conn; and sever-



al chaplain colleagues and ministry partners, including FBFI chaplains Mike Ascher (Chesapeake Police Department) and John Radacsy (US Coast Guard Auxiliary Chaplaincy).

The role of commanding officer at the Naval

Chaplaincy School is uniquely complex. The school is responsible for transforming civilian clergy into military chaplains and advancing the development of Religious Program Specialists (RPs) across the fleet. Each year, NCS conducts multiple Basic Leadership Courses, training more than two hundred newly accessed chaplains. It also delivers Intermediate, Advanced, and Senior Leadership Courses for officers at key career milestones. In addition, NCS oversees the RP “A” School and professional development programs for enlisted personnel.

Beyond Newport, mobile training teams extend this mission globally, delivering professional development at more than a dozen locations worldwide. Through these combined efforts, NCS maintains direct, recurring engagement with nearly every Navy chaplain and RP.

Captain Long said the following in his address: Above all, I am profoundly grateful to God for this opportunity, for His countless blessings and the unmerited grace and forgiveness He so generously offers through His Son, Jesus Christ. I am honored by the trust placed in me to lead the institution responsible for training Navy chaplains and Religious Program Specialists. At NCS, we will continue to pursue excellence in strengthening the soul of the warfighter so they are spiritually ready to fight and win our nation's wars.

While positions of authority are not what FBFI chaplains typically seek, we are grateful when God places them in positions of influence. CAPT Long now serves in such a role. Please pray for him as he commands. Pray that the qualities of gospel ministry would shape those he leads. Pray that he would wear command well and lead with patience, prudence, and integrity.



CHAPLAIN NOTEWORTHY PROMOTIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

Collin Bond: Accessioned from Chaplain Candidate to Chaplain in ARNG

Chad Fitts: Accessioned from ARNG to Active Duty

Daryl Jeffers: Commander's Commendation Award for outstanding duty performance

Greg Kaminski: Division 05 Top Trainee for 2025, Operations Service Award, Coast Guard Sustained Auxiliary Service Award

Chris Koehn: Unit Meritorious Service Medal

Bret Perkuchin: Certificate of Retirement from the Army

Caleb Schaaf: Promoted to Captain

John Schaaf: Ordained March 15, 2026, Ruby Mountain Bible Church, Spring Creek, Nevada

Adam Yates: Promoted to 1LT

Josh Zollers: Ordained April 12, 2026, First Baptist Church, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin



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